

COMMUNITARIAN POLITICS FOR BRITAIN'S POOREST PLACES

FABIAN SPEECH

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Thank you to the Fabian Society for hosting this new series of seminars on social mobility – getting on, and getting ahead in life.

These conversations build on your work over a century and our work over the last decade. And in the last year, your series on 'Narrowing the Gap' and our white paper on New Opportunities

The series of seminars that we are hosting together provides some new space to explore new ground. We have invited some extremely experienced, extremely articulate and extremely wise people to contribute

And because I am none of those things, I get to open, with a very personal speech;

- Not based on my view as a minister,
- Nor on my view as a Member of Parliament
- But, on the view I have seen as a community organiser in East Birmingham, in the five years since I was elected

It is that work as a community organiser, that has taught me the need for a radical new agenda for communitarian politics and policies in Britain, that makes a balance of rights and responsibilities not theoretical but real.

So, a fortnight ago, I made a speech to Quilliam about the new communitarians' agenda for community

Tonight I want to explore what new communitarians could say about opportunity

And in the weeks ahead, I will say more about the new communitarian agenda for the public services

1. NEW ANXIETIES, NEW HORIZONS

This year our task in Government is twofold.

To deliver the answers to the here and now – but also to set out new foundations for the future.

Alongside an answer to new anxieties must come a vision of new horizons.

If we make the right choices now – investing not cutting; reforming, not standing still – then we could win for Britain a big share of the 1 billion new skilled jobs with better wages that will be created worldwide in the decade to come

If we make the right choices now, we can put those new opportunities, those new chances, those new horizons, within reach of the many and not the few.

Tonight I want to talk about the places where I think those new horizons are often hardest to see – the street corners of our poorest communities in our inner cities

And in this fight there have always been two fronts

The push against poverty, but also the march for a more socially mobile society.

They are subtly different;

On both fronts we're made gigantic progress

- 2.8 million more people in work than there were in 1998
- 500,000 fewer children now in income poverty and the poverty rate for pensioners down by a third
- A doubling of the annual growth rate of the income of the poorest 20%.

And finally some movement on social mobility after 30 years of no progress:

- Earnings mobility down during the 1980's and 90's but up since 2000
- And the relevance of family income on exam results, down in 2006 from 1986

But both fights come together as a single struggle in Britain's poorest places; the parts towns and cities where half of British people living in poverty now reside.

It is the fight that Tony Blair said in his first speech was 'the greatest challenge for any democratic government'.

And it is a fight I say we must finish in the decade to come.

It is a fight to live in a country where poverty is not a road-block to aspiration – and where aspiration is a fast-track out of poverty

2. CITIES ARE VITAL CENTRES

I want to explain why I see cities as vital centre of this work

In part, the argument is sentimental

In Europe, it is in our towns and cities where, arguably, we invented the modern idea of freedom

The freedom to trade and prosper, to self govern, to associate and speak freely

Hence the medieval dictum as Ferdinand Braudel puts it; 'city air makes free'

But the freedom of the city is different to the freedom of the frontier.

It was never just about independence- from arbitrary rule or arbitrary rules- it was always the freedom of inter-dependence:

It's not simply the freedom of Mill or John Rawls or Amartya Sen; it's the freedom of what Quentin Skinner calls the neo-Roman tradition; of active citizenship, participation and debate.

It's the idea that your freedom depends not just on what you can take- but what you give.

But the argument for cities isn't simply sentimental: it's essential.

In the last decade all our work has moved us up around two places in the European league table of inequality

And if we improved the incomes of the poor by a third in the 20% most deprived of places we would up again another place.

- We would have a more equal country and an economy where our performance matches our potential
- And we would make a reality of the city's traditional promise for thousands more

This is a prize worth having and it is surely within us to reach for it

3. THE FORCES STACKED AGAINST US

If we are to be realistic radicals in this matter, we have to accept the nature and scale of the forces we are tackling: new forces are pounding away at old fault-lines.

Forces that are national, indeed global:

- The decline of manufacturing from its old urban base continues to extinguish low-skilled and skilled manual jobs
- The pace of out-migration, suburbanisation and urban sprawl that has continued, pulling out jobs and often richer residents
- The acceleration of owner-occupation that often leaves social housing in the least popular areas, allocated according to need, concentrating those without work in certain places

These forces act along an old fault line:

- That runs from abandonment of housing and closed shops and decaying infrastructure to local stigma
- To worklessness as working culture, and social networks connecting people to jobs all disappear
- To defeatism and low aspirations
- To visible neglect and decline
- To distortion of local public services

It's a fault line over a century old. And it's a spiral that can quicken in the maelstrom of today's giant global forces.

So the challenge is big- but so is the opportunity.

Poor places are often right next door to rich places

Aspirations can be sky-high- with big labour markets

Land is often available and cheaper

And the communities themselves often constitute a big and dense market place that is simply under-served.

This is what my community is like.

- Around us we have Birmingham's Eastside, a logistics corridor, a new and growing airport. Thousands of jobs around us on all points of the compass.
- 80% of our young people want to go to college- way above the national average for rich and poor
- And businesses are opening all the time

So the challenge for us is how do we unlock this opportunity; and in so doing, smash the glass ceiling on aspiration in the inner city.

What I've learnt is that it can be impossible for individuals to flourish without a community.

Without a set of values and standards that we share; without a set of obligations to each other that we honour; without a set of places and institutions that we feel we own.

These collective goods allow every individual to get ahead in life.

This has become my definition of communitarianism. And I learnt it not in books; nor in Whitehall. But from what we're trying in Hodge Hill.

4. BREAKING THE CYCLE OF DECLINE

Breaking the cycle of decline is not easy. But I want to offer three pointers on where to get started.

First and perhaps most important, respect is the ground floor of Renewal.

You simply cannot bring prosperity to a place unless you bring it peace.

This is in one sense, obvious. If you live in our poorest areas, you're twice as likely to be a victim of crime – and economically it is simply more expensive to do business.

But the importance of the respect is more fundamental than this.

Let me explain.

We wanted to put the community in charge of regeneration

But what we found is that you can't simply pluck community leadership off the shelf. It is too often scarce.

As I put together our vision of community-led renewal – Hodge Hill 2020 – I realised the need to understand this absence of leadership.

I then found the root cause pretty simple. The absence of the basic requirement of a safe, secure neighbourhood.

Frankly, it is hard to ask individuals to become leaders of change when they do not feel safe to walk in their streets and use public spaces

Or feel confident enough in the neighbourliness of their neighbours to seek to work together with them

Or if they do not trust that those in their neighbourhood place the same value that they do on having a safe home and a supportive community within which to raise their family.

If you live with a sense of fear, rather than a spirit of solidarity, when disorder breeds insecurity and when fear breeds isolation, the call to responsibility will go unanswered.

So if you don't start by being tough on crime, you won't have a community to help you get anywhere

For me it was my first campaign.

Meeting after meeting with local residents. Literally mapping the hot-spots, grot-spots and places where the drug dealers dwelt.

Building the dossiers for police action.

And what the process has begun to help a multi-ethnic community see is, that neighbours who hadn't spoken shared the same angst, about the joy-riders; about the drug dealers; about the gangs who made life hell for others.

Now we have police numbers in our area up 50% - and a fall in crime of over 13% two years in a row.

So neighbourhood policing and community justice are not simply community safety issues.

They are fundamental to the fight against poverty – and the march for a more mobile country.

Respect is the ground-floor of renewal.

Second, communitarians believe every individual has an obligation to get on in life

Communitarians have always argued clearly that claiming rights without assuming responsibilities isn't on, as Etzioni puts it;

'people have the moral responsibility to help themselves as best they can'

But in our poor communities, there are roadblocks- because people simply lack the power to get on- so we have to deal with the power failures.

For me, this is where both the communitarian idea of freedom and the liberal view come together.

This year, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of JS Mill's On Liberty. It's a tradition, in my book, inestimably improved in more recent times, by first John Rawls and now, Amartya Sen.

In particular, Sen argues that for change to be meaningful we must deliver better equality in "substantive freedoms" – the capabilities – to choose a life that one has reason to value' .

This argument takes us beyond the idea that poverty is simply the absence of income

Beyond the notion that equality of opportunity is on its own enough.

It tells us that both income and opportunity might get you to the starting line in life, but without capabilities – and therefore power - you will only get so far down the track – stopping perhaps a long way short of your ambitions – or indeed your potential.

But the truth is that in the inner city, there's a power failure.

Two aspects of this have taxed us in Hodge Hill;

The obligation on our young people to do as well as they can; to reach for goals as far as they can stretch.

And the obligation on adults to get themselves ready to take a job.

Let me talk about the power failures that face both.

Take our young people.

Through a series of youth conferences, a major study by the University of Birmingham, and now through a major programme of research into character education funded by the Templeton Foundation, I have studied for two years, why so few of our young people go to university – when my surveys tell me their top priority for new investment is learning a new skill.

I found no shortage of aspiration. Some 80% of our young people want to go to college.

But what we found is a lack of a sense of how the world works. What Prof James Arthur, who is working with me in our schools, described to me, as a lack of 'mental map' of how to get on in life.

This is a road-block for our young people.

To break it down our young people want to develop, not only their understanding of the things around them – but an understanding of the things inside them – self-confidence, self-esteem, ambition, motivation, nerve.

Things some of us but not all were lucky to get from our parents; things that a small few often get from the finest public schools.

In other words, the wisdom and insight and savoir faire that comes from community life.

This is why I have come to believe that a new agenda for character education is so important.

We have to acknowledge that for our young people, real power is not only the hard stuff of exams; it's the harder stuff of how the world works. What we once called 'soft skills' for many in the inner city are the most important skills of all.

Second, we've studied hard the road-blocks to responsibility for adults getting a job.

In Hodge Hill, we have the fourth highest unemployment in the country. Many on incapacity benefit. Many with mental health problems that keep them out of work.

So, three years ago I brought together the council, the LSC, the NHS, the Job Centre to ask, how do we get people off benefits and into work?

Over the course of months we devised a way of reaching out to people not in work; connecting them to health services – like mental health services – then connecting them to skills, then connecting to volunteering, or further training or jobs.

After 1 month's testing, we had a model that worked.

But what struck me hardest is that we do need tougher incentives for people to get a job- but if you are out of work you often don't have the power to put together that pathway- to health- to skills- to work.

You need community institutions to come together in a tighter knit.

A communitarian answer to help deliver a liberal view of freedom.

So my third lesson for inner city renewal therefore is to add a new dimension to our agenda for public services.

To help centres of local services, become centres for local society.

When I look around a community like mine today, I can see a new fabric of community institutions woven and re-woven in the decade gone by;

- New Sure-Starts, new schools and new colleges
- New neighbourhood police teams
- New health-centres

- New housing associations and new homes

And in some of Britain's poorest places, these public assets are the only foundations on which to build community

The ask of these institutions therefore - not only to serve those who most need the state but also to knit communities together – is very demanding

How do we boost their capacity to do this?

Money is necessary but not sufficient.

So we've tried in Hodge Hill to fast-track not public-private partnerships- but public-society partnerships.

Not powered by big capital but micro-finance. To create organisations which can multiply the reach and impact of public services.

On Friday, I visited St Benedicts School in Bordesley Green – one of the poorest wards in England.

There the Head studies carefully which groups are doing well – and which could do better.

When she saw Bengali boys were falling behind, she targeted family learning services – delivered in part through local volunteers – to help teach parents.

Parents who then went on to help better their children. The result? Bengali boys did best at St Benedicts last year.

The cost? Just 1.6% of the school budget.

Some might call this co-production.

I call it harnessing a community for change.

Yet just as the community is a great under-tapped ally for public servants doing their job – so, public services are still an under-tapped asset for the community.

Over three years we have pulled together a network of social entrepreneurs – entrepreneurs who have spotted opportunities in the asset base around them.

People like Tim opening schools after hours for football and cricket. Or Masood opening cafes with cheap computer access. Or Asharat opening shop-fronts for training and new skills.

They work round the clock; but most importantly, they work around the corner from where local residents need them.

These people are not creating multinational companies with big budgets. They're creating real social change powered by micro-finance.

They're deploying small sums of money to work a very valuable asset – a school, a health-centre, a neighbourhood office - much, much harder.

And their partnership with community institutions opens a new two way street;

Where public servants can draw from community power. And where community power can make every pound of public spending go further and further

I think this new joint venture, this new alliance, between community institutions and their own third sector, will be amongst the most important in transforming our poor places.

So tomorrow the Cabinet Office will commission a short study on how new partnerships between local public service leaders and the micro- third sector around them, can make our centres of services, true centres of society, especially in our poorest places where community matters most.

5. THE POLITICS OF INNER CITY POVERTY

So there is much we can do in Government in the next year and the next decade to bring about inner city renewal:

- To offer neighbourhood policing and community justice as a ground-floor for community renewal
- To remove the road-blocks to individual responsibility by using the community and its services to give new power to those whose aspirations are high but confidence low
- To combine public assets and community organisation in a coalition for change

After reform of parliament and today's crazy system of expenses, we will need to accelerate the business of restoring trust in politics.

And so, to complete the unfinished business of Britain's poorest places, we should construct a radical communitarian programme – for community, for opportunity for public services.

In so doing, we can deliver and be seen to deliver on our passion I politics: to guarantee an equal distribution of capability, of aspiration, of opportunity, and of power.