

This is how you win an election

Stacco Troncoso in conversation with Victoria Anderica, head of Transparency, and Miguel Arana, director of Citizen Participation, City of Madrid¹

How did a group of 15M activists form an electoral coalition, which, after lagging in the polls, finally had a breakthrough victory? A win that shattered the chronic neoliberal narrative and forged an alternative path bearing little resemblance to the Brexits, the Trumps, to all that we have been conditioned to endure, if not expect. According to Ahora Madrid's Miguel Arana and Victoria Anderica, the key is *keeping it real* – with real openness and participation. It will not work to pay lip service to those ideals and abandon them later. There is no faking it. Stacco Troncoso, from the P2P Foundation, visited the Madrid city council's citizen participation, transparency and open government department and spoke to Victoria Anderica, head of Transparency, and Miguel Arana, director of Citizen Participation.

There were some meetings two years ago, in a well-known Madrid squat/social centre called Patio Maravillas, among other places, where people made a statement: "We are going to take power". That was Ganemos. They were called crazy, yet one year later, you took power. I would like to hear your view of these

1 | A longer version of this interview was previously published on the blog of the P2P Foundation on December 29, 2016. The P2P Foundation is a non-profit organisation and global network dedicated to advocacy and research of commons oriented peer-to-peer dynamics in society.

*last two years – first, the transition from *Ganemos Madrid* to *Ahora Madrid*, and then the second, the year since the election.*

Miguel Arana: First, one important word is power. When social movements think about power, they think about institutions. That is where power resides: you just have to enter the building, become the one who gives the orders, and then things will change. One thing I love about Spain in this recent period is that from the very beginning of the movements on the streets, the idea was that we are not going to the institutions. That was wonderful – we were out there for three or four years in the streets, in the squares, the assemblies, the “citizen tides” (mareas) green, white, etc. – the Stop Evictions movement – and the idea then was, “We do not care about institutions! We will get together and think about how to change everything, press on and make all these crazy actions and ideas and everything we can imagine”. And then, just in this last phase, after we tried everything else we said, “... ok, maybe we could also try to enter the institutions. Some part of the power is there – we should get inside”. I think this is an important remark. When people are looking from the outside – from other countries – it is difficult to understand what has been happening all these years. We got to the institutions because we spent four years building something really strong, really powerful, and that is what allows us to enter them now. This is also important because the game in the institutions is a difficult and special one. To some degree, it is designed so you usually cannot win when you come from outside. We won because we were in the streets for all these years, thinking about the things we wanted to do and change, being really clear, building the movement without leaders, without faces, without laws – everything. Now, we can be in the institutions and face the attacks, which are really crazy. Outside, you are a lot more resilient against attacks because it is about the ideas, not the people.

Can you clarify who you mean by the attacks?

Miguel Arana: Especially the media and the other parties, the traditional parties – the way they interact with you is by not focusing on problems or solutions; they only focus on *you*, personally. It is like, “you did this ...” or, “you are coming from this world”, or – whatever. Previously, when we were not a party, when we were not the people inside, we never talked about

ourselves. We just talked about the problems, that was the important thing. We built something serious and now we can enter the institutions. This last phase, building the party, was really different. The values that the movement held as important before – horizontality, avoiding structures, no hierarchies – well, once you get inside, you are required to build some kind of hierarchy. Things are not as horizontal as you would like anymore. Of course this is problematic. You have to understand, and imagine, how you want to solve these things. I think we have been able to get through some of the main problems, for example, building the electoral list. That was done in Ahora Madrid in a very open way. Anyone could just join.

Let us talk about the citizen participation portal, Decide Madrid. Tell us how it works, how long it has been up, and what the general reaction has been.

Miguel Arana: Before coming into the institutions, one of the main problems we faced was that the moment you want to open the movement to everybody and have them make decisions, you start facing the complexity of the situation. If you want to have 20 people debate and decide something, it is easy. You make an assembly, like we had in the squares, you talk, and that is it. If you want to have 100 – or 1,000 – people, maybe you can still have an assembly or some kind of a more complex system, but if you want to scale up, it is impossible. We have 3.2 million people, something like that ... You also want to build an effective system. You do not want just one decision in four years, you want to take all of the important decisions, every day. We believe that this can only be solved through the internet with a digital platform where all the physical barriers disappear, and where you can have thousands of people talking, deciding, proposing, etc. This whole year, we have been thinking about the tools we had available, trying and experimenting with everything that was on the internet. We learned a lot, tried a lot of platforms and got a lot of experience. But still there is no set, proper platform really capable of allowing all these direct democracy processes that we want. Nothing fits what we really need. We decided from the beginning to design a platform that collects our years of experiences and similar experiences we have heard about from all over the world, and build something that allows us to produce mechanisms and reproduce the democratisation we want to see. We started with this new platform. The software is called Consul and the platform is called Decide Madrid.

We started from scratch in June 2015, it got built very fast. In September 2015, we opened the first very basic process for the platform to start to work. It is a free software platform; we are sharing it with different cities. Barcelona, Oviedo and A Coruña are using it. We have already spoken with 40 or 50 cities who are interested in Spain but also in other countries.

We are also studying different mechanisms to open the city council for the citizens. For example, we opened the citizen budget, a participatory budget. This year a small part of the budget, 60 million euros (which, anyway, is an important sum of money) is now decided by the people. Yes, people can always make proposals, but this is much more specific because now, they are proposing on how to spend a certain amount of money. You cannot propose just anything; it has to be focused on *how* to use money. It is close to specific issues. You can build a school, a social centre, maybe fix some streets, but you cannot spend the money however you like. There are legal limits.

You keep a focus on openness with other local parties in different cities, do you mutualise information and best practices with them?

Miguel Arana: All of us are working on the same things. We are just taking the common ideas developed in the last four years and putting them into practice. At the end of the day, all the programmes are quite similar but it is not like we wrote them together, it is just that we are coming from the same place. Common traits include being open to everybody, participatory decision-making, putting social justice at the core of everything we do. This is a very comfortable feeling; it is really great when working together. And we really *are working together*, in everything. In all the plans. This is significant. Normally, you find a sense of competition among the major cities. But here it is the opposite. We really love each other, we really want to work together and to help. Whenever something bad happens to the people in Barcelona, we are totally outraged and screaming our lungs out: "No, the same thing cannot be happening to them!" And it is the same with the other cities, it is amazing. We meet in lots of forums, conferences, working groups. We really are working together, which makes life much easier. Normally, most city councils work and develop their projects in isolation, and they want to come out on top of the other cities. So, if they want to build software for participation, you go to a big technology company and pay a million euros ...

... And you make it proprietary ...

Miguel Arana: ... and you get your proprietary software. At the same time, the next city is doing exactly the same. They have exactly the same software but they also paid a million, and it is the same for other cities. You end up with 50 cities using the same software while announcing it as this great new thing. We are doing absolutely the opposite. We started the software from scratch – this is Consul, from Decide Madrid. Some months later, Barcelona started using the same software. Now the developers from Barcelona have come to Madrid and they are working together. And now the people in A Coruña, working together, will adopt it. If we start solving all our problems by applying collective intelligence and debating how to scale everything, we will have something available for everybody in the world.

We talk about politics and counter politics; we talk about power and counterpower. Now that you find yourself within power, how do you enable and make sure that there is a counterpower and respect that? I guess that, through your work, you are enabling the great majority of people outside institutions to still have a voice, to still matter.

Miguel Arana: For sure! Our specific role here could be quite short. This is what we need to do: enable people to take decisions, to take control. Once that is done with, we do not need to do anything else. Ok, we have to take care and do the maintenance so it keeps working, and nothing more. We have started all these processes and think that they have the potential to change everything, but up until now, the bulk of the decisions taken by the city council are taken in the traditional way. We cannot forget that 99% of the system still works that way. People are doing their best to open everything to everybody, but power remains focused on a small group of people.

In 15M I could identify the Commons as part of the discourse, both explicitly and implicitly. Now that you have come to power, do you think that the Commons is still part of the dialogue? Not just with the activists and the people working here but with the citizens that you interact with? Or, do you think it is a hard political concept to understand?

Victoria Anderica: I think it is a hard political concept to understand. I think that in cities like Barcelona, they use it more naturally than we do here in Madrid, probably because of the people who are working in the city right now. But the fact that you do not use it as a concept does not mean that we are not actually putting it into place. The feeling that brought everyone in, which nowadays exists in the Madrid government is very similar to the one that struck the people of Barcelona, Zaragoza and other cities. That is something they had in common. I think it is being used, or verbalised, more by people in Barcelona. They have even done a congress about it, talking about it – but I think in Madrid it is also happening. It is probably something we do not say, but I would say it is definitely happening.

I definitely think it is part of the matrix, and I would like to see it become more part of the conversation because it is impossible to define. Because of that, it is actually an interesting conversation to have with people, to engage their creativity. It is not something you just explain with a little pamphlet and no further dialogue: “here is all you need to know about the commons, read it, goodbye.”

Victoria Anderica: Exactly. I think it is the philosophy behind the commons that is moving every single department here in the city of Madrid, because the idea is to give the city back to the citizens. That is essentially what we are talking about. That is what we are doing, actually doing, no? I would say there are a lot of concepts that are difficult for people to understand because they do not normally use them, but it does not mean they do not really understand them – they know what is going on. Even if they do not call it “the Commons”, they can feel what is really happening. In that sense, I think it is just a different approach in terms of communication, but I do not think it is different in terms of what is actually happening.

Miguel Arana: I think that the Commons, as a concept, is absolutely important because it offers us a new path to follow. It is quite a complex concept, which points to an absolute paradigm change, but we are still ensconced in the old paradigms and it may be difficult to understand the concept and its full potential. Still, it is a beacon to follow and one of the few, new possibilities allowing us to change things because it really questions the matrix of the whole system. It is huge and complex, as it has to do with economy, with knowledge, with power and its distribution.

However, at this moment I cannot say that it is playing a very visible or specific role.

How do you see this crystallising and scaling up, both nationally and transnationally? These experiences you are building here, do you think they are feasible at other levels? Or do you think that we need to go through a process of maturation of the urban commons before we can tackle national and transnational Commons?

Miguel Arana: All these ideas, including the commons but also focusing on things like collective intelligence or mechanisms for direct democracy – they are not really concerned with scale or the way power and society were previously organised. A true paradigm change will not be fixed to the old structures. For example, take this decision-making platform we are building: once you have built a viable platform that incites tens of thousands of people to work, think and take decisions together, the number of people or the scale does not matter anymore. It does not matter what type of decision you make, it does not matter if it is a local or national decision, none of that matters. The same thing happens with the Commons.

Since one of the characteristics of these ideas is how fluid and open they are, I do not think they are fixed to pre-existing structures. Anything that we can make in Madrid and other cities will work at any scale, anywhere in the world. Actually, inside the department we have built a service, a kind of working group called “The Institutional Extension Service”. And that is precisely what they do: they are calling every city council in the world, every country, everybody to tell them: “Okay we are building this platform, it is free and we are going to give you the platform, we are going to give you all the rules and laws we had to write to make it work, and we will give you all the knowledge that we have built around this platform, for free. It is working for Madrid, so it can also work for you – so, why are you not using it?”

Anything else to close the discussion?

Victoria Anderica: We talked about the transparency policies, but I have not gone into much detail about what we have already done and what we can share. For example, in the transparency ordinance, which will include

what the government must do, we will include the publication of diaries or agendas. That means that every single public official needs to publish their meetings. We need to say who we are meeting, and what we are talking about. This is essential to decision-making transparency and is one of the goals we want to achieve within the three years we have left. We have built the software for that and it is being used very well.

Then, the second thing I have not talked about is the transparency of the lobbies. This ordinance includes the obligation to create a lobby register, which is something that is not very common in Spain. The locations that have put a transparency register into place, like Catalonia, have not had it implemented in a very good way. There are many lobbies that are not registering, because no one is taking care of it. So, we will create a mandatory lobby registry, we are working on it. I think this will be a very good tool to share. I am talking about the software, because we will mix it with the agenda so it will be easy to register a new one, and then access the agendas and request meetings. It will flow – it will be very easy to use.

In terms of losing the fear that many people have about the transparency of decision-making, we are doing it and nothing is happening – in a good sense. I mean, we are publishing the agendas, we have published the CVs of everyone that is not a public official who works in City Hall. We thought it was going to be the end of the world – and nothing happened. We have had positive feedback. People are happy to know who they are working with because actually, we have really good professionals joining us in City Hall. That is great. I think that is something where Madrid can work as an example of how we should lose that fear of transparency, because it can be done.