

Wilberforce Address 2006: "Rebuilding our Communities"

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by Caroline Spelman MP

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Ladies and Gentleman

I am honoured to be asked to give this lecture and I would like to thank Elizabeth for the work she is doing for CCF and all the preparations for this evening.

In the spirit of Wilberforce as a reformer I have chosen to talk to you about regeneration-rebuilding lives not just places.

William Wilberforce was a predecessor of John Prescott's as an MP for Hull so it seems particularly apt to be talking about an issue for which Mr Prescott now takes responsibility.

I will resist the temptation to take the comparison any further for I believe community regeneration is one of the most serious issues facing any post modern government.

Tonight I want to focus on what makes for successful regeneration and some, although by no means all, of the practical measures I think we need to take.

For decades governments of different political persuasions have been trying to regenerate deprived parts of this country.

This regeneration has taken place under a seemingly endless variety of initiatives: "Urban Aid", "Enterprise Zones", "City Challenge", "Going for Growth", "New Deal for Communities", "Sustainable Communities" - to name but a few.

If there has been any failure in regeneration policy over the decades it has not been for want of catchy slogans!

Yet as a recent Rowntree foundation report shows most of the wards that were deprived a century ago are still deprived today.

When I was first elected to my Midlands constituency I asked how it was that after millions of pounds of the Single Regeneration Budget fund had been spent on an estate in my constituency, three wards in it still counted amongst the bottom 10% most deprived wards in the country.

In those areas of deprivation life expectancy is nearly a decade less than the average. For those of us who believe in the sanctity of life that is horrifying statistic and one which is unjustifiable in the modern age. The further injustice is that this disparity is increasing as we all live longer.

This pattern is replicated when it comes to general poor health. Research carried out in the 2001 census found that self-reported ill health stood at 20% for the unemployed or those having never worked as opposed to just 5% for those in managerial or professional employment.

As well as poor health, my three most deprived wards suffer double the average rate of unemployment and very poor levels of educational attainment. Clearly a lot of what has been done is not working. The purpose of my lecture tonight is to examine why this is and what we need to do differently.

Cynics might say why bother but only the most hard-hearted can suppress the desire to help when we see others in need. A Christian has an absolute duty to help. From the earliest books of the Bible we read "There will always be poor people among you.

Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land" Deuteronomy 15.11. More starkly on the day of judgement Jesus warns us that we will be held to account for our failure to feed the hungry, clothe the naked , care for the sick and visit the imprisoned (Matthew 25.32)

Nor is neglect of the needs of the poor an option politically. Our deprived communities are just that OURS and we are all in this together in trying to work out how to help.

That is what David Cameron means when he talks about shared responsibility. We cannot hide behind the fact that we are the world's fourth largest economy when the fact is that many people here live in Third World conditions. I do not believe we will be returned to power until we demonstrate our willingness to engage with the needs of our most deprived communities most of which are urban.

For me, and so many others that are involved in this issue, regeneration is essential if we are to improve the places where people spend their lives and it is an issue where the spiritual and political imperatives meet.

There is a powerful legacy in our political history of trying to give people a hand up out of poverty.

From the slum clearance initiative of Disraeli, through regeneration schemes of Chamberlain and the rehousing programmes of MacMillan - improving the living conditions of the poor in society has been a traditional strength for us and one which we need to reclaim as our own.

That is why we are launching a sustained campaign on regeneration starting in Liverpool next week with the whole shadow cabinet on the case.

It is significant that we are returning to Liverpool for it was here that Michael Heseltine founded a successful City Challenge project. This was a bold regeneration initiative from which 25 years on we can learn the lessons.

The rebuilding of Albert Dock was a success as was the London Docklands. But other City Challenge projects were less successful in Bethnal Green and Tipton in the West Midlands and it is just as important to face up to why.

I have looked though 140 regeneration projects and one key message to emerge is that if regeneration is something we do with the community it is more likely to succeed than if it is something we just do to a community.

If the community is involved, listened to, engaged with and ultimately takes ownership of the changes it wants to achieve it is more likely to succeed.

Take the City Challenge project in Castle Vale Birmingham. The Vale as it was known had a bad name a 1960s Radburn estate with unpopular high rise blocks of flats, high density, few amenities and synonymous with crime.

Through a Housing Action Trust run by residents for residents the Tower Blocks were brought down and a mix of home -ownership and rental introduced and amenities brought to the estate like a Sainsburys and a state of the art Primary care centre which has halved the rate of infant mortality.

What Castle Vale demonstrates is that regeneration is not just about buildings and the environment but also about people. A deprived community often suffers from a very low level of self esteem, and this brings me onto the first objective - the rebuilding of civic pride.

Rebuilding Civic Pride

It may amuse you to learnt that since taking on this role I am a frequent visitor to what used

to be the old red light district of Birmingham - a place called Balsall Heath.

This place has now been turned around and what sticks in my mind is the way one resident said to me "we felt embarrassed to say we live here, but we don't anymore".

This is because residents have cleared the prostitutes and cleaned up the streets making this one of the safest wards in Birmingham.

Now I'd like to show a brief video clip broadcast by Channel 4 which focused on Balsall Heath and the changes that have taken place there.

What a brilliantly simple idea, having a local police station staffed by volunteers. Helping people to help themselves takes little money and goes a long way.

What came across clearly in that clip was the sense of Civic Pride and that is central regenerating a community. People need to feel good about where they live and have a shared sense of responsibility in making it that stay that way.

If you visit northern industrial towns you will be struck very often by the grandeur of their Town Halls and civic buildings. These magnificent constructions were demonstrations of civic pride and became beacons for the local community.

In a sense the buildings were a visual representation of the community spirit that existed and likewise many decaying and derelict properties symbolise the erosion of civic pride and community spirit.

When people feel uplifted by their surroundings it is a vital determinant in their overall quality of life.

It's hard to feel uplifted when your street is scarred with graffiti, the pavement is littered with beer cans and the nearest green space is a no-go area. Turning that around needs the support and contribution of the whole community.

Rebuilding the role of Local Champion

But that needs nurturing and it needs driving, and so I come to my second objective of raising up 'Local Champions' who can bring people together and channel their efforts. They are both 'social entrepreneurs' and also what is termed 'capacity builders'.

A social entrepreneur is self explanatory but when we talk of some who can capacity build what we mean is someone who can identify and mobilise other individuals, groups and resources which can help deliver change at a local level.

The key to regeneration is to find a local champion who can inspire and lead their neighbours in a campaign which achieves and sustains change in the way the community wants.

They may be Mums and Dads who want their children to grow up on cleaner safer streets, or a local teacher who sees how the school provides a hub for a community or a local pastor as with the Baptist minister on my estate who runs a carers service from within his church.

Such people are not easy to find in a community conditioned to having things done to it and which is mistrustful of authority deciding what it thinks is best, changing its mind or never coming up with the goods.

They are especially suspicious of politicians of all persuasions! So we need to build the confidence and skills of the local champions we find.

The regeneration then becomes personal. I have seen lives transformed by the involvement in community renewal. Mums on the Sure Start programme with very low self esteem learn that they are good at raising their children and go onto provide learning support in schools and now some that I know are taking degrees to become teachers .

They will be the best possible role models for the children in their care. Dads who were out of work learning alongside their children in schools where the IT suite is open after school hours to help make up for an education which failed the parent. Dad wants to learn how to read so he can follow what his own child learns.

And there are those presently not part of the community who can share in this process of renewal such as the homeless, the drug abusing and the imprisoned.

So my third objective is Rebuilding and restoring control to people

The common denominator is so often the loss of control people experience over their lives. Often people feel no longer in a position to take responsibility for their own lives and we need to help them rebalance the situation so that they gradually they take more and more control back.

I firmly believe people grow into their responsibilities but that does not negate the need to help them grow.

John Bird editor of the Big Issue is a living example of individual renewal now giving new life to the community. Once homeless now leading this successful charity he points out that just putting a roof over someone's head is not enough they need the work to pay for it.

So buy a copy of the Big Issue next time you see it in the knowledge you are helping rebuild a life! In that small gesture of buying that magazine you are actually illustrating the culture that we need to foster for successful regeneration, the culture of encouraging and helping someone to take control and help themselves.

Let me give you another example. The charity I chair called Welcome helps drug abusers get a job and hold it down and we have many ex-offenders among our clients who are released from prison without anywhere to live rarely a job and sometimes neither clothes or money. Small wonder re-offending rates are so high. Far from being restorative our justice system seems anti-diluvian.

We have to start with the most basic skills of how to feed, clothe and wash before we can move to skills they need for work.

Too often regeneration is seen as only physical. If I was to ask you what springs to mind when you think about an area that has been regenerated I imagine you think of new buildings and manicured green spaces.

Yes, these things are a vital part of regeneration but I think too often we can fall into the trap of thinking that the physical improvement of a neighbourhood is an end in itself, when in fact the sustained physical improvement of a neighbourhood actually follows on from the personal regeneration of the lives of the people living there.

In short, not enough attention is given to the human element of regeneration. In many cases a sense of community needs to be built and nurtured.

So often we talk about deprived communities, and the sad reality is that the sense of community diminished long ago and what is left is just individuals co-existing.

We need only look at our city suburbs to see that the vacuum left by communities is soon filled by the culture of gangs and territories.

This shouldn't be surprising. For young people who feel socially disaffected gangs provide the comfort and security and kinship which would in days gone by have been offered through their neighbourhood community.

They fill the need held by many for a sense of belonging and a sense of identification with where they live. But they are a symptom of the problem not the solution.

So my fourth objective is Rebuilding Community Cohesion

If regeneration is to be successful it has to foster and sustain neighbourhoods, communities and a shared identity that supplants the culture of gangs, that gives people an alternative, broader and more beneficial sense of association.

We need to replace the culture of "What's in it for me?" with a new sense of "Good for Me, Good for My Neighbour". But community cohesion is an ephemeral sort of thing.

The difficulty from the point of view of any politician is that you cannot deliver it from central government, you cannot craft legislation to provide for it and you cannot simply allocate funds to deliver it. It has to grow from the grass-roots up as people realise they live inter-dependent lives.

But we can help by creating a framework for community cohesion to flourish. We can start by acknowledging and building on the proud history that many communities have, by offering opportunities and resources which will unite local people rather than divide them. It is about giving the whole community ownership of the projects and a stake in its success.

This can't be done through the wholesale demolition of houses as proposed in John Prescott's Pathfinders scheme.

It is lunacy to think that tearing down the physical structure of a community will heal the social divisions within it.

I feel passionately about this issue and I see Pathfinders as cultural vandalism writ large, it is the equivalent of saying to those communities "you are beyond salvation so we will level you to the ground and start again". Is "managed decline" really the best we can do in 2006?

How can you expect people to regain a sense of civic pride when the government is effectively giving those areas a sense of national shame? If you go to Liverpool, East Yorkshire, Teesside or any of these places you will hear this view from local communities.

The tragedy of Pathfinders is that is doing the opposite of what history shows us needs to be done for successful regeneration.

It is concentrating on buildings instead of people, it is being done against the wishes of local people and with no involvement from them, it is being imposed on them from above, and it is destroying any sense of community cohesion that previously existed.

Regeneration should be organic, with local people's support and involvement.

Government should deliver the climate, opportunity and, yes, resources so that people can reclaim the places.

My fifth objective is the Rebuilding of Educational Achievement

Education is at the heart of regenerating a community with low self esteem and a culture of under-achievement. Parents instinctively want the best for their children and that instinct can be harnessed to help raise the aspirations of the whole community.

The school is often one of the only amenities on some of our soulless 1960s housing estates

and each school has its community of Mums and Dads, Nans and grandpas willing the next generation on.

The potential to regenerate these schools as centres of life-long learning is huge. If the state education system failed you it can be hard to cross the threshold again. So let's be creative here, let's have two portals - one for adults and one for children.

Training and advice in and out of school hours for those in and out of work. The school is a tremendous resource in a deprived community but it needs to be open out of school hours. Is that really so difficult?

It is only through education, be it academic or vocational, early learning or adult learning, that people can be empowered to make choices and take control.

Education can foster a sense of community and show children how to interact and relate with others. But teachers have an immensely difficult job sustaining the interest of children from a background of low academic achievement.

So often all that stands between the school yard and dropping out of the education system altogether is a metal fence, and in deprived communities, where education is deeply unfashionable, teachers and parents face an uphill battle keeping children on the right side of it.

Children from a deprived background are most likely to be low educational achievers and so the situation is self-perpetuating.

Education is at the heart of breaking this cycle. It presents an opportunity but in turn another challenge, the challenge of developing neighbourhoods where an educated population want to remain rather than simply to move on and move out.

This brings me to my sixth and last objective: Rebuilding Opportunities and Balanced Economic Growth

This is where you the role of job opportunities and security come in.

Historically settlements have developed around centres of employment for local people, be it the shipyards along the River Tyne, the farms of the Sussex Weald or the manufacturing industry of the West Midlands.

The era of long-term, population-sustaining mass employers has passed and we have had to embrace the move to more short-term, flexible and often service-based industries. This transition has left many communities in limbo, existing without the economic rationale on which they were founded.

One town planner, David Higdon, described this process with regard to Newcastle's West End, he said:

"In the forty year cycle (1945-85) first the workers were re-housed but then their traditional jobs, the reason for being there, were removed. It amounts to a 'planning non-sequitur'."

Yet at the same time we have other parts of the country, in some cases other parts of the same city, positively over-heating with demand for business and living space.

I passionately believe that we need to find more effective ways of balancing economic growth more evenly across the country.

My team is undertaking a piece of research entitled 'Exploring the Barriers to Economic Growth' and it has the remit of looking at how we can spread what I would call 'the London effect' up through the rest of the country.

Now of course you would expect that of me, I am a West Midlands MP and I share the slightly chippy feeling that prevails North of the Watford Gap that everything in the UK seems to revolve around London.

But it is a startling fact that the worlds tenth largest economy is London and the SE with other areas benefiting little from this; they are at best lying fallow, at worst fostering an underclass of the future.

In 1845 Benjamin Disraeli spoke of:

'Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.'

Over a century later there are still parts of the country where this analysis holds true.

What I hope my research will do is identify the obstacles to creating a better economic balance and provide a blue print for overcoming it and taking in everything from transport links, crime levels, through to the availability of a skilled labour workforce.

The advancement of IT and new working practises can be instrumental in delivering more balanced economic growth.

Jobs and employment opportunities are increasingly portable and we need to seize that as a vehicle for rolling out prosperity more evenly across the country.

However, it is not just about economic balance between parts of the country, it is about economic balance in many cases within the same town or city.

Many central business districts have been rebuilt but round them languishes a collar of decline as people move out to the leafy suburbs and green fields beyond then commute "grey deserts" to work.

This is not sustainable. And our next big idea needs to be a new model for attractive near city living.

Simply building on more and more countryside is a cop out and will serve only to short change those areas most in need of regeneration.

The reasons for people's flight from the inner city are various, but one thing they have in common is that they form part of a vicious circle of decline. Factors like levels of crime, performance of schools and quality of the local environment all contribute to whether or not a neighbourhood is one that people want to move into and live in.

But the problem is that it becomes self-perpetuating. As soon as an area gets a reputation as somewhere that you wouldn't want to bring up a family then families stop moving into the area and so an area quickly goes into decline – but with help and constructive partnerships things can change.

I can feel you thinking, Caroline what does it cost?

I have resisted the temptation to talk about money because all too often Conservatives seem to be talking about tax and public spending. There are certain things it is worth paying for because they serve the common good.

That said, regeneration is actually one of the few examples where by deploying amazingly little money you can see massive rewards, rewards which not only improve the lives of residents immeasurably, but that also enrich society as a whole.

Down the years millions have to been wasted in regeneration projects that have not worked.

If I tell you there are presently 50 different funding streams for regeneration you will see that there certainly isn't efficient use of resources.

Funding is often time-limited. How many projects do you know which have a grant for 3 years only?

This stems from the political habit of announcing eye-catching initiatives as if the announcement itself would fix the problem. What we don't do well is appraise and replicate those that are a success.

Helping people and communities to help themselves is for me the very essence of being in politics. The reality is you can't tell people to get on their bike if they have never been shown how to ride it, and I see the role of government as being like a pair of stabilisers, running alongside communities until they are able to go it alone.

But we need to make changes.

We need to devolve real power down to local councils so that they can properly engage with the needs of their communities.

Local government is the best-placed to see what needs to be done and to relate to local people and we are missing a massive opportunity by denuding it of powers and turning it into a mere agent of Whitehall.

And when I talk about devolving powers down, I mean genuine decentralisation rather than a regional quangocracy. For all its talk of localism or 'double devolution', this government has done far more to bypass local democracy than almost any other.

More and more decisions which are integral to regeneration are now being taken at a regional level:

Regional Chambers now decide on planning and special strategy, police forces are being coerced into regional structures which will weaken their links with individual areas and last week we learnt that the role of locally elected councils in Crime and Disorder Partnership is now under threat.

The new creed of regionalisation is systematically stripping people of control over where they live and divorcing them from the institutions intended to serve them. We need to reverse that by abolishing the regional tier of government and getting power back down to local councillors and local people.

We need to draw on the expertise of the voluntary sector and give them their head. They already have a proven track record of delivering local solutions so let's stop seeing them as a happy coincidence and make them integral to public policy.

Instead of government trying to constrain these organisations it should be trusting them and giving them more opportunities.

We need to harness the spirit of social enterprise and run with it, taking flagship examples like Balsall Heath, Castle Vale and the smaller scale credit unions, foyers for homeless people and individual learning plans for disadvantaged children.

Commercial Enterprise has become the bedrock of our economy and so Social Enterprise can become the bedrock of our communities.

It's a gamble for politicians as we hand away a great deal of responsibility. It will mean

standing at the Despatch Box and saying "I am sorry that has been decided locally."

This will be a new politics under a new conservative government.

A new Conservative policy on regeneration needs to restore civic pride in community by raising up and building the capacity of local champions who in turn engage the whole community in bringing about change which people want to see and take ownership of.

A new Conservative government will have to provide a framework where schools and education are at the heart of regeneration, a sustaining local economy underpins regeneration, and the regeneration of lives goes hand in hand with the restoration buildings.

Our hand should be open to the needs of the poor to offer a hand up where money is leveraged by the goodwill and instinct of people to build a better world around them for those they know and love.