Mile End Group 81
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'The Past, Present and Future of Tech City'
Ben Hammersley

Transcript:

<u>Introduction by Jon Davis, Director of The Mile End Group at Queen Mary</u>

For those of you new to the Mile End Group we focus on the hidden wiring of government, looking at everything from Prime Ministers in cabinet to finance and security, to local things. This is our 81st meeting in our 9th year. Before we begin I would like to give a very big thank you to our friends at Hewlett Packard who have sponsored us over many years now and tonight's seminar is also co- sponsored by the Impact QM Initiative at Queen Mary.

Why are we here tonight? Well this is something personal to me. East End, born in Plaistow, just up the road from a family who for several generations worked in the docks. Some of you might know, some of you might not that the docks directly, the docks of London, I am talking about the Isle of Dogs, Royal Docks, Southern, Wapping directly employed about 90,000 people and between 1969 and 1981 every one of those docks closed, 90,000 direct jobs gone and so many more ancillary ones, communities just destroyed, the place was a ghost town.

My family like many others were part of the white flight that moved out a long long way to those badlands at the end of the District Line, a long way, a long way, and what I think was interesting about it although it is not far there is still a store there, a store of the emigrants. It was all about the past, there were great things about the East End as was, but what was clear and in some respects is still clear for lots or people out that way, I am not just talking about Essex I am talking about Kent and some other areas.

For lots of these people and for me growing up you got the sense that there was nothing good left behind but memories. Everything was about the past, the East End was the past. Well that view is changing fast. For myself a few years back I started to do some research around Canary Wharf, I sound like a paid up member, in some ways I am, of Canary Wharf Group and London Docklands Development Corporation but they talk about, and you know it is hard to disagree with these sort of numbers, that Canary Wharf itself has created 100,000 jobs now, more than the docks that it replaced. They are talking about it doubling over the next 20 or25 years.

What we have got is a renaissance in the East End. We add onto that the Olympics, the whole re-construction of Stratford City as it is now called, Stratford International, but all of

that for me right now pales into insignificance because of this thing that is happening in Shoreditch. Something that should have occurred to me earlier is that the City of London is the historic edge of the East End, the biggest financial centre in Europe, arguably in the world, has been linked now to the second largest financial centre in Europe, Canary Wharf, bigger than Frankfurt.

We add on the Olympic Park, I mean West Ham Stadium as will be, and then the beautiful roundabout at Old Street, I understand some people in the audience are looking at putting a bit of a new spiel on that particular roundabout. But what should have occurred to me earlier with all these things is that if you draw a cross across it, Queen Mary is right bang in the middle, right bang in the middle.

Queen Mary as you know has always prided itself on being and certainly aspirationally being world class. Recently as some of you may know we were elected to the Russell Group of A- league British Universities, so I am particularly pleased, being director of the Mile End Group to welcome this new Meg Tech theme, which blends many of our interests and I would like to say a very warm welcome to the new friends in the audience, we hope you will return, and who better than the Prime Minister's Ambassador to Tech City to talk to us about the newest and hugely exciting element to the East End renaissance.

With a bio, now some people accuse me of being an academic in the past, so you know it is elitist for me to quote Wikipedia but I thought I would on this particular circumstance. A biography that describes our speaker as a diplomat, broadcaster, journalist, internet technologist, futurist and author of the forthcoming "64 things you need to know for them" I give you Ben Hammersley.

Speech by Ben Hammersley:

Thank you very much my name is Ben Hammersley, I do many things, if you look me up on line I am the Prime Minister's ambassador to Tech City, I am also largely the editor of Wired magazine. For those of you who don't know Wired magazine it's dedicated to the future and as a member of the editorial team we are very beholden to live in the future. Many of you don't know this but in 6 months time Powerpoint will be made illegal and so I don't have any slides and I have actually written my speech down for the first time in a long time. This is basically because I am scared of every single one of you.

Unlike most of the speakers who have graced this stage before I am not a politician. I spend most of my time on the road really talking to people and thinking about the social effects of the internet on society. I do this in Europe, the Americas and the Middle East and then I try and come back here to London and explain these parts of the world and the ideas

that come from it to the really important people here who can't go to those places themselves, so that is why I have this title that I am speaking to you from underneath today, the Prime Minister's Ambassador to Tech City. Actually that is mostly because special envoy to post modernity was already taken.

I am not based in Westminster but I am really based on the internet. I just visit there from time to time and tell them things. And so what I am going to be talking to government this week about and what I am going to be talking about to you tonight is the notion that I have that the political class as it is today is making some grave mistakes with technological social and business policies and are doing so in a way which means that we can't see these mistakes and we can't undo them. But I am also going to talk about how very happily I think through awareness of these mistakes and through initiatives like Tech City we can discover the potential for much greater success.

To start to understand these problems or these opportunities we need to start by asking ourselves the fundamental question of why is there a political initiative called Tech City. Now between you and me the real reason is because the real name of the area, Silicone Roundabout, was considered to be slightly too sarcastic even for the government, so we thought we would pick something really awful like Tech City. But anyway, back to the theme we need to start asking this question until we can ask it no more why are we doing this? And why are we doing that? And why that? Why and why and why?

This method of asking why until we reach a fundamental point the most basic motivation isn't really a new idea. Perhaps the most impressive economic regeneration project involving technology which was post war Japan is actually based on a managerial technique called Kaisan and Kaisan encourages you to ask these 5 whys of everything you do. So it is not just me with a silly moustache and tattoo standing in front of you talking philosophy, it is actually a very hard business managerial technique that is proven and industrial. Asking why this constant act of communal introspection is incredibly important but we are not doing it. Instead we are chasing numbers, we are judging ourselves by infographics. It is really understandable why we do this actually, data the thing that we are all obsessed with at the moment makes things seem science-y and makes things easy to manage and push things round on a spreadsheet for a budget. It gives an air of rationality and it is lobbied for by large companies and many people in the room today. If you put a number on the wall the saying goes, it will go up. Pay attention to something by measuring it and it will move in the direction you want it to go. This is the basis of everything from weightwatchers to game formation.

But the numbers that we choose to measure are by definition bound up with unquestioned values. Values from other places decided by other people. To give you an example here there is one big fashion that you are going to start hearing an awful lot about in the Sunday papers, it is one of those innovations that is about to reach the mainstream, it is the idea of the smart city. As I say you will hear a lot about this in the next few years and if you don't know what it means the theory is simple. The theory says if we pass sensors, electronic sensors, around the city and connect those sensors to the internet and make the stuff that the sensors sets the data comes from available to everybody in that city then those people can change their behaviour in relation to information coming off the city in real time.

So for example if when you leave here today if you had real time data of the number of people on the platform of Mile End station and you saw that it was really busy you might decide to do something else instead, get the bike, go to the pub whatever. Real time data in this smart city idea enables you to change your behaviour, it is an urban scale idea, if you can measure it you can optimise it and this smart city idea leads to claims that things like architecture of the 21st century, the mobile phone would be to the architecture of the 21st century what the car was to the architecture of the 20th century.

We will design buildings and roads that will allow for on the spot optimisation and we will be more interested in whether or not we can get a signal somewhere and maybe a view. And in many ways this might actually be true after all that is measured is bound to be optimised as I have said and so the trick though is to pay attention to what it is that we are actually measuring.

In smart cities, at least according to the advertising bumph that you can find on the internet, the thing that seems to be most important to the suppliers of the equipment is transit time, how quickly you can get from home to work and back again. This isn't really surprising because the entities that make these technologies are most interested in getting people from home to their office cubicle, keeping them there for long enough and then sending them home again as fast as possible. In a subtle way the smart cities idea optimises the city, not for the values of the communities within but for the values of the companies that supply them.

IBM who are a very big smart city supplier for example have no real interest in optimising for pavement cafes or pretty girls on bicycles or compassion, kindness, happiness or any of the other things that you might find incredibly valuable in an urban environment. Instead what they do is they encourage optimisation of something that is easy to measure and something that is important to them as a company and then we as people, born as policymakers and as executives and academics forget that cultural contact and act as if the

things that we find easy to measure are in fact the only things in the world that matter at all, and that is not the case.

Now you are asking yourself – why is Ben talking this stuff about measuring stuff and not about Tech City. Well as a political initiative it is really indicative of something that I think is stricken through the modern political condition, which is the modern political condition seems to be that we have forgotten why we are here in the first place. Anyone who has ever set foot on this stage of the Mile End Groupers at some stage got into politics at least at some point to make the world a better place, but in the battle on the political landscape itself many people, indeed perhaps most people, have forgotten about that first instinct and we the rest of us in this interconnected community have forgotten to remind them of that.

No one has asked why for a very long time and instead we judge ourselves at the very best by the numbers and at the very worst by cheap political victories of a sort that completely make no sense whatsoever outside the Westminster village. We have in many ways traded our ideals for variables and nobody can really remember what those variables actually stand for. So why are we here, why Tech City and what is the future.

Well, Tech City is the idea that East London's technology community can in the internet age be a catalyst that improves the lives of this whole area, this city, the country and in fact the whole world. Fundamentally it comes from the fact that East London is a unique place blessed with hundreds of cultures, hundreds of languages, it is a place of extraordinarily richness in depth and what will make East London Tech City a success is not the Tech City part of it but the East London that it grows from. Let me explain that. When you ask why enough times, when you really dig down as to why are we doing this and why are we doing that deeper and deeper you always fundamentally come down to the same answer because we are all in this together.

Why are we doing Tech City? Because at the end of the day we are all in this together, life is short. But cities however are not corporations and neither are countries. We can't think of running a country like we would think of running a company. You can't in a city for example re-jig an org chart, you can't sack an entire post code, no matter how much you would like to. You can't sack people from the city, the people are the city. But sometimes we use the word community as if it is something separate from us. What are you going to do for the community people ask? As if what you do isn't affecting the community already and as if you are not part of the community itself. Now in the tech world this is really common.

It is partly I think because much of the tech world is actually sited in places where there really wasn't anything there before. Silicone Valley was farmland before Silicone Valley appeared, there really isn't anything there apart from the tech community and all of the

other tech clusters around the world have all been built as office parks through tabularata outside big cities Skolkava in Moscow for example, Cambridge Research Park as another. The cultural values in those places are the cultural values of their tenant corporations. If you have ever been there, and if you haven't you should go, it is a really interesting place to have a look round and shudder. Silicone Valley is itself really boring. But we forget this because we admire their numbers, we admire the thing that we measure that measures their success, we look at the 1 Billion dollars that Facebook paid in imaginary money to Instagram and without asking why enough times we attempt to import their values and they wonder why they don't stick.

The Olympics for example and Silicone Valley are both foreign and transient and not really of our culture and the noise they make here in London isn't success, it is a clash of aesthetics and Tech City risks being like that. Some people talk of extending the cluster into Hackney for example, but they sometimes talk about this but forget that people already live in Hackney and have done for about a thousand years in the same flats. The fact that people already live there is in fact the value of East London Tech City. We must remember no matter who we are that Tech City is not a place for venture capitalists to find cheap rent and even codas to give them a good return for them to then offshore as fast as they possibly can. Tech City is actually the realisation that there is something very special here. We have a community that has become a place that nurtures people into a set of skills that can be a blessing for everyone and everyone in this community from the Imams in the Mosques to the academics in the universities to the graffiti artists and the market traders and the strippers and everybody else have all come together to create a place which in its totality seems to be about to create a new renaissance and not just a local renaissance but a genuine capital R renaissance. We are in the first few years of perhaps the biggest revolution in the history of humanity and it is happening most in the places like East London where the whole community is created somewhere for it to take root.

We are going to produce something really interesting. Now yes there will be financial rewards, people will get rich, but if you ask why enough times you will find that getting rich isn't the point really and any attempt to make it exclusively so importing other peoples values to that effect is doomed and furthermore allowing people to get rich without having them enrich their own community back again or give back to the place that nurtured them is fundamentally unsustainable. The Tech Investment community talks an awful lot about how we need more developers in the same way as we used to need more labourers in the fields.

Well this may be true but we also need more poets and more artists and more hoodies and more kebab shops, more people in the rag trade, more academics and anything else that

you want to be, because we have I think in the tech industry isolated ourselves for far too long. We have hidden first behind a geek culture and now we hide behind numbers, behind investment targets and numerical measures of success and by not asking why and digging into what it is we are doing fundamentally we have missed what makes us great in the first place.

Now there is a story that is an old Zen Buddhism story, a very bad Buddhist. There is a flower in a field sat there on its own flowering and the question is asked what is flowering, is it the flower that is flowering, people say yes the flower is flowering but then you say but look the flower couldn't flower if it wasn't for the roots and you say ok is it the roots that are flowering and you say oh yes it's the roots that are flowering but no the roots couldn't flower it wasn't for the soil around them. So is it the soil that is flowering, well yes the but the soil wouldn't be there if it wasn't for the field in the first place. Ok so is it the field that is flowering, well yes but the field couldn't be there if it wasn't for the farms surrounding it and so on and so on – a stretched metaphor.

We measure in Tech City at the moment for an awful lot of individual successes without paying attention to the fact that we are in fact a community having successes. Every single person in this room didn't make it here on their own. Now much of the criticism of Tech City on line and in papers and so on has come from people who see the places being only one activity but Shoreditch only consists of one thing, whatever it is they do. Anything that isn't what they do is spoken of, or I should say blogged really, as being pointless or somehow damaging. You know you are not really involved in Tech City by implication of the future unless you are ABC or a startup guy or a serial entrepreneur or at least somebody who blogs about them. But this criticism is I think really wrong. In reality everybody is part of it and every social policy, every government bill decision feeds into its success or its failure. That's why it really sucks to be a thoughtful politician. But it is also why it is so necessary that the policymakers understand the modern world in its entirety.

As citizens or as members of these local communities as businesses, as politicians as civil society, as industry groups, as academics, as wherever you place yourself professionally we are all personally deeply invested in each other and so we have a duty to constantly reassess what we are doing, to ask why much more than we ask how much. Our social policies as policy makers need to copy the iterative development style of these Tech City start-ups, consistently testing what you are doing against your assumptions. Not because they reject data, far from it, but because that sort of iterative testing always has a higher purpose in mind and a constant reminder to return to it. We have to constantly question the way we are measuring our success. I would like Tech City to be a place where we measure our success by the happiness and fulfilment and jeur de vivre of everybody who lives there

and not the baseline profits of multi national companies who happen to rent some space there. We have to be careful that we optimise for the good thing not for the bad or the indifferent. The past at Tech City was obscurity, self imposed obscurity, the present is currently very confused and compartmentalised but the future could be one where Tech City is the name we give not to a layer of San Francisco bubble economy that we have plonked on top of Shoreditch but to a project where all of East London comes together to find to use its new found talents and its unique civilisation, combining that with the global economy to make life better for everybody