

Conservatives: the party for the vulnerable

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by Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP
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Last month I visited Easterhouse in Glasgow; one of the poorest public housing estates in Europe.

I walked around part of the estate with a local Baptist minister.

The grey, wet day matched the bleakness of nearly everything that I saw.

He showed me abandoned, boarded up houses surrounded by litter and disfigured by graffiti.

We stopped in a sheltered walkway where heroin addicts inject the drug into their bodies.

I looked into one building, in a stairwell I saw a place where a child had been playing. A discarded teddy bear lay in the corner. A perfectly ordinary sight.

Except that next to it lay the paraphernalia of a crack cocaine addict. What hope does that child have?

'What are you doing here?' shouted one resident.

'This has always been a Labour area,' he told me.

'Yes and look around you', I said.

It's political failure that hurts vulnerable people.

However, the bleakness of my visit to Easterhouse was redeemed through witnessing the courage and resolve of many local people.

I visited one neighbourhood project run by local people for local people.

The Baptist minister runs a breakfast club for children who would otherwise go to school hungry.

In contrast to some of the public sector schemes that come and go, the leaders of the project knew the people they helped.

And the person in need is helped by someone who has often themselves struggled with - and conquered - the same issues of literacy, desertion or addiction.

It's not just about winning votes for the Conservative Party in places like Easterhouse.

It's about meaning what we say: that there are no 'no-go' areas as far as we are concerned.

It's about being a Party that doesn't just drive past Easterhouse on the motorway.

Whilst there, I was told about a recent conference entitled 'Education, schools and social inclusion' that was held at the school. It included all the usual bureaucrats and experts, but excluded all the local people. They might as well have held it in Whitehall.

The family networks and people-sized institutions that hold communities together have no place in an ideology that sees government task forces and consultants as the solution to every problem.

But it's not just there. Recently I visited two mothers in Faversham who had set up a drug

rehabilitation unit. Their sons had stolen to feed their addiction. One of the mothers had been forced to turn her son into the police.

The authorities would do nothing to curb drug dealing on the estate, so the two women had set up a counselling and advice service. They had shown tremendous courage in taking matters into their own hands, trying to solve a problem no one else would address.

Critique of Labour

Labour won in 1997 because they said they understood the vulnerable and the problems they faced.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Tony Blair promised the residents of Southwark's Aylesbury estate that he would bring back the 'will to win'.

Like much of what the Prime Minister said in those days it struck a chord. Like too much of what the Prime Minister says it has failed to come to pass.

This is a Government that had more going for it than any in the modern era.

Two landslide election victories.

The unparalleled patience of the British people.

The foundation of economic success inherited from its Conservative predecessor.

Never has a Government had so much and achieved so little.

Just compare that to the way Margaret Thatcher turned around the economic collapse she inherited 1979.

We thank her and wish her a speedy recovery with all our hearts.

Tony Blair talked about the 'post-euphoria, pre-delivery' phase of New Labour. The problem is he said that at the beginning of 1998.

The Prime Minister is fond of his phases. But I would offer you my own interpretation of his five years in power.

In the beginning were the promises.

'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', '24 hours to save the NHS', 'education, education, education', 'no plans to increase taxes at all'.

Then there were the breaking of those promises.

The rise in street violence, the lengthening waiting lists and the teacher shortages. A litany of failure paid for through stealth taxes on mortgages and marriage, pensions and petrol.

Last of all they blame everybody else.

It's all the fault of the 'wreckers', the public servants who leave scars on the Prime Minister's back. Or it's the fault of the previous Conservative Government.

And when that doesn't work, it's the fault of his own ministers.

David Blunkett says it's all Jack Straw's fault. Jack Straw says it's all Robin Cook's fault. Robin Cook that it's all Gordon Brown's fault. Brown says it's Blair's fault. The only thing they can all agree on is that it really is Stephen Byers' fault.

Shorn of any principle or purpose apart from the naked pursuit of power for its own sake, this is not a joined-up Government, it is a Government coming apart at the seams.

They used to boast about the way they would keep the private sector out of the health service, now they turn to it in desperation.

They fiddled with rail privatisation, then renationalised the rail network.

They attacked me for standing up for rail investors, and now they are being forced to compensate them.

They were once in favour of a democratic House of Lords, now they propose a Chamber of Cronies.

They claimed to be on the side of patients, but when the family of a 94 year old complained about her treatment they insulted her and sent out ministers and hospital managers to rubbish her story.

Ministers change tack almost as often as the Prime Minister changes his wardrobe on a foreign trip.

Over five years, Labour have had more summits than the Himalayas, more Czars than Imperial Russia, and more five year plans than Stalin.

The Government is in the throes of a collective nervous breakdown They have lost sight of who they are and have become fixated with how they look.

We know what the Prime Minister likes to wear up his sleeve, but the naked truth is he has no answers.

And as events lurch out of his control the Government falls back on their worst instincts.

To spin faster, to manipulate figures and to compromise public servants and the civil service even further. This not just what New Labour does, it is who they have become.

They seek headlines not policies. Slogans not solutions. This isn't a Government; it's an advertisement.

They are caught in a corrupting spiral where politics for its own sake is not only failing to improve people's lives, it is also undermining everyone's faith in our political process.

Labour's failure doesn't just present us with an opportunity to offer a different way of doing things, it also presents us with a challenge.

Not being Labour is insufficient, we have to be an alternative Government. We have to win the next Election, not wait for them to lose it.

We will provide solutions to the problems Labour ignore. We're going to be patient, take the time to do it properly and get it right.

But we must also come up with a different way of presenting ourselves to an electorate disillusioned with politics.

We will never convince people of our motives simply by shouting louder.

We have to transform the way we conduct ourselves if people are to have any idea about how we wish to transform the country.

In short we need a new approach to politics.

'New' politics: tone

It's been done before. Cast your minds back a couple of years to the United States.

There too, they had been living through one of the longest and largest upturns in their economic history.

There too, an administration addicted to the Third Way wasted two terms and failed to deliver on their promises.

And yet in the midst of economic success, the American people elected a Republican, George W Bush, over the then sitting Democratic Vice President.

Quite simply they trusted him to deliver the changes they thought necessary precisely because they saw someone with principles who wasn't afraid to articulate them.

I met President Bush when I visited America last December and we can learn a great deal from him.

About showing that what we believe helps everyone particularly the most vulnerable in our society.

About mapping out a distinctively conservative agenda that appeals to the common ground.

Above all we talked about challenging those popular prejudices about conservatives.

It is the hardest thing in the world to see ourselves as others see us. They think we are not like them, they think we don't care about them.

And yet you and I know that we share the same concerns as everyone else, we want the same things, we have the same ambitions.

The way we live our lives should be the way we practice our politics: as decent, honest, tolerant and generous people.

We need to be passionate and positive about the things and the people we are in favour of, not just the things we are against.

We all laugh at Victor Meldrew on television, but you wouldn't want to live with him. And you certainly wouldn't vote for him.

If we want people to vote for us, I say to everyone in this hall:

You are the people who select our candidates.

You have a vital responsibility.

I want you to select the best line-up of new MPs this country has ever seen.

I want you to seek out talented people on their merits wherever they may be - whatever their age, sex or background.

Because if we don't reflect the Britain we want to lead, we will never be asked to lead it.

It isn't about changing what we believe in, it is about being ourselves again.

It's about doing the right thing and being true to our principles and values.

'New' politics: policies

If there's one message that will shine out through all our policies, it is this:

Trust people.

Trust people to do their jobs.

Trust people to know what's best for their families.

Trust people to create wealth and create jobs.

Trust people with their own money.

Trust people to live their lives.

And if you trust people, you will find that they will build communities. They will support each other.

Our job is to support them.

It marks a fundamental difference between us and Labour.

The message that shines out from Labour's policies is equally clear.

They distrust you.

They distrust how you do your job if you are a teacher, a police officer or a doctor.

They distrust you in knowing what is best for your family.

They distrust your ability to manage your own finances, so they want to take more of it from you and hand it back like pocket money.

That's why every week they launch a new long-term plan.

That's why they fire off a directive a week at teachers.

That's why they want to make police officers fill in a form before they can even stop a suspect in the street.

This Government has become the most controlling, centralising, bullying and manipulating government we have had in my lifetime.

We must break once and for all with the top-down agenda of central control.

We will base our reforms of the public services on reviving them as community institutions, not branch offices of the Government.

GPs are part of the fabric of the local community:

They understand the concerns and priorities of their neighbourhood far better than Alan Milburn can.

I want the whole of our health service to be responsive to local needs, local patients and local GPs.

As Liam Fox and I have been visiting health services across Europe to learn what makes them deliver better care, one thing is clear: the best systems are based on patients and their doctors having a choice over their hospital treatment.

We will free our hospitals from control by Whitehall.

They will be more independent of politicians.

They will be part of the communities they serve.

The same is true of our schools.

I want to axe layers of control from central government and re-establish the identity of schools as local institutions.

I've seen what that can mean in my own constituency. I am a trustee of Whitefields, a special needs school that was the first of its kind in the country to go grant-maintained.

Not only has it achieved amazing results for its pupils, it has also become a centre of excellence advising other schools on how best to cope with special needs pupils.

I want to replace the directives of ministers with discretion for head teachers and boards of governors.

If the head teacher and governors find a disruptive pupil is damaging the education of other children and making life a misery for teachers, out they'll go.

Why should the education of the many be sacrificed for the rights of the few in our schools?

And why should the law-abiding majority be sacrificed for the rights of criminals?

The result of nationally set rules is that our police officers have less and less discretion in how to police.

Some police forces have themselves, often in response to Government targets, retreated into a distant and centralised form of policing within their areas.

In New York, Mayor Giuliani recognised that high-level policing - looking for the Mr Bigs of crime - was not enough to keep the streets safe.

Neighbourhoods need policing.

Officers need to know their neighbourhoods.

And neighbourhood jobs need to know their police officers. Very well indeed.

That's what they did in New York.

They resurrected the old concept of the beat with police officers serving a close patchwork of overlapping neighbourhoods.

Oliver Letwin saw at first hand how the NYPD are no more than two minutes away from any crime that is reported.

As a result they cut crime by 60 per cent in the last 9 years.

Robbery, burglary and car theft are down by over 70 per cent.

And violent crime is down by 75 per cent.

How many of us can say that that is our experience today?

Under a Conservative government Britain will have neighbourhood policing.

In the past, Conservative governments have been guilty of taking power away from local government to Whitehall.

That was a mistake.

We will reverse this process and restore to local councils the discretion to act according to the interests of the communities they serve.

And in this hall today many of you are councillors and are making life better for the people you serve, every day.

You show, by your dedication and hard work, that we can make a difference.

And on 2 May I want more Conservative councillors.

But local councils should never be the only local institutions to which people turn.

In Manchester, I've seen at first hand how people have come together to create, Langdon College, a residential school for Jewish children with disabilities.

Because our policies will be built from the bottom up - on the natural communities that people feel part of - we will have no truck with Labour's bogus regions.

Why would the people of Carlisle want to be bossed around by Manchester?

And the last thing the people of Cornwall want is to be controlled by Bristol.

When we give power to real communities in Britain, we will not stand by and let it be taken away by Brussels.

If we don't want a Britain of bogus regions, we certainly don't want a Europe of bogus regions.

The challenges abroad

We are the 4th largest economy on earth. We gave the world free trade, common law and the English language. We want to secure our nation's place in the world that we have done so much to shape.

We need to work to create a European Union that is modern, outward-looking and decentralised.

An EU capable of adapting to the future.

An EU where Britain still maintains control over its own destiny.

There must be something seriously wrong with the way this Government works when British troops are sent into danger in Macedonia as part of a Euro Army simply because the Government does not want to offend our European partners.

So I tell you this. When Tony Blair finally has the courage to call a referendum on the single currency, we will fight him and we will win.

A strong foreign policy must be based on an understanding of our history, not on attempts to deny it.

Nor should we deny human nature. We need to take the world as it is, not as we would like it to be; to understand what has changed since September 11th and what in fact has remained the same.

There have always been evil people in this world but now these people have access to more terrible technologies.

Saddam Hussein poses a growing threat to us all. He should no longer be allowed to develop and deploy his weapons of mass destruction.

Time is on his side, not ours.

History teaches us that appeasement is not an option.

It also teaches us that compassion is a part of realism.

Spreading democracy, economic reform and free trade among developing countries will benefit us as well as the people who live there. This is modern conservatism.

Helping the poor, the hungry and the persecuted is a moral challenge which we must meet.

Peroration

The relentless pace of the modern world creates opportunities. Yet as these opportunities grow, so do the things which seem increasingly beyond our control.

The world has shrunk, our horizons have expanded, but our concerns are as local as ever.

We travel further, but is it safe to walk down the street?

Our jobs are more challenging, but can we get in to work in the morning?

Science can alter our genes, but who will look after us when we fall ill?

Our children can surf the internet, but are they learning to read and write properly?

Politicians can use change to help answer these questions or block change and hope the questions will go away.

Politicians can push power down to public servants and make them properly accountable for the way they use it, or we can subject them to minute-by-minute political control.

Politicians can truly modernise our public services or we can chant the mantra of modernisation to disguise fear of real reform.

What is absolutely stark is that we cannot go on using 1940s solutions to tackle 21st century problems.

We have to find a better way for all our sakes, but particularly for those whose need is greatest.

A nation that leaves its vulnerable behind, diminishes its own future.

Britain will never be all that it should be until opportunity and security mean something to people in Easterhouse.

To make this country theirs as much as it is ours.

That is a mission fit for the new century.

We are the Party fit for that purpose.