

Citizens: A Manifesto

“An important, moving and powerful exposition of the democratic ideal.

Timely and valuable”.

Naomi Wolf

“Citizens: A Manifesto is a vigorous and imaginative sketch of an ideal. It describes what we all might be, and what it might be like to live at our fullest”.

Philip Pullman

“A shining model of what we should demand of ourselves and of our fellow citizens”.

Ariel Dorfman

“This manifesto offers a model of participatory, active citizenship, setting out the rights and responsibilities of a citizen in a way that seeks to empower the individual and reinvigorate the body politic. It presents a framework of citizenship that is engaged and egalitarian; where the people – not the state – determine their own futures and work together for the common good. This vision of what citizens can be – and can achieve – alerts us to the limited citizenship we currently experience and to the possibility of something better”.

Peter Tatchell

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.

Walt Whitman, 'Democratic Vistas'

Democracy lies dormant, yet even in slumber the term 'citizen' retains a sense of wonder. To act as a citizen is to give expression to an egalitarian ideal; to be civic-minded is to be conscious of the influence of individual action. This manifesto sets out to sketch the central tenets of citizenship, and outline some of the barriers to greater civic participation. The approach taken is suggestive rather than prescriptive, in the belief that behaviour is not codified in law but cultivated by those 'habits of the heart' that are formed by our environment and our ethics.

The citizens of a modern nation state inhabit a domain of instant connection, and yet we feel disconnected, as if bypassed by the central networks of power. Ours is a life once removed, with a diminished sense of civic space; of a realm in which individuals declare a *public* interest, and recognise each other as citizens. The concept of democracy as a shared project has been supplanted by an outlook that roots human motivation in the drive for competition, and speaks of 'the individual and society' as if they are in opposition. This vision nurtures an attitude of mutual suspicion, and explains how a society of such achievement can have become so sceptical about its potential. The 'cynical chic' of recent fashion is a cloying syrup that seeps into every pore of the body politic, weakening the sinews and sapping the spirit. As we attempt to revive the social ethic, it is worth heeding the advice of an anonymous citizen: "Let's leave pessimism for better times".

Citizenship is a common script that unifies the dialects of distinct identity. Its ability to cohere society is dependent on a universal standard of civic literacy, one that is impaired by persistent disparities in education, health and wealth. In many parliamentary democracies, divisions are exacerbated by a political class that – contrary to its rhetoric – remains deeply suspicious of the electorate. An environment conducive to civic association would require a radical redistribution of power, away from the present model of market-based centralisation, which stems, paradoxically, from a mistrust of both the state *and* the individual. By deferring decision making to the market, and implementation of policy to remote managers, 'liberal' capitalism has hollowed out the public sphere, dismantling the infrastructure of social democracy and stripping away the sites of civic communion. This settlement has devalued the bonds of trust that are the currency of civic exchange – a deficit that creates and perpetuates incivility, and casts doubt over the possibility of reciprocal relations. If we are to forge a civic identity, it is necessary first to raise our estimation of the ability of individuals to become critical and creative citizens. Only by doing this can the conditions be laid for a 'civic awakening' to transform the life of democracy.

The rise of authoritarian capitalism in former Communist states brings into sharp focus the choice facing our faltering democracy: between an approach that facilitates agency – and demands that citizens engage actively – and one that restricts it, and requires it to be negated. In the repressive model, individuals cash in their rights as citizens for their freedoms as consumers, becoming subjects to 'easy' servitude, having been denied a more fulfilling form of civic liberty. The values of our current culture may point in this direction, but such a focus

on material enrichment cannot meet the social and spiritual needs of an increasingly atomised society. Instead of nurturing the citizen's capacity for empathy, consumer culture infantilises him, keeping him 'in perpetual childhood'. This form of paternalism weans the individual to his own desire: muted as a citizen, he seeks to express himself as a consumer, only to become trapped in a downward spiral driven by dissatisfaction and the desire for instant gratification. As consumerism inflates the ego, it stunts the imagination; its ideology of individualism has been more effective at stifling individuality than any culture of conformity, in part because it appropriates almost every mode of rebellion. Indeed, so much of our creative energies are channelled into consumption that it has become difficult even to imagine other ways of being. (Herein lies the paradox of egalitarianism: that equality of condition leads to *greater* diversity of expression). To refuse participation in the unending race for acquisition is not a turning away from the world, but an unveiling of it, to see it and its inhabitants in harmony.

The evolution of a civic consciousness calls for a transition from consumer democracy to civic democracy, from an approach that mimics the market to one that places choice in an ethical framework. At present, individuals are consumers of public policy, not participants in shaping it; they are polled on their opinions but have no involvement in setting the questions or shaping the terms of debate. Subsequently, their role is two dimensional – they can choose whether to 'buy' or not – and ultimately passive, particularly in an environment so heavily mediated by a commercial fourth estate. In contrast, civic democracy is deliberative and active – it *asks of*, rather than just asks – informed by the knowledge that citizens themselves are transformed through political engagement. Whereas consumer democracy is rooted in the inherent inequality of the market, civic democracy works from the premise that citizens are equal partners; and that as we differ in consumer tastes, we share civic aspirations – for clean, green public spaces, good quality local services, a rich and diverse cultural life. At the heart of this transformation is the creation of a civic culture, one that is elevating, experimental and born of high expectations. Above all, a civic culture is a culture of mutual recognition, in that its core ethic is interdependence. It places civic contribution ahead of private accumulation, a matter not simply of remuneration – teachers, for example, receive a reward that cannot be quantified solely in material terms – but of how we value work and give meaning to it. Crucially, this culture recognises that a chasm in fortunes compromises *every* citizen; and that the hidden face of suffering could well have been, and could well be, our own.

A manifesto must be made manifest if it is to justify its ambition, and this one requires completion and revision through the practice of civic action. The latest struggle for citizenship may be the most challenging to date, as the obstacles are embedded into our everyday lives, the products of habit and uncritical inheritance. Sceptics argue that the destiny of democracy has been scripted already, that its star is in eclipse and that it is the fate of this generation to play out its final acts. Yet this underestimates the appeal of the civic ideal – to marry the 'good life' with the 'common good' – and our willingness to undertake, and even to have an appetite for, difficult tasks. Economic Man, with his narrow calculation and rugged self-preservation, is incapable of mapping the breadth of human ambition. Emerging from his shadow is a nobler form of being: Civic Man, a social animal who sees a world beyond the self. This recognition of our common-wealth can awaken the civic imagination; born of the realisation that the 'art of living' is achieved not in isolation but with and for others – in a society that dares to be true to the word 'Democracy', and whose citizens enact it every day.

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N.B. I regret not being able to present the manifesto in gender neutral language. In place of s/he, the term “one” would have been preferable, but in modern English it feels archaic and impersonal. While the document assumes the ‘normative’ masculine form, it acknowledges the shortcomings of this approach and readers are encouraged to substitute gender by case. Translators are requested to adopt the neutral pronoun where it is in contemporary use.

- A citizen can be a citizen at any time in any place.
- A citizen's status is not defined by government or derived from the state: it exists by virtue of society itself. His identity as a citizen transcends geography and gender, sexuality and ethnicity, profession and religion: citizenship regards him as a complete if imperfect individual, rather than an aspect of origin or affiliation.
- A citizen evolves, and in the process enriches his society. His citizenship is never static but is realised in each action and interaction. A citizen renews his citizenship every day.
- A citizen values public space. He regards it not as a place of passing through but as a location to inhabit, exchange and create. He tends to it, and is attentive to its art and architecture.
- A citizen protects and conserves the natural environment, and assesses his impact on local and global ecosystems. Citizens are conscious of the fragile nature of bio-diversity: the loss of a species is irreversible and irreplaceable, and cannot be offset by the gains of growth, however large. A citizen is a steward – not the owner – of land, and regards the earth as a shared home rather than a resource to be exhausted. He works within his community to create a living landscape that is habitable, hospitable and sustainable, with minimal noise, air and light pollution.
- A citizen has power. He exercises it every day, actively by choice and passively by neglect. A citizen considers how this power affects others, and does not abuse it: he respects his power and that of his fellow citizens.
- A citizen is not a cynic. Cynicism is the refuge of the powerless.
- A citizen creates the conditions in which citizenship may flourish. He works to combat alienation, apathy and social decay, and to foster a civic sense of self.
- A citizen does not reject politics due to the shortcomings of politicians. A citizen is a political animal.
- A citizen votes, and encourages his fellow citizens to do likewise. He follows election campaigns closely and takes the opportunity to challenge politicians on their record and their promises. Yet citizens also recognise the limits of elected office, and of election as a mode of expression, and look to facilitate change on a daily basis in less formal arenas, where votes are not courted and voices not heard.

- A citizen is an internationalist, and works for the causes of liberty, equality and justice in every corner of the globe. Citizens never underestimate the importance of their choices: no action stands in isolation.
- A citizen is aware of the ethical implications of his consumption; of its impact on labour rights, animal rights and the environment. Citizens assert that universal standards in these areas are integral to a just system of trade, and form part of the ‘level playing field’ for emerging economies.
- A citizen understands how markets function and falter, and how government can mitigate against their failure. Citizens resist the privatisation of public amenities, and petition to ensure that core civic infrastructure operates under common ownership.
- A citizen promotes democracy in the workplace, advancing collaborative models such as cooperatives and mutuels. Citizens support mechanisms that place them at the heart of decision-making, such as participatory budgeting and citizens’ juries, and champion sortition as a means of developing an engaged and knowledgeable citizenry.
- A citizen is present, not represented; and in attendance by consent.
- A citizen is attuned to the depiction of gender and sexuality in the media and the marketplace, and challenges the trend that commodifies and infantilises individuals.
- A citizen upholds the integrity of public space, as a neutral location free of corporate branding. To this end, citizens support restrictions on advertising in environments where the individual cannot ‘opt-out’, as well as the regulation of stealth marketing aimed at children.
- A citizen is a netizen, and regards the internet as a site for civic engagement. Citizens treat cyber-space as an extension of the public realm, and campaign for it to remain a commons, with equal treatment of traffic across content and platforms.
- A citizen is sensitive to the presentation and prioritisation of news, and discerning in his consumption of it. He stays informed through a variety of sources with domestic and international developments, and challenges editors to foreground stories with long-term implications. Journalists understand that their influence is extraordinary and that they share a corresponding responsibility – one which is not diminished by commercial obligations. In turn, all citizens are watchful of erosions on the freedom of the press.

- A citizen acknowledges that social and political problems are often complex, and does not seek easy answers to difficult questions.
- A citizen confronts a culture of fear, as it is manifest on the street and manipulated in the media. Citizens protest the normalisation of surveillance as an everyday occurrence, along with any erosion of civil liberties, particularly on behalf of those unable to defend their rights.
- A citizen respects the law and familiarises himself with its processes. He learns how law is conceived and developed, and how it may be challenged.
- A citizen is vigilant of undemocratic influence in public life, and alert to the danger of monopolies for the growth of civil society. Citizens demand access to a plurality of voices in the media, on the basis that an open society is not necessarily democratic, but a democracy is – by its very nature – open. Citizens challenge politicians to be transparent about the role of lobbying in the formulation and implementation of policy.
- A citizen has a cosmopolitan outlook: he combines a universal approach to ethics with an appreciation of particular ways of seeing. Citizens reject parochialism and cultural relativism, and oppose the segregation of public space – whether as a ghetto or a gated community.
- A citizen regards inequality as a barrier to social cohesion, and highlights disparities in opportunity for individuals everywhere.
- A citizen helps create an environment in which individuals are conscious of – and attentive to – their physical and mental health, and where treatment is universally accessible and free at the point of delivery. Citizens educate themselves in protection and prevention, in both a personal and public capacity, and contribute where possible with blood and organ donation. A citizen is aware of the challenges facing disabled citizens, and lobbies for greater access in public areas: a citizen alleviates the hardship of his fellow citizens.
- A citizen challenges a culture of low expectations. Citizens are ambitious – for their personal growth, for the welfare of their community, and for the development of their society.
- A citizen is a teacher and a student, and an advocate of life-long learning. Citizens oppose the marketisation of education, and instead emphasise its importance in developing critical and creative thinking.

- A citizen studies human achievement, so he may know the potential of his fellow citizens.
- A citizen studies human cruelty, so he may know the potential of his fellow citizens.
- A citizen studies the life in between.
- A citizen is curious about other cultures and civilisations, and takes the opportunity to travel and learn different languages.
- A citizen treats a stranger as a fellow citizen. He regards other individuals as citizens in perpetuity, but his own citizenship as contingent on his commitment.
- A citizen's conscience is his compass. Citizens always empathise, and regard empathy as a precondition of judgement, not a substitute for it.
- A citizen entertains ideas from every religious tradition, and (in so doing) rejects dogma. He is open to wonder and reason, and to the power of the imagination.
- A citizen looks to space for a fuller understanding of where and who we are. Citizens regard the exploration of the universe as the ultimate expression of human ambition, as well as an opportunity for global collaboration. In addition, these endeavours may enhance our knowledge of the earth's biosphere, and act as a catalyst for technological and scientific innovations.
- A citizen does not treat all activity as a transaction. He knows that what is valuable cannot always be understood in terms of what is useful, and that many profitable pursuits render no material gain.
- A citizen takes an interest in the arts, and values their insight into the universal condition. He acknowledges that the arts equip citizens with a grammar for engaging with the world, and recognises their ability to distil beauty, inspire empathy, and illuminate human dignity. He ensures that citizens are introduced to the arts at an early age, and are encouraged to enquire and experiment.
- A citizen takes an interest in the sciences, and values their insight into the universal condition. He acknowledges that the sciences equip citizens with a vocabulary for comprehending the world, and recognises their ability to reveal nature, advance culture, and enhance quality of life. He ensures that citizens are introduced to the sciences at an early age, and are encouraged to enquire and experiment.

- A citizen challenges himself to be independent of mind, and recognises that maintaining this independence is an ongoing challenge. He dares to break new ground, in the knowledge that exploration is the path to invention.
- A citizen examines the issues arising from advances in biomedical technology, and petitions to keep universal genetic information in the public domain. Citizens broaden ethical debates to encompass questions of autonomy and non-conformity, and take steps – if necessary through legislation – to secure the right of individuals to an independent identity.
- A citizen reflects on what it means to be a citizen. He discusses citizenship with his peers and proposes ways in which it may be developed.
- A citizen is a role model, and considers his influence on younger citizens in particular. He is conscious of the power of example, and of how his society defines and rewards achievement. Citizens provide a caring and safe environment for children, taking a close interest in their development and communicating to them the concept of citizenship.
- A citizen values the contribution of earlier generations. He studies their struggles and commemorates their sacrifices, mindful of the responsibility of each generation to the next. He works to establish the conditions that enable senior citizens to live in dignity, and regards these efforts as acts of reciprocity, not charity.
- A citizen recognises the importance of recognition. He acknowledges the civic contributions of his fellow citizens, even as he does not seek reward for every act of virtue.
- A citizen demands more of himself than he does of his fellow citizens.
- A citizen nurtures the spirit of citizenship. He understands that the exercise of civic virtue is habitual, and that fluency comes with practice.
- A citizen aspires, above all, to be a citizen.

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