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A secret society?

By Ruth Alexander
Jonathan Maitland show, BBC Radio 5 Live



Inspiring future leaders? Common Purpose seeks to encourage personal development and making new contacts

Its critics say it is a secret networking organisation at the heart of the establishment, with a hidden agenda and influence.

More than 20,000 people - identified as the next generation of leaders - have attended its courses, but if you are not one of them, you have probably never heard of it.

It is called Common Purpose and prominent supporters include BBC business editor Robert Peston, Assistant Deputy Commissioner Cressida Dick of the Metropolitan Police and numerous top public sector officials.

It's a not-for-profit organisation which organises training and networking events for high-fliers.

Connections

Its website says: "Common Purpose gives leaders the inspiration, the knowledge and the connections they need to produce real change - in their workplaces and in their communities."

According to one Common Purpose "graduate" who spoke to the BBC, Common Purpose's activities seem innocent enough: delegates attend a week-long residential course, where the emphasis is on personal development and making new contacts.

She said delegates were encouraged to identify their strengths and weaknesses and were taken on outings to a psychiatric hospital, a prison, a local tenants' association and the City.

But former naval officer Brian Gerrish, who leads a campaign against Common Purpose, says: "It's a secret society for careerists. The key point is that the networking is done out of sight of the general public."



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Critics

"If you actually look at the documented evidence as to what Common Purpose is doing, they are clearly not just a training provider. They are operating a highly political agenda, which is to create new chosen leaders in society."

The conspiracy theorists think Common Purpose is trying take over the world. They believe it is shaping people to work to its hidden agenda of promoting a European super-state, forcing diversity on British society, and imposing political correctness.

Common Purpose organisers do not deny trying to identify future leaders, but they say their agenda is merely to open up the potential for success to a more diverse range of people. And the organisation's website says: "We are always balanced and owe no historical or other allegiance to any other group."



It's who you know...

People we have spoken to who have been on Common Purpose courses are frankly perplexed at the accusation that it is all about advancing a European super-state.

Helga Henry, an arts manager from Birmingham, has been on a course: "I'm sort of aware that there's some controversy and that there are people who believe Common Purpose is fuelled by a pro-EU agenda. But it certainly wasn't apparent in the course I was on."

Destined for the top?

But does she think she is part of an elite that will one day be future rulers of the world?

"That would be lovely, wouldn't it?" she laughs. "If all you had to do is to go on a course to do that, that would be great."

But there is a bigger question.

Should publically-funded institutions like the police, local authorities and the BBC pay money to a charity to host training courses which are essentially networking opportunities for staff?

Some of the courses cost as much as £5,750.

A Freedom of Information request by Conservative MP Philip Davies uncovered the fact that the Department for Work and Pensions had spent £238,000 sending its people on Common Purpose courses between 2002 and 2007.

Chatham House rule

And while there is no evidence that Common Purpose has anything to hide, it is not the most open organisation.

Its meetings are held under the Chatham House Rule, which means everything that is said in them is unattributable.

However Common Purpose trustee Andrew Cubie told BBC Radio 5 Live that many organisations chose to hold meetings in this way: "It means that people are very frank. They talk about their failures more than their successes. You get a very good learning process.

"This is about learning, it is not about a networking or membership organisation."

But although anyone can apply to go on a Common Purpose course, attendees are mainly graduate professionals - and those who are not assessed as having future leader potential will not be accepted.

One critic claims to have uncovered a memo which dismissed the idea of having a particular individual on a local advisory group in Suffolk because he was "too Ipswich".

There is no credible reason to think Common Purpose is about to take over the world.

But as the organisation's aim is to identify and train the next generation of leaders, the charges of elitism seem difficult to refute.

A selection of readers' comments:

I went on a weeks event 3-4 years ago. It was a very interesting experience, meeting people I would never normally come across- we went to a local prison. CP provided some very interesting speakers - who showed that there was life outside the interesting confines of my job. Nothing at all about a European dimension - quite the opposite, the emphasis was local.

Nicholas Johnson, Ottery Saint Mary

The whole philosophy of training of "leaders" is based on an implicit assumption that the rest of us will be "followers".

Stephen, Australia

I have spoken at a number of very well run Common Purpose events, in various parts of the country, and I do not recognise the somewhat paranoid description an organisation whose sole purpose is to bring together people from different walks of life who are making, or may be required to make, decisions that affect other areas of society. The 'Common Purpose' being to encourage them to know and understand the processes by which people (who they are unlikely to meet in the general course of their lives) tackle their jobs and absorb their responsibilities. Possibly my being a member of the Labour Party will be seen as an additional reason to intensify this hapless 'search for malevolence'!

David Puttnam, London

I am a member of CP. Elitist it is not but it does require people to be involved, open minded and to cooperate rather than confront. I am retired now but still work for and in my community, as a volunteer bus driver, and through church. I worked for a charity for the disabled before I retired, does this make me privileged and elitist?

David Butterfield, Pocklington

Only two things bother me, and neither of them has anything to do with the silly conspiracy theories. The first is that Government departments that send people on its courses are throwing our money around. The second is its charitable status. This is a business like any other, except that it re-invests its profits, and it should be taxed as a business.

Richard Baron, London

It seems entirely positive that leaders from different aspects of society should meet each other and understand each other's concerns and interests in order to create a more cohesive and stronger community.

C J Oakes, London

It sounds suspiciously like an expensive jolly for men in grey suits to me.

H. Billinghamurst, Epsom

I am sure that Common Purpose does a lot of "good work" just as the Masons do. But anyone who denies that this is a potentially bad influence is simply naive. Do we really want already powerful business and political leaders to have cosy networked relationships

with our leading Police Officers? Is it not clear that "graduates" of Common Purpose will have a very similar outlook, the opposite of the diversity they purport to encourage?

Michael Barnes, Milton Keynes

I like thousands of other people from the private, public and voluntary sectors have done a Common Purpose programme. I did not feel brain washed. I think it is important that people from different sectors and walks of life mix and get to understand different perspectives.

Zenna Atkins, Portsmouth

I went on a common purpose course a few years ago. We went to a drama studio, a police station and a local college, and the focus was more on teamwork and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses than anything else. I rather enjoyed it, and never felt pressured or manipulated at all.

Sam, Yorkshire

This story was broadcast on the Jonathan Maitland show on BBC Radio 5 Live on Sunday 8 March 2009. Download the free [podcast](#).

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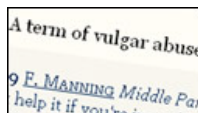
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