

Speech by the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn MP to the Guardian Public Service Awards, 6pm - 23rd November 2004

‘Valuing Public Service’

Tonight we honour the best in public service. I want to thank the Guardian for organising these awards. You have given us the chance to applaud the dedication of people who all too rarely get recognition or reward for what they do - and yet who make such a difference to our country, whether they are health service workers or local government officers.

As this the first year of the Guardian Public Service Awards demonstrates, countless projects and initiatives are changing people’s lives for the better. What you see here tonight is no more than the tip of the iceberg. Public services and public servants who each and every day bring good to hundreds of communities and millions of people. The commitment to serving others - whether helping a young child to read, coaxing a patient out of a coma, supporting a victim overcome the trauma of crime - these are things money alone can’t buy.

So when we honour the winners here tonight we are honouring more than a few individuals or organisations. We are honouring their fellows in public service. We are honouring their ethics of public service. And we are honouring the values of public service itself. One that expresses our common humanity: a belief that we are far more than a set of individuals looking after just ourselves - that we achieve more by working together than we ever can alone.

The Guardian Public Service Awards are about rewarding what really counts in our country - giving to others. I’ve always thought it a bit odd that while as a society we seem quite prepared to honour footballers and pop stars with small - and often - large fortunes, and while the business ethic is regarded - rightly - as a motor of national success, those who give their all in the service of others - the cleaners, porters, the housing staff, the play workers, the mental health nurses - are usually forgotten and rarely thanked.

So tonight, on behalf of the Prime Minister, the Government and I believe the whole country I want to thank you for all you do. Britain rightly praises its economic entrepreneurs - it needs to praise its social entrepreneurs too.

You remind us that enterprise is not just the preserve of those who create the nation’s wealth. It is there among those who sustain the nation’s health. Initiative is found not just in commerce or in trade. It is there in councils

and in transport. Excellence is not just the hallmark of the best in the private sector. It is there in the public sector. Innovation is not just pursued in the business sector. It is there in the voluntary sector.

That is what we are seeing here tonight - enterprise alongside excellence, initiative alongside innovation.

But I believe we are seeing evidence of something else. A remarkable renaissance is underway in our public services. It is true of course that not everything is perfect. Local services can still struggle to recruit or retain staff. Pressures are real. More resources are always needed. But the question is not whether everything is broken or everything is fixed. The question is whether progress has taken hold. And whether what we see here this evening - excellence among some - is becoming more widely available to all.

On both counts the evidence suggests there are good reasons to be cheerful. Hospital waiting lists are at a 17 year low. Your chance of being a victim of crime is at a twenty year low. Local council performance is up. Just last week social services ratings were up. And school test results are not just up, they are better than they have ever been.

What is more excellence is spreading. In schools, the toughest areas are seeing the biggest improvements. Primary schools in the highest poverty areas have improved at double the rate of schools in the most affluent areas.

I am not saying every problem is solved: far from it. And there are always new problems to deal with. MRSA is one. Anti-social behaviour is another. But as we look to the future it is important not to forget the past. It is easy to forget how far we have come. Seven years ago grants to councils had been cut by 7%. Now they are up by 30%. Seven years ago spending on NHS buildings and equipment was lower at the end of the 1992-97 Parliament than it had been at the beginning. Since 1997 capital spending has risen by almost 200%. Seven years ago pay rises in the public sector lagged behind those in the private sector. Now the reverse is true. And while employment in the public sector fell between 1979 and 1997, since then half a million more people have been employed.

28,000 more teachers, 12,500 more police officers, 77,500 more nurses, 19,000 more doctors; these are more than figures on paper: they express our nation's new priorities.

For I believe an old consensus in Britain is giving way to a new one. In the 1980s the consensus was that Britain must inevitably fall behind. Today a new consensus is emerging that Britain can move ahead. Then it was nostalgia about the past. Today it is hope about the future.

Look around the world and see the trends. After decades of uncertainty and decline the British economy is now strong and stable. The distinctive approach Britain has taken to macro-economic policy has allowed us to weather global uncertainties far better than any other major economy. Unemployment is at a thirty year low. Employment at an all-time high. Britain is working. Indeed, our economy has grown for the longest period since records began.

Strength in our economy has given us the strength to invest in our public services. Public services, that elsewhere in the world are being cut back or going back, here at home are now growing and improving as the British approach of combining resources with reforms achieves real results. Britain is the only major country in the world that for the last two years and the next two will increase public investment in healthcare and education, year on year, as a proportion of national income.

Just a few years ago, the consensus was that public services were a symbol of a basket-case Britain of inefficiency and over-staffing. In those days, the grass was always supposed to be greener on the other side: whether that was the French health system or the German welfare system.

Seven years on the story is a different one. And it is being told by different voices. Listen to what Eric Chemla, a French transplant surgeon, argued recently of the transformation in the performance of the NHS: “The two systems are like lifts that cross. The French system is going down and the English system is going up. In fact they crossed three years ago... You go to an NHS hospital and they have the best doctors because of the way they are recruited... People don't understand what good fortune they have here in Britain”.

Or listen to the German Employment Minister Wolfgang Clement declaring after a recent visit to Job Centre Plus in South London: “The job placement policy is the best in the whole of Europe”.

The old consensus was that Britain's public services could not be improved but instead had to be abandoned. Today we are building a new consensus: not just that Britain's public services can be better, but that they can be the best. The fatalism of the old consensus is giving way to the optimism of the new.

The old consensus said that Britain's public services were a drag on business and enterprise. Today, a new consensus is emerging that in a competitive global market where knowledge is king, the fortunes of business and enterprise rely on the success of public services, none more important than those provided by schools, colleges and universities. So where the old consensus saw public services as part of Britain's problem, today they are seen as part of the solution.

So no one should be in any doubt about the Government's commitment to public services - or those who work in them. In a world of ever faster change the job you do in providing security and opportunity is more important than it has ever been. To feel secure we need the right framework of law. The measures unveiled in today's Queen's Speech will help secure national borders and protect local communities.

And if communities and citizens are to realise their aspirations for progress they need opportunity alongside security. They need the opportunity of services that offer better childcare and more responsive health care. They need services that give them an opportunity to have a say and exercise more choice. Services that give them the opportunity to learn not once in just part of their lifetime but throughout their lifetime.

Public services hold the key to unlocking a modern Britain that is economically successful because it is socially mobile. We cannot have one without the other. Realising each and every individual's potential is the best way of maximising our country's potential.

So as we move forward through the Pre-Budget Report and the next wave of departmental five year plans, this twin track of providing security and opportunity in an era of vast global change will be at the core of our ambitions for Britain.

Public services will be at the heart of this future programme. They are uniquely placed to help equip people to meet the future challenges Britain faces. And we can face that future with optimism because I believe we can forge a new consensus about the future of public services themselves. These are its elements.

First, in place of the old consensus of tax cuts for a few coming before investment that could benefit all, the new consensus is that the priority for Britain has to be investment first, tax cuts second.

Second, while the old consensus asked Britain to choose between resources or reforms, the new says it is not either/or - it is both. People tend to like resources. Sometimes they are less keen on reforms. But the reason that Britain's public services are moving forward is because of the combination of both. So at the very point that improvement is taking hold across the public services it would be wrong to retreat from reform. That is not a mistake we will make. Reform must - and will - go on.

Third, while the old consensus elevated all things private to be good and downgraded all things public to be bad, a new consensus says that the public can be as good as the private. Equally, if our ambition - as I believe it must be - is to make excellence in our public services available to all then we have a duty to harness what is best of the public, private and voluntary sectors. There are, of course, limits to the role of free markets. But equally there are limits to the role of centralised states. Responsive services require more local and less national control.

Fourth, then, while the old consensus said that choice could only ever be available to those with wealth, the new consensus says it should be available to all. So whether it is the chance to own your own home or to choose your own hospital, our ambition should be to redistribute opportunities in our society.

Finally, while the old consensus said that you could have excellence but not equity, today the new consensus says that Britain will not succeed unless we have both.

Educational excellence for an elite will no longer do for a modern Britain in a more competitive world. Hence the need to press ahead with reforms to schools, colleges and universities so that they bring opportunities for higher standards and greater choice to the many, not just a few. And to those who still say better school results must mean the system is failing rather than that students are succeeding, I say it is wrong to cap aspiration when Britain needs every child and every adult to fulfil their true potential. The glass ceiling that holds too many of our people back must now be broken.

And that must include the glass ceiling inside the public services - so that there are better career ladders for talent to advance. In these next few years we need to deepen what we have done in the last few - not least through pay reforms like Agenda for Change and the School Workforce Agreement - to help nursing assistants and classroom assistants to move up to become fully qualified nurses or teachers. If we are to get the best services for the public we have to get the best from every member of public service staff.

In sum, new times mean new ways of providing public services. That is what is so inspiring about tonight's event. It shows it can be done - and is being done.

So we owe you thanks not just for the small differences that make life better for individual citizens and individual communities. But because every time you prove public services work you help to forge a new progressive consensus for change.

A consensus that acknowledges the scale of what is still to be done but knows it can be done. That takes pride in the fact that after years of being run down Britain's public services are on the way up.

It is a consensus that learns from what works and is relentless in reforming what does not. It is one that feels confident about facing the challenges of tomorrow because of the progress underway today. In tonight's award winners, we get a glimpse of what that future can hold. As you have shown together we can make a better future. Our challenge as a nation is now to make what you have done for some, available to all.

Ends/