

Speech by Liam Byrne MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to The Institute for Government on 11th November 2009

‘Radicals with Realism’

Introduction

I'm enormously grateful to the Institute for Government for the chance to speak tonight about the future of public services.

In the short time you've been established, you've put yourself on the map as a place where politicians and policy makers and people who are about government come together to talk about how government can be better.

Disraeli once said, "to believe in the heroic makes heroes".

I've often thought it's a good motto for British public servants.

Public servants who believe in the quiet heroics of making a difference, often in the very hardest of circumstances.

Public servants who it has been the greatest privilege of my professional career to meet in the five years since I was elected;

Public servants who like Phil Granger and Grantley Hays who I took to meet the Prime Minister recently.

In my constituency it was those two who were prepared to front up to some of the most frightening elements on the Matchbox Estate in Shard End to bring some peace and quiet to the citizens who live there;

Public servants like the nurse in a care home, I heard about when I was minister for social care who had used to hold the hand of a those in the final days of their life and talked to them about their childhood memories so that their last memories would be their happiest;

Public servants who like frontline staff at the UK Border Agency which I was proud to lead for 2 years who were on had to help lead the response to the terrorist attacks at Glasgow Airport and still keep our border safe.

They are all people who believe, as Woodrow Wilson put it "that to work for the common good is the greatest creed".

They are people like my parents, student radicals in the 1960's who believed that if you really wanted to change the world, you went into public life

Everything I've learnt in my short career in politics has told me that they were right.

Sometimes it is easy for these stories to get lost in the blizzards of statistics we use to describe the extraordinary progress in public services since we came to office in 1997.

The fact that crime is down by a third,

The fact that exam results are now 50% better for 16 year olds,

The fact that the average time to get into a hospital is now only 4.5 weeks.

Sometimes, these figures sound abstract

But they're not

They're the summary of the millions of tiny acts of diligence, courage, compassion, professionalism and pride by British public servants which together has created a wave of change in this country.

So the question I want to tackle tonight is how we make sure that in the decade ahead that wave of change doesn't stop but grows stronger.

Now I put myself in the camp labelled "idealist without illusions"

And I believe that the next decade could be the best decade for public services making a difference.

But only if we stay focused on the ends we're trying to deliver; and constantly modernise the means.

And only if we recognise how changes – in the power of people; the strength of our frontline, and the vitality of civic life – offer us the chance to change the shape, size, and strength - of our government.

The next context

Let me start with the debate about means and ends

Sometimes when I talk to Progressives, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I see pessimism in their eyes.

They look at the difficult spending decisions that are coming, the challenge of halving the deficit over four years, the slower rate of public spending growth and look depressed about the prospects for delivering social democracy.

But they're mistaken. And here's why.

We were always to going to hit the point when public spending growth had to slow

When the investment gap was fixed.

When we not only reached but exceeded international averages for spending on police and education and health.

And that point is now.

The challenge for the decade ahead is not to look at difficult decisions and give up on social progress

It is to ask, how must we change the means of delivering social progress.

The Government always understood this.

When I hear today's debates about spending – around the table in my office, or in the corridors of Westminster or Whitehall, it often reminds me of the debates we had 15 years ago, when we modernised Clause Four.

In that debate we focused on the ends of social justice; and we modernised the means;

We thought again about competition. Investment. Regulation.

We discussed new methods – like public private partnerships which today deliver well over £60 billion of new investment.

And, present at creation, was Gordon Brown's insistence on the right, tough-minded, balance on tax and spend;

That debate on ends and means made us radicals with realism.

Now once again, we have to take our traditional values; the ends of politics; our ambitions not just for a growing economy, a fairer society and a stronger country.

And we have to ask ourselves again, how do the means need to change.

And as the Chancellor said in Cardiff, where there are difficult decisions we need to take them, not flinch from them.

The right but tough-minded balance was key to us winning trust in 1997. It is key to us winning us trust in 2010.

Because if we do not show that we are a party for all seasons, then quite simply, we won't be hired to work in all seasons.

The New Challenges

Rights; Not A Roll Of The Dice

So how do the means have to change?

Simply put.

By drawing strength from the decade of investment that has gone

And by drawing on the new strengths in our country:

- People power
- Civic society
- And public service enterprise

Unlike fiscal consolidations of the past, we enter the years ahead after a decade of public spending growth.

That means we have a storehouse of strengths on which we can draw.

So let me start with people.

The simple truth is that people today are far more powerful than a decade ago.

More are in work. We've had higher income growth per head than any other country in the G7.

People have lost their deference and got used to choice.

New technology has transformed their networks and abilities and sheer access to information about the world around them and the people who serve them.

Minute by minute. Second by second.

During the US election, President Obama stayed in touch with over 2.5m followers on the web;

Here in the UK, Twitter drove a public apology from Jan Moir and public disclosure from Trefigura.

All of these changes mean ordinary people and popular pressure are better placed to drive the improvement of frontline public services in the decade ahead than in the past.

By exercising their choice to different providers and by exercising their voice to say what they think.

That's a giant leap on from 1997. When we came to office, it was the government which had to do a lot of pushing things forward.

We did it by setting targets.

In 1998 we set 600 of them. Today this is down to 30.

But in the years to come we have to accelerate the shift of power from Whitehall to people.

By replacing targets enforced from the top, with rights exercised by people.

That's why I've argued that we have so much to learn from countries like Sweden, Austria, Finland, Canada, Holland which have replaced targets with rights.

And that's why in the months ahead we will set out plans to enshrine in law legal enforceable rights to healthcare, and we'll publish soon rights to education, one to one tuition and strong police teams.

And we'll couple this with plans to give people far more information about how their local services compare to the best.

We don't believe public services should be a gamble.

We think they should be a guarantee.

And by the way, if you are a social democrat, this approach has a big advantage because it means you can devolve power in a complicated system and protect equity because people have rights to a minimum level of service.

That's why we think plans to get rid of the two-week cancer wait right are madness.

We don't want people to feel they're rolling the dice everytime they use the NHS, or send their kids to a new school, or call the police. We want people to have a right to good services.

And people power can go further still.

More and more now, people want a say in how services are designed and used and are quite happy to play a part in them being delivered.

We have to help that; and we can start by getting out information, data, maps and let the free-range of society's imagination develop new ways of doing business.

Making the public's data public isn't just good for letting people know how local services fare –

It's good for social innovation – one of the most powerful forces of change we can harness in the years to come.

Civil Society

The second force we can harness in the decade ahead is the new force of civil society.

Some people pretend there's a trade-off between the state and society. He sees the state and society as actors in a zero-sum game.

More of one means less of another.

They've never worked in the communities like the one I serve.

There is no trade-off.

The bottom line is this.

If you want a strong society, you need a fair society. And fair societies have a strong state.

Compare for a moment, Sweden and America. In Sweden, 60% think their fellow citizens can be trusted – in the US, its less than 40%

Take two states at opposite ends of the Mississippi.

In Louisiana, just 30% of people say 'most' people can be trusted; in Minnesota its over 60%

Strong societies are fair societies – and fair societies have strong states.

Just look at what's happened in Britain.

The number of charities has grown by nearly 40%

Charitable giving is up dramatically

Levels of trust in communities are high.

This is a strength on which we can draw in the year ahead.

Common causes are best tackled by the state and society together: Whether that is giving more children the confidence to go to college;

or helping each other combat long term conditions; or helping clear a street of youths with not enough to do.

Let me share one story from Hodge Hill.

The streets of Glebe Farm are where I first campaigned for office. It is a neighbourhood once infamous for anti social behaviour and youth crime.

For many years traditional policing failed to tackle the problem of a few ringleaders and their scores of hangers on who made life hell for others.

But in the last couple of years, police and council workers changed their methods: They put police on the beat; targeted ringleaders and made arrests.

Then they hired the best youth workers from across the city to reach out to the kids mixed up with the wrong crowd.

They brought in the Midnight Bus to keep them off the streets and a minibus to take kids home; they worked with the Minister to turn the old church on Audley Road into a youth club; they worked with local businesses to change the shape of the streets and to insert CCTV.

They built a community coalition that has brought down ASB by something like 40%.

It's the kind of example that tells us that alongside an agenda for strengthening public services we have to set out an agenda for strengthening the sinews of public life.

State and society together can do more than either one alone. But it demands we think – and act - locally with a renewed sense of purpose.

It demands that we think about the services we offer in the new fabric of community institutions in our country – Sure Starts, neighbourhood police teams, the new infrastructure of schools and ask: how do centres of local services become centres of local society.

It demands we explore thoroughly, not in a cursory way, the potential for mobilising communities to help deliver aspects of public service; whether it is through mentoring kids after school, offering community service to teenagers, or expanding peer to peer support in health, probation or counter-addiction services, like the extraordinary Expert Patient Programme.

It demands we do more on the national stage to raise our moral voice – about the responsibilities of good citizenship and parenting.

It demands that we ask communities to co-design and help shape the billions of pounds worth of bricks and mortar going into new homes, new town centres and primary care centres, new schools and nurseries, and not simply parachute in designs from on high.

It demands that political parties especially my own do more in local communities to support, mentor, inspire the change-makers who want to make a difference to what is going on outside their front-door, but do not know where to start.

It demands new civic institutions like a social investment bank. Civic innovations like a social impact bond. Civic opportunities like community service for youngsters.

In other words it demands a constant exercise in imagination in every aspect of our work in government and out on the streets of our communities, to put community life first.

The new front-line

The third force for change is the new power and new potential of today's frontline.

Today's front-line is very different to the front-line of the past.

We have 240,000 more police officers, teachers, doctors and nurses who are at least 24% better paid.

It is a serious force to be reckoned with.

Our front-line has never been as well-equipped to innovate and join services together in a way that delivers a better service and costs less money.

That means the frontline today is more than able to bring back together public services once divided between a myriad of agencies – to serve the whole needs of the person standing in front of them.

Steve Bundred once said to me that the real place that innovation lives is in the grey space between agencies. He's right. It does.

It is why experiments like the one Michael Bichard here is leading - Total Place - are looking at how front-line public servants – like the teachers I met at Platt Bridge in Wigan last week – are able to weave services – like childcare, childrens' health, adult learning, schooling, after work care into a seamless web of support where you can't see the joins anymore.

But new technology also means we can now share services that are routine – HR, finance, IT, property - between agencies in a much more ambitious way.

It means that Whitehall can – and must - embrace the truth of the modern age that you don't have to be big to be strong.

Once upon a time, the nostrums of the new public management school told us to subdivide every difficult task into its simplest part and set up an agency to get on with it.

We have some 790 agencies, executive NDPBs and advisory bodies.

In the modern age, we don't need a landscape which is that complicated.

We can simplify things. Put things back together. And save a lot of money in the process. Indeed if we brought every part of government up to the level of the best we could save £9 billion.

And where there are assets and businesses we no longer need to own, we should sell them.

Our first estimate is £16 billion of sales is possible – in fact I think that number could turn out to be higher.

Conclusion: the Tories and lazy myths

So I am an optimist about the future for public services. I believe we can halve the deficit over four years, make tough decisions on spending, just as we have on tax and set the stage for a country that is both richer and fairer.

We do it by drawing on the storehouse of strength we have created over the last 10 years.

The British picture is so different today.

When I go home every week to Hodge Hill, I can see the difference that our investment has made.

I can see the schools with new teachers, new kit, and results off the scale of what was achieved in the past.

I can see neighbourhood police teams, back on the beat and crime down 13% two years in a row.

I can see diggers clearing the ground for new health-centres – the biggest in Birmingham - that will help us tackle a 13-year gap in life expectancy between some of my wards and Lichfield 15 miles up the road.

I know there will be difficult decisions ahead. Believe me, I've heard the arguments about most of them.

But we'd do well today to remember the advice of Nye Bevan.

In the only book he wrote, on the penultimate page he said; 'progress is not the elimination of struggle, but rather a change in its terms'.

The terms of the Government's challenge have changed but we go into the future well prepared to succeed.

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