

THE CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

ABRAHAM LINCOLN LECTURE

"The politics of fear versus the politics of hope in a rapidly changing world"

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21 June 2011
One Birdcage Walk, London, SW1H 9JJ

Check against delivery

Abraham Lincoln 1st December 1862 (Annual Message to Congress, one month before signing the Emancipation Proclamation)

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present ... As our case is new so we must think anew and act anew.”

Barack Obama 25th May 2011 (London)

Speaking of the responsibility of government, he said: “to succeed we must cast aside the impulse to look at impoverished parts of the globe as a place for charity.”

“Instead we should empower the same forces that have allowed our own people to thrive. We should help the hungry to feed themselves, the doctors who care for the sick.”

... “We do these things because we believe not simply in the rights of nation, we believe in the rights of citizens.”

... “Yes our diversity can lead to tensions ... But even as these debates can be difficult, we fundamentally recognise that our patchwork heritage is an enormous strength.”

And in his most memorable passage drew on that strength to say how remarkable it was “for the grandson of a Kenyan who served as a cook in the British army to stand before you as president of the United States”!

These quotes, from a president responsible for the abolition of slavery and the first black president of the United States, bridge the gulf of history.

They speak of changing times. The need to adapt and to adopt new ways of coping with that rapidity of change, with the challenge of both threats and opportunities. A challenge which brings fear and hope as both families and governments wrestle with the enormity of economic, social and cultural change. What I believe the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was getting at in his New Statesman article recently, when he talked about the anxiety which impacts disproportionately people in the population, compared to the nation as a whole.

At the same time, the ever present threat of global terrorism on the one hand and the disintegration of decency and respect in our communities on the other, provide a destabilising cocktail which is an ever-present if subliminal factor in our lives.

Communication technology, from satellite and internet communication through to the development of Twitter, brings instant information on a global scale and with it the uncertainties, the instability and the challenges which in a bygone era would have been distant from and without immediate impact in the lives of millions of people.

The threat of cyber attacks is ever-growing, with over 20,000 malicious emails on government networks each month, an estimated 1,000 of which are deliberately targeted.

I remember walking with the former Immigration Minister, now Baroness Beverley Hughes, in a small quiet market town in the South Lakeland, distant from any of the traumas or

substantial demographic and ethnic changes of urban Britain. We were accosted by a woman who politely enquired as to why Government were allowing her town to be overrun by asylum seekers. We asked how many she knew, where they were based and why we were unaware of any such dispersal centre in the locality.

It turned out of course, that there were no asylum seekers in the vicinity. What she had seen on regional and national television was a picture of another place. For her a disturbingly frightening place of change, of old certainties disappearing and of life moving too fast and out of control.

Equally, people talk about the numbers coming in from Eastern Europe when those countries joined fully into the European Union in May 2004. Yes, there was by the statisticians (ministers were very careful not to use figures) an underestimate of the likely flow at a time of economic prosperity, growth and large scale vacancies.

The truth is a little more complex than the simple question as to whether people should have been allowed to work legally and transparently rather than clandestinely in the sub-economy (given that they have the freedom to move even if in some countries they didn't have the freedom to work legally). In fact, forty percent of those who registered to work were already in Britain!

Nevertheless, perception is as important as reality in the political arena, not least because we are talking about how people feel, think and react, and as a consequence how they see the world around them.

Paradoxically, as the government clampdown on those coming from outside the European Union (including students and their dependents), we see a substantial export of jobs to those very countries. In simple terms, call centres and the like are now mopping up the jobs which previously would have been available in the UK. Taken by potential migrants who instead of arriving on our shores, take such jobs in their home country, funded by us and at the expense of those we are attempting here to get into work.

To say this is perverse would be to underplay the significance of what in effect is self-delusion. This after all leads politicians to believe that they can have one goal of dramatically reducing migrants, whilst excluding home based job seekers, from that very employment which has been exported abroad!

I raise this only to show that in dealing with the major challenges which the Centre for Social Justice have sought to address, of family, educational attainment, economic dependency, addiction and debt, it is impossible to look for answers without appreciating that the world upon which old certainties, structures, cultural norms and sources of influence were built, has been shaken to its foundation.

Bin Laden may have been taken out of the equation, but global terrorism still exists, with the UK's threat level today remaining 'severe'. The economic meltdown initiated from Wall Street has over the past three years created the most enormous insecurity for millions of people, even for those who have not felt the cold winds of redundancy but who understandably worry about themselves and their family for the future.

The ability to access employment is under enormous strain as the number of unemployed per vacancy has more than doubled from 2.3 unemployed per vacancy in March 2008 to 5.1 in March 2011. Whilst the recent job figures on the 15 June were encouraging, particularly for young people, the rise in the claimant count was not.

More progress in moving those on incapacity benefit (and deep seated intergenerational worklessness) into the labour market could have been made over the last twenty years but as ever, hindsight is a wonderful thing. Every step taken was resisted both politically and it has to be said by those affected. Understandably in terms again of the fear which change and uncertainty brings. Hence the need for Government to be alongside people in aiding them through the transitions which for the wealthy hold no worries but for those on the margins, constitute a major upheaval in their lives.

An interesting statistic emerging from the Labour Force Survey (ONS) is that the overall number of low-skill jobs, whilst broadly unchanged at around 3.2 million, has seen the number of UK-born workers seeking such jobs fall from 3.04m to 2.56m since the beginning of 2002. The number of non-UK-born workers, on the other hand, has risen from 298,000 to 666,000 in the same period. The significance of this is that the demographics of the workforce have changed. The type of job that people have and were prepared to take has changed and as a consequence those from outside the UK borders have filled the gap.

It can of course be argued that the economically dependent should have been more rapidly prepared for and enabled to move into such jobs. The difficulty is a simple one. The type of job available is not necessarily those for which even if they were willing, the economically dependent would be capable of taking.

This challenge needs to be understood. Not to duck it but to work through it as a long term project.

Those who described me as being too harsh in respect of measures taken to tackle unwarranted asylum claims, on counterterrorism measures, on tough policing in communities or difficult welfare reforms, seem now suddenly converted on both sides of the political divide to zealous enthusiasm for more rapid change. I welcome this!

The truth is that progress is made incrementally. Wishing for change does not create it, legislating for change does not achieve it, railing, as Tony Blair found, against the 'forces of conservatism' does not make people less resistant to that change.

I remember in early 1998 being mobbed by a crowd in Cardiff outside a hall holding hundreds of people, waiting for me to speak on radical welfare reform and the proposition of 'no fifth option', to work, training, a voluntary sector option, or what was described then as the environmental task force. I chipped my tooth as the car door slammed in my face, and the mob roundly condemned the modest measures that the Government were seeking to outline. That proof of the challenge in bringing about change rests with me still today!

Even more bizarrely, on a local radio phone-in to coincide with the visit, a forty-two year old confronted me with the challenge as to why he should return to work when he'd had a heart bypass. I had of course to point out that the expenditure on the heart bypass was not only to save him from imminent death but to enable him to become independent and self-reliant – rather than long-term incapacitated for the rest of his life!

So my message today is twofold:

Firstly, perhaps we could learn from history and in doing so, examine the facts and have a dialogue which is based on more than a presumption that resistance to all change, and any change, allies you with the forces of darkness. (I'm sure the bishops feel the same)!

The second, is that if we are to overcome understandable fear and insecurity, we do need to offer people hope, a quid pro quo for their own acceptance of self-help and personal responsibility, with Government aiding the transitions, providing mutual help through the duty we owe each other.

Nothing less than a change in the relationship between Government and governed, will do. Instead, what we must put in place is a compact between formal politics and the voters – as citizens and active members of civil society (what David Cameron describes as the Big Society, and Ed Miliband outlined last week as part of understanding our responsibility to each other).

A compact which defines more clearly what can be expected from Government, where the boundaries lie in relation to public and private, and where the individual and the family should be expected to respond. In this way 'Earned Entitlement' and the reinforcement of reciprocity can form the foundation on which common values can be promoted.

It is necessary therefore to accept that there are some values upon which we can all agree. Our instincts around the family as a building block within society, is surely a given? Self-determination is aspired to by many who through no fault of their own are reliant on others as well as those in society fortunate enough to be born into relatively affluent circumstances. That insurance policy we call 'the welfare state', was originally intended to achieve just that – helping people not just to help themselves but also to help others.

Parents – with some regrettable exceptions – work to ensure their child succeeds and care about the quality of the education system without always knowing what to do to achieve improvement.

The aspiration and expectation which was taken for granted as I grew up in the 1950s and 60s was eroded badly in the 1980s/90s in a morass of hopelessness where, the forerunner to incapacity benefit led to a whole swathe of those formerly working in heavy industry finding themselves literally 'dumped' on the scrapheap.

A diminution in expectation and a culture of worklessness arose, which we are still struggling to deal with today.

Yes, it is those areas of heavy industry and late twentieth century decline- the Glasgows, Merseysides and former mining areas that have seen the largest rise over the last thirty years in intergenerational unemployment.

Yet, it is no accident that in the cultural melting pot of London, with a more transient population and fewer families with multiple earners and broader neighbourhood support systems, worklessness is relatively higher.

Yes, the Office for National Statistics does demonstrate even with a fall in the flow of those coming onto incapacity benefit, and with measures to tackle long-term unemployment, households with no one working, and therefore the incidence of worklessness, has

increased. A little humility in addressing why this should be, and the enormous task in turning it around, wouldn't come amiss.

The increase from 1% to 1.7% of those with no one working in their household should give us all pause for thought. I remember back ten years ago when Jean (now Baroness) Corston who was my parliamentary private secretary told me the story of the eight year old boy she met in a Bristol school. Asking him what he intended to do for his future he said quite guilelessly 'I want to draw my unemployment benefit on a Thursday'!

And of course, those in debt or addiction are most likely to be both without work and without hope of improvement. Building hope, ensuring that we unite the resources that we make available to tackle poverty, must surely be at the top of the agenda.

However, to go back to Barack Obama's reference to 'teaching a man to fish' rather than simply giving the fish to the hungry, brings us round to the important task all of us face in getting this right. I suggest a number of steps which could gain widespread agreement and which in many respects are already part of the lexicon of policies of the main political parties represented at Westminster.

Firstly, I have already referred to the issue of the transitions of life. Modern government should be prepared to help with both the difficulties and moments of opportunity. Not as a crutch but as was once described to me, a trampoline from which the jump can be made to something better. To achieve this we need to take into account the uncertainties, the insecurity and therefore the fears that only those who have experienced grinding poverty or terrible family or personal trauma, can fully understand. Whether it is the deterioration in mental health or the breakdown of relationships, help is needed.

That can come both from Government or – through the support of Government – from the informal and voluntary sector. It cannot be wished into existence, it has to be worked for, and financially supported.

That is why from the original local Sure Start programmes through to Home-Start and the family intervention programmes, we should reinforce the life chances of children and put the glue back into both family and community. The initiative being taken by Emma Harrison in developing a holistic approach to the needs of families is a logical and effective step in rebuilding those crucial self-motivators which many of us take for granted.

Secondly, we must ensure that nothing gets in the way of offering every child the fulfilment of their potential, vocational or academic, intellectual or spiritual. My mantra in government was 'standards not structures'. It still is today. But with a proviso. If structures and institutions get in the way of offering our young people the life chances they deserve, then the structures must give way.

Learning from both progress and mistakes from the past, makes sense but it is through collaboration and cooperation, not through fragmentation that we will bring out the best in those who seek to serve.

Thirdly, we should tackle economic insecurity as part of building a new relationship between Government and governed, as I outlined earlier. In this 'compact' everyone should have a clearer idea as to precisely what is expected of them and over a rational period time, what

steps will be in place to assist them or signpost them, to take advantage of new forms of reciprocity, within the community.

There is, surprise surprise, nothing new about communitarianism. Placing this in the context of globalisation is now the challenge.

This brings me to the issue of welfare modernisation, and changes in the benefits system. There is much widespread agreement about the work in this area undertaken by CSJ and despite considerable reservations, much of the thrust of the welfare reform legislation which completed its passage last week in the House of Commons, builds on previous work over the last fifteen years. It would be deeply unfortunate if the Government at this point were not prepared in the House of Lords to listen, to respond, and to give a little. The eighteen billion pound reduction in the nation's welfare bill should not be the driving force but rather the better use of resources and the more effective outcome that we all seek.

One issue on which I certainly regret not having contributed more effectively to resolving is the massive and continually growing bill for working age housing benefit. From over £12 billion in 2005 to the £21 billion today, we all know that a new system needs to be created which provides not the 'trap' and disincentive currently built into the system but a genuine hand up. Simply chopping the heads off flowers doesn't create new blooms.

That is why I would like to suggest today that the Centre for Social Justice and the IPPR should join together with the support of both David Cameron and Ed Miliband (and Nick Clegg) to come up with a step by step, long term solution. This would of course entail a review of how we fund the provision and not just the affordability of homes for rent and for sale. At current levels of funding the subsidy to rent, we might be better using some of this resource to offer a lump sum as a starter grant for young people seeking a foothold on the housing ladder as a revision to the 'stair casing' proposals which the previous Government were experimenting with.

This could be achieved by match funding the amount saved up to say £15,000 and would be confined to UK citizens and repayable from the assets were the recipients to leave the housing market.

An expanded child trust fund would have achieved in part, this goal but that is now history. Fourthly, and additionally, we need to experiment with a much more radical approach to decentralising the various strands of welfare policy. This would include a holistic approach to funding going into a specific family. It would have to be ring-fenced, if at local level, other priorities were not to distort the objective of investing heavily but more coherently in meeting the challenge of dysfunctionality. Finding long term solutions, requires imaginative and flexible policies.

The logistics of this are not easy but if, retaining basic entitlements laid down nationally, what has been Income Support (Employment Support Allowance), Housing/Council Tax Benefit, and for the future, Universal Credit, the cost of directly provided services (and the costed time of interventions from a variety of agencies, national and local), disaggregated to provide an income stream and new forms of outcome-based engagement with the family, it could achieve more than the existing fragmented approach.

Resources, meagre as they are at the moment at local level, could be added to this 'pot' as part of the health and wellbeing budget or, from police and criminal justice, as well as the more obvious elements of youth and community provision.

This would build on the concept of total place, the idea of a whole range of funding agencies coming together to meet need. In one sense we would have come full circle. From the really local initiatives that created the embryo welfare state in the first place, which through Beveridge and the post-war settlement became a national provision. For, at this level mutuality and reciprocity become much more understandable, manageable and so does achieving a solution rather than ameliorating a problem.

The use of the under-claimed European Social Fund could make a difference if properly targeted in getting families to learn that they have something to offer others as well as themselves. The development of self-worth, self-esteem and feeling valued. This is, however, not about contracting to deliver services but to change lives!

Fifthly, as part of facing up to the enormity of one in five of the under-25s seeking work, we need to return to the concept of a large-scale volunteer programme. This would not be instead of but in addition to the Government's National Citizens Service at the age of 16. It could, as I suggested to David Cameron in the House of Commons not so long ago be funded by an endowment drawn down from the gradual sell off of the banking assets which we as a nation have paid so dear to acquire! A blueprint for this does exist but the funding does not.

Sixthly, we could also look to the major assets we own in the financial sector, to face the issue of debt. Five years ago with ten major charities I did work on this, again with a solution that could provide affordable credit on the basis of 'something for something' so that opening an account, growing a capacity to cope and even the development of microcredit, could assist in the broader goal of reducing indebtedness and creating programmes which link money advice with local entrepreneurship.

(Perhaps I should approach Andrew Mitchell, the Secretary of State for International Development to seek some funding for this)!

But putting irony aside, this approach has worked in developing countries.

That is why I'm so pleased that the Money Advice Service is at last moving from its pilot stage to national availability.

And seventhly: addiction. The scourge which debilitates and destroys individuals, undermines and fractures families, blights communities and makes billions each year for the peddlers of death and devastation.

This is a challenge worthy of more than political knockabout. But also of the avoidance of what is rapidly becoming the contradiction of objectives laid out centrally, and the so-called 'localism' drive, leading to a different outcome! Take the Commissioning of services in this area. Cost-cutting leads to large scale Prime Contracts, asking of those bidding for contracts, to cover a whole range of the continuum of treatment and care eventually moving through to rehabilitation.

Those organisations in the not-for-profit sector who have a high degree of success, find themselves at a disadvantage as they are unable to put together the more sophisticated overall programme which the commissioning agencies demand!

The mantra of 'localism' needs to be balanced with the reality of policy objectives and attainable outcomes in practice. Government should surely seek to protect what is working against the 'one size fits all' which is in danger of being imposed at the present time.

Finally, a plea for a coherent social policy. None of the objectives and ideas laid out here, or the lessons from history will work, if they are not joined up. That, as I know from Government, is indeed a major challenge. A challenge not just for Government but for us as an opposition. And, a challenge I would like to be able to address on another occasion!

ENDS

The Centre for Social Justice is an independent not-for-profit thinktank set up by Rt Hon
Iain Duncan Smith MP, to advance the education of the public in the subject of social justice
and to promote the role of the voluntary sector.

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