

# **PM speech on "Bringing Britain Together", South London 8 Dec 1997**

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Stockwell Park.7

[Categories: welfare, law and order]

## **“BRINGING BRITAIN TOGETHER” SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT HON TONY BLAIR MP STOCKWELL PARK SCHOOL SOUTH LONDON, MONDAY 8 DECEMBER 1997**

We are here today in the Stockwell Park School in Lambeth to launch one of the most important new initiatives of this administration. It is an experiment in policy-making that is vital to the country's future.

The Social Exclusion Unit will yield results over months and years not days, but its purpose is central to the values and ambitions of the new Government. Its role reflects a new mood in the country and the values of a new Government.

Expectations are a curious thing. Before the election many people complained when I said we couldn't do it all at once; spending would be tough; when I refused to promise more money even for worthy causes; when I emphasised that the basis of a stable economy was monetary and fiscal prudence. Expectations are being lowered too much, they said.

After the election, it is remarkable how expectations have rocketed and how short the memories are of what was said before. We are accused of breaking promises we never made, often by opponents who introduced the very measures they now criticise us for not reversing. So let me spell it out again. We can't do it all at once. It will take time. And we must never lose control of spending and monetary policy. Because if we do we will repeat the pain of boom and bust, of record interest rates, repossessions, soaring public debt - all the attributes of a Britain which before 1st May had for the last twenty to thirty

years, the least stability of any major economy in the world.

But within this necessary prudence, do not let anyone fall for the nonsense that Labour priorities are Tory ones, or that we have done just the same as them.

The £3.5bn Welfare to Work programme. That wasn't a Tory policy.

The £1.2bn School Building programme. That was never in any Tory manifesto I saw.

The £2.5bn extra spending on schools and hospitals next year. That wasn't in any Tory spending plans.

The Section 11 funding cut for children from ethnic minorities in schools, reversed.

The last government's cuts in Housing Benefit, reversed.

The £50 cash help for heating for pensioners on income support and £20 for the rest. No Tory policy there.

The £300m childcare strategy, with £200m help to lone parents to get into jobs. That never crossed Tory lips.

The £900m release of capital receipts for housing. Not in 18 years did that happen.

VAT on fuel cut. It was the last Government that raised it.

But it all takes time. Welfare to work doesn't start until next year. It will only be over time that the extra money for schools and hospitals gets through. Progress I promised, and am delivering. Britain reborn in a day or even a Parliamentary session - I never did promise that and couldn't deliver it.

At the heart of all our work, however, is one central theme: national renewal. Britain re-built as one nation, in which each citizen is valued and has a stake; in which no-one is excluded from opportunity and the chance to develop their potential; in which we make it, once more, our national purpose to tackle social division and inequality.

Hence the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit.

My political philosophy is simple. Individuals prosper in a strong and active community of citizens. But Britain cannot be a strong community, cannot be one nation, when there are so many families experiencing a third generation of unemployment, when so many pensioners live on crime-ridden housing estates and are afraid to go out, when thousands of truant children spend their days hanging round on street corners.

The public knows only too well the dangers of a society that is falling apart. They know that worsening inequality, hopelessness, crime and poverty undermine the decency on which any good society rests. They know how easily shared values and rules can unravel.

Social exclusion is about income but it is about more. It is about prospects and networks and life-chances. It's a very modern problem, and one that is more harmful to the individual, more damaging to self-esteem, more corrosive for society as a whole, more likely to be passed down from generation to generation, than material poverty.

Getting government to act more coherently is the key. Everyone knows that the problems of social exclusion - of failure at school, joblessness, crime - are woven together when you get down to the level of the individual's daily life, or the life of a housing estate. Yet all too often governments in the past have tried to slice problems up into separate packages - as if you could fix an estate by just painting the houses rather than tackling the lack of jobs or the level of crime. And in many areas dozens of agencies and professions are working in parallel, often doing good things, but sometimes working at cross purposes with far too little coordination and cooperation.

Joined up problems demand joined up solutions. Back in June I spoke about new ways for departments and agencies to work together. I also talked about the need to act to prevent problems before they get out of hand. I described how government itself would have to change if it was to be the solution rather than, as is sometimes the case, being part of the problem. I said that the job of refashioning welfare and the job of refashioning government are inseparable.

The Social Exclusion Unit is a big step towards putting these ideas into practice, helping government to work in a more coherent, integrated way,

across departmental boundaries, and with all the agencies - public, private and voluntary - that can help turn things round. It will be a dynamic unit - there to solve problems and to achieve results.

Its staff are now all appointed, and most have been at work for more than a month. Its make-up - including secondees from many government departments, from the voluntary sector, business, police, local government and probation - exemplifies the new ways in which we need to work.

We don't believe that Whitehall knows best. We need practical experience. We need the insights of people who have worked at the sharp end. And just as we plan to bring other experience into government, so too will the unit be outward looking. Finding out about the best projects, the most promising initiatives. Working with communities engaged in making their own solutions. And crucially, too, hearing of the socially excluded themselves.

I've asked the unit to make truancy and school exclusions a top priority because we know that the prospects for kids who miss school are so dismal. It's bad enough if kids are missing out on the education they'll need to get a job and make a life. What's worse is that for many, being out of school is the beginning of a slippery slope to crime, drugs and exploitation by others. They pay a high price. But in the long run we all end up paying for it as well.

The first message we're sending out today is that we're not prepared to sit by while more and more kids are excluded or truant without taking action. There will always be some who need special help that can't be provided in a mainstream school. But good schools don't exclude pupils unless it's absolutely necessary.

However, we also need to acknowledge that this isn't a problem that schools can solve on their own. They need the backing of parents and the community. And they need the help of all the different agencies that work with young people - social services, educational authorities and the police too.

The people you see here today demonstrate that commitment. They are here to show their belief that it's no longer good enough to blame someone else - this is a problem we need to solve together.

David Blunkett will be announcing new measures today to step up the attack on exclusions and truancy by helping children who are having difficulty keeping

up at school, many of whom skip lessons because they can't keep up and won't admit it.

Our actions on exclusion reflect our values and those of the British people. It offends against our values to see children with no prospect of work, families trapped in poverty, neighbourhoods blighted by crime.

But this isn't just about compassion. It's also about self-interest. If we can shift resources from picking up the costs of problems to preventing them, there will be a dividend for everyone.

We now have a chance for the first time in a generation to prevent Britain irretrievably sliding into division. A chance to bring Britain together.

The Social Exclusion Unit is just one part of government. Every department has a role to play. Every business, charity, school, and every community needs to help too. But I am confident that the unit will make a particularly important contribution because it is tackling directly the problems that affect the people who are most excluded.

Help them and we change young lives for the better. Help them and we make society stronger. Help them and we make Britain better. Help them and we bring Britain back together.