

Justice of the peace

Philippa Stroud is the director of the Centre for Social Justice, which plays a key role in shaping Conservative policy. **Matt Ross** learns about a strand of Tory thinking that stresses restoration rather than retribution

“People were aghast and distraught at the ‘Baby P’ case – but what would have happened if Baby P had grown up?” It’s a good question for a think tank chief to ask – and Philippa Stroud, executive director of the Centre for Social Justice, believes the most likely answer is that a deeply troubled young man would have ended up snared in the criminal justice system. “We can’t be outraged at a young child being such a horrific victim, then lock them up and throw away the key when that child didn’t get the intervention that was needed,” she says. “Actually, we need to help these people get their lives back on track.”

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), established by former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith in 2004, occupies a unique position very close to the current Conservative leadership – but its approach doesn’t fit easily into the traditional left-right political narrative. Stroud is eurosceptic, deeply Christian – she is strongly anti-abortion – and focused on the family. Yet on issues of criminal justice, for example, her approach has little in common with the traditionally punitive Tory standpoint: for the CSJ, ‘justice’ means helping people to solve their problems rather than imposing penalties for transgressions.

This ‘caring Conservatism’ approach still has limited traction among party members, but the CSJ has been crucial in shaping David Cameron’s stance on social issues; indeed, Stroud is often hesitant in throwing her weight behind specific policies, lest she be seen as trying to bounce the Tory leadership into backing them. “Sixty-eight of our policy proposals have already been accepted” by the party, she points out; “There is obviously a large take-up there. And of course Iain is a previous leader of the Conservative Party; I’m a Conservative Party candidate.”

Stroud is standing in Sutton and Cheam, where incumbent Liberal Democrat MP Paul Burstow has a majority of less than 3000. And she’s a good fit for the liberal-minded seat: while many Tory candidates have backgrounds in business or the media, most of her career has been spent in the voluntary sector, working to tackle poverty and deprivation (*see box*) – an experience that has given her enormous respect for the views and knowledge of frontline staff.

“Our policy work is not all academically- and economically-led,” she says. “In each working group, half the members are frontline poverty-fighting practitioners; people who work in communities every day, and who tell it to us exactly as they find it. And we try to recruit staff who not only have an academic background, but a voluntary sector background as well”.

The CSJ is also a decidedly Christian organisation: Stroud, married to a pastor, has written that her life “is framed by my Christianity”, and Duncan Smith is also religious. But when asked whether the government should set out and pursue a set of strong principles, Stroud is clear that pragmatism lies at the heart of her work. “I don’t think we’ve ever articulated any principles,” she says. “I think we have analysed the trends that are driving social breakdown, and tried to come up with effective solutions.”

Those trends, she argues, have included well-intentioned Labour policies that have failed to tackle the causes of poverty – and produced waste and perverse incentives along the way. The government has tried to reduce poverty by handing out money, she says, but that approach won’t work if people still suffer from unstable families, poor schools, drug problems, debts and unemployment. “Some government interventions actually increase hardship; we need to take a closer look at unintended consequences,” she adds.

Stroud cites the benefits system as a key area of perverse incentives. “The dynamics in the system mean that the logical decision is to remain at home and not do anything, because going into work doesn’t produce anything much for you,” she complains, explaining that



Photo: Photoshot/Gary Lee

Stroud: ‘Nothing stops a bullet like a job’

under-25s and single mothers in particular are in effect subject to massive marginal rates of taxation. “We need to increase the earnings disregard so that the impact of going into work is instant and very dramatic, and then taper it away over time,” she argues. “That makes the system more costly initially – but if you get more people into work, it’s more effective.”

Such benefits reforms, she believes, would save money quite quickly – but the approach that she advocates to helping people tackle other problems, such as criminality and drug addiction, involves intensive, and costly, support. How will such an approach fare when money is tight? “I recognise that we are not going to be able to persuade George Osborne to bring lots of cash forward,” she replies. “Our encouragement to an incoming government would be not to make cuts across the board, but to ask which projects are really delivering.” The CSJ is developing a model to measure “social return on investment”, she adds, with the intention of gathering evidence on which intervention programmes will rapidly produce wider public savings.

In delivering such interventions, Stroud suggests, the voluntary sector has an important role to play: many vulnerable people prefer to receive services from non-governmental organisations. Yet she is a fan of the civil service: “For the most part, we’ve been amazed at how enthusiastic they’ve been, and how welcoming to innovative ideas,” she says. In parts of government, she adds, she’s picked up feelings of frustration alongside “an eagerness for evidence-based policy proposals that have been worked on and genuinely thought-through, and that have a high level of leadership commitment”.

Civil service *structures* are another matter. Asked whether the current system of cross-departmental public service agreements has fostered sufficient coordination on social issues, Stroud is clear: “No,

not at all,” she replies, explaining that the CSJ has considered both the creation of a Department for Children and Social Justice, and the establishment of a National Council for Social Justice. Her preference is for the latter: responsible to the prime minister, it would be chaired and manned by senior ministers with the cabinet secretary, special advisers and non-executive directors; supported by a pooled funding stream; based in the Cabinet Office; and scrutinised by a dedicated select committee. “The challenge for us is not working out how we’d do this,” says Stroud. “The challenge for us is ensuring that this is the model that gets adopted.”

In winning that commitment, the CSJ is starting from a good place. As Stroud points out, “David Cameron has very clearly said that if he becomes PM, one of the things that he wants to be judged on is the mending of broken Britain.” She hopes that the CSJ’s forthcoming green paper, *Breakthrough Whitehall*, will give its ideas more traction within the party. But can the CSJ’s pragmatic, sympathetic approach to social problems really win over a party that, just five years ago, fought an election on a ‘tough’, prison-works philosophy?

“I don’t know, to be honest,” Stroud replies. “The true test of that is in government – but I’d say that there is genuine commitment; this social justice agenda does unite people from all sides of the party.” Her strongest weapon, she says, will be evidence of what works; in government “there are moments when you have a national incident, when the desire is to swing away from policy proposals due to a national outcry – and it will then be the evidence that enables ministers to hold their nerve.”

Too often, Stroud believes, “layer upon layer upon layer” of family policy has been built up as the government acts to appease public opinion following particular incidents. “But are children actually any safer?” she asks. “You can go on being tougher and tougher and tougher in the criminal justice system, but actually, as we learned [studying gangs in Boston], you can’t arrest your way out of these problems. And there’s another great quote we were given: ‘Nothing stops a bullet like a job’.”

Given a Conservative election win, “our job will be to constantly confront people with the evidence,” Stroud concludes. “Governments do strange things when they’re under pressure. But we will definitely be committed to giving them everything they need to see this through.” ■

Philippa Stroud: CV highlights

- 1965:** Born in Devon to a Christian family, the daughter of a banker and a hospice nurse
- 1987:** After reading French at Birmingham University, joins a Hong Kong project to help Triad gang members get out of drugs and crime
- 1989:** Runs residential support project for the homeless in Bedford
- 2001:** Develops a Birmingham project to care for the homeless, addicts and those in debt; stands as Tory candidate against Clare Short in Birmingham Ladywood
- 2003:** Co-founds the CSJ with Iain Duncan Smith
- 2005:** Made the director of the Conservative Party’s Social Justice Policy Group
- 2010:** Stands as Tory candidate in Sutton and Cheam, Surrey