

Fabian conference on democracy

Speech by Ed Miliband MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office

8 September 2007

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introduction

Let me start today by acknowledging the debt we owe to Charter 88, founded twenty years ago next year which has kept the flame alive across a whole range of areas around constitutional reform.

And also the debt we owe to the Power Commission and other organisations over the last few years for taking up this issue and, agree with them or disagree with all their conclusions, raising the issue of the health of our democracy

The latest contribution to this debate is the Fabian pamphlet published today which talks importantly about the role of political parties and how they can be renewed.

For me today's Conference is about a simple starting point: recognising that the pursuit of equality is not simply about the tackling of inequality on the basis of opportunity, but also on the basis of power. Powerlessness is a great social evil just as much as poverty.

So the changes announced in the *Governance of Britain* document are fundamentally important— from a strengthened Parliament, to constraints on the royal prerogative, enhanced powers for select committees over public appointments. That is why Jack Straw and Michael Wills are taking forward an important national debate.

Equally the changes in local government that Hazel Blears is leading are crucial: giving more powers to local government, over services like economic development and transport.

But that's not what I want to focus on today. I want to talk about something more challenging: going beyond national institutions, beyond local elections. My argument is that while we need to strengthen the institutions of representative democracy – whether parliament or local government – we also need new and deeper forms of engagement so that more people have a chance to be involved particularly in the local issues that affect their lives.

Essentially, this is about a different kind of state – in the way it governs, the way it makes decisions, the way it is held accountable.

In this speech I want to say

Why we need to do this – because it’s right in principle, because we can’t solve many of the problems we face without it and because it is right for our time.

How we do it – not by being wide-eyed about people’s wish to sit on committees but understanding the ways in which people can get involved and being willing to undertake experiments in democracy as we seek to engage people

I will be laying out some of the ground – as this is a big priority for the new government – but I’d like to discuss with people here how to develop it.

And finally, what it means for progressive politics – not as some would suggest that by giving power away we give up our ability to do good but that doing so recognises the reality of how progressive political change happens.

Why we need to do this

Let me start with the why.

Fundamentally, it is about addressing inequalities of power, just as we have taken measures to address other inequalities over the last ten years.

I have seen it in my own constituency whether it is to do with the housing estate being knocked down with people living there not being given proper information or youth services being designed without young people having a genuine voice.

An American academic, Archon Fung, has talked about three ways in which representative democracy is necessary but not sufficient.

First and most obviously, different forms of engagement can provide a richer and more textured conversation between and with people about their preferences which we may only get periodically, if at all, from debates at elections. And it can make for better policy-making as a result.

Second, sometimes mechanisms of representative democracy provide insufficient accountability---for example over local decisions about public services, such as local policing priorities. Part of the solution may lie in direct local public accountability on these issues

Thirdly, and most critically, there are many issues we face in our society that cannot be solved without people’s involvement. So, for example, we can’t address the issues of young people feeling they have nowhere to go if the services are designed by adults.

These are timeless reasons why representative democracy on its own is not enough. But there is an additional reason why this agenda is right for our time.

Because while twenty, thirty and forty years ago, our society was characterised by the deference that meant people would accept representative democracy on its own, today they don’t.

People want and demand more power over their own lives, people are less likely to trust those in authority, whether it be politicians, public service professionals or business.

It seems to me incredibly important that this decline in deference is welcomed, and the fundamental challenge for progressive politics it seems to me – and the one we must face together – is to convert that scepticism about those who govern and rule into a positive force for change in communities and nationally.

And to prevent the alternative – which is that that scepticism is converted into cynicism, a sense that nothing can change and that politics is a waste of time.

What is it that prevents cynicism becoming scepticism? It has to be democracy. Not simply a narrow once every four or five years democracy but a much richer form of democracy which allows participation well beyond it.

How to engage people

So the challenge is to find new ways of reaching out to people and involving them in the democratic process.

We can discuss these issues in my surgeries. We can discuss them in public meetings. But structured discussions allow a richer and more informed debate, and allow communities to debate it amongst themselves as well as with government agencies.

This must start at the level of national policy-making. Following the Prime Minister's speech last Monday, the citizens' jury concept has received huge amounts of publicity.

How can citizens' juries or forums contribute to the policy-making process? At a minimum, instead of the old style of consultation – documents from Whitehall which reached a select few – they represent a new way to have a conversation with people.

To be clear about this, citizens' juries work best when they address specific areas of concern which ensure that policy-making is done on the basis that it understands people's needs and concerns.

That is why this week, Ed Balls discussed his Children's Plan at an early stage with parents and young people, why Jacqui Smith is talking about issues of police accountability next week and why in health, some of the key issues around access will be discussed at a group of citizens' juries round the country.

But nobody suggests citizens' juries are a panacea on their own for problems of participation. My argument today is that they must be part of a broader set of experiments in democracy. And a different attitude of mind and orientation on the part of the state so that every effort is made to involve people in different ways.

Above all, this must be about local issues that directly touch people's lives where they feel they currently have too little voice or say about the things that matter to them.

We must be honest about the paradox here. On the one hand, people are no longer happy simply to trust that the local health service knows best, the police know best, the MP knows best. But at the same time, no one can claim that everyone wants to sit on a committee – they don't.

So bringing democracy to our local services means making decisions transparent, but it also means recognising that different people at different times want different levels of involvement.

At the most basic level this is about providing information. So for the people on the housing estate which is being knocked down, the most basic requirement of the state must be information. We need to be honest that still too often the state fails to meet this minimum requirement.

And the good thing is that increasingly we see new sources of information not controlled by the state, but increasingly generated by users themselves – from Netmums, which provides childcare and parenting information, to Patient Opinion, which provides user-generated information about healthcare.

For some good information will be enough but for others it will not. Good consultation, which many local authorities and other agencies are pioneering, is important. And this is why citizens' juries can be important.

But as I have indicated, transparency and consultation will be inadequate in many cases given the demands of citizens for a say and given that their involvement can make a huge difference to the services that are provided.

Developing forms of participation and involvement which go beyond these basic requirements is a major priority for the new government. Across major public services we want to find ways in which people can better involved in the decisions that affect them.

Take policing. There can be a lack of engagement with the public, that can allow scepticism to convert to cynicism: so people don't share the dilemmas of the police. That is why Jacqui Smith will be holding conversations with the public next week.

In some parts of the country, the police now conduct local beat meetings each month so that individuals can be involved in shaping local police priorities and understand the decisions that affect them. And we want to build on this.

We have pioneered youth budgets for young people themselves to decide how local resources are spent. I know from talking to young people in my constituency what a difference this makes. For the first time, when they ask for resources I can actually say that young people themselves will decide and that has a transformative effect on their willingness to engage as well as what is provided.

Some parts of the country have gone even further and given local people a direct say over the spending of local resources, building on what has been pioneered in Porto Alegre in Brazil. Already there are 10 pilots to extend these experiments to the UK

and we need to build on these experiments where they have worked, and be honest where they have not.

Sometimes the state is not just ceding power temporarily. Everyone knows a public asset in their local community that is underused, or a public asset that has been sold off that could have transformed a community. So there is an important agenda here giving local people within community organisations the chance to have direct control over local assets like community centres. And thanks to money we made available last year, 20 projects are now going to go forward to show what can be done.

And there are examples round the country which show the effects this can have. The Goodwin centre in the Thornton Estate in Hull started as a result of being given its land directly from the local authority, and used that to involve the community in the transformation of the area. Local people were involved in how the centre was built and how it provides services. Where before there was no GP, no children's centre and little open space, the Goodwin Centre provided them.

And with greater information, with greater consultation and with community control of assets, it is important to have clearer rights to redress. That is what the Community Call for Action will strengthen.

So the bedrock needs to be local democracy. But for local democracy to thrive, we need to go beyond ballot-box politics to involve people in new ways and at different levels.

Progressive causes

So renewing our democracy means renewing it at a local as well as a national level. These are some of the areas – as well as our national political institutions – that need to be addressed. But in doing so, we need to tackle a fundamental question for progressives about these issues – in the process of giving power away, do we hamper our ability to make progressive change happen?

There has been one tradition, which we could caricature as the Fabian tradition. It has always been democratic, but it has concentrated on mechanical reforms, occupying the state and using the power of the state to achieve progressive ends.

Some people in this tradition will worry that community assets go to people who can't get elected – indeed I hear it in my own constituency. Of course there is a danger of capture. Of course there is a unique legitimacy that comes from being elected. But mechanisms of accountability can be built in – as in Hull, where eight out of 11 on the board are elected representatives from the local area.

Some people will worry that this agenda will lend itself to usual suspects and can't go beyond them. That's why mechanisms like the citizens' jury have an important role and more generally, we need to design systems of participation which can bring people in without huge commitments of time.

And what about the role of political parties? This is a challenge to them too to find ways in which they can renew themselves as community institutions encouraging their

members to take part in the institutions of the community, for example, by encouraging people to become school governors, participate in tenants' associations and health boards.

But the strongest response to these criticisms of ceding power is to ask how political change happens.

We have learnt that if we want change at local level, of course it needs an active state but it also won't happen without the active involvement of people. The Goodwin Centre has transformed Thornton in Hull because of the active involvement of local people.

Sure Start has made a huge difference in my community because government funding is allied to the active involvement of local people, so that it is an institution rooted in the community.

And of course it's not just true at local level, its true nationally as well.

When we think about the great changes that have happened in the last ten years – whether it is gay rights, international debt and development, or greater disability rights – they haven't happened because simply or even mainly because progressive government wanted them to happen, but because advocacy and campaigning groups helped make them happen.

But to make this really happen, we need a society in which more of these organisations can campaign for change.

That is why we are working with the charity commission to make it clear to the third sector that they can campaign in support of their demands if they further their charitable purpose: because of an understanding that part of being a charity is the ability to stand up for those for whom your organisation was founded.

The progressive cause needs the engagement not just of some groups of citizens, but of those who because of their circumstances are at most risk of disaffection.

And the progressive cause needs the voices of the marginalised to be heard, and a government willing to act being pressed and persuaded by a civil society that demands they act – whether on child poverty, inequality or the threat of climate change.

Conclusion

I have tried to lay out an agenda that goes beyond changes to our national institutions, and goes beyond strengthening our local institutions. Both are important, but we can go beyond it.

I have argued that we need to go beyond the ballot box to engage people locally in the decisions that affect their lives. It is hard and difficult but it is absolutely necessary to achieving the kind of the country we want to see.

Not just because the changes are right in themselves. But fundamentally because of this: if scepticism becomes cynicism it will always favour reactionary forces not progressive causes.

Progressive politics relies on people believing that we can change our world for the better.

That needs a stronger, more vibrant democracy than we have. If we build it, then I believe we can change our country for the better, address the inequalities of power that exist and build the progressive Britain so many of us want to see.