

## **David Cameron: Empowering local communities can heal our broken society**

Speaking at the Local Government Association conference on 5 July 2007, Conservative Party Leader David Cameron said:

“Let me begin by acknowledging the good work of so many councils and Fire and Rescue Authorities in the recent floods.

It’s tempting to blame the Government for everything that goes wrong.

Indeed Gordon Brown became Prime Minister a week ago – and it hasn’t stopped raining since.

But when an act of God hits there’s little that London can do about it – and local government has to pick up the pieces.

Many thousands of families have suffered terribly, and still are.

Without the efforts of councils and the fire service – rescuing people from flooded homes, providing emergency centres, cleaning up – things would be far, far worse.

So thank you.

## **Democracy**

Speaking to this conference last year, I explained the new localism of the modern Conservative Party.

Tony Benn once said he wanted to see a fundamental shift of wealth and power in favour of working people.

Replace ‘working’ with ‘local’ and it’s a contention I accept.

This is a ridiculously over-centralised country and I stand before you a convinced localist.

Last year I made the democratic argument for localism.

A decentralised country, with local people in direct control of the decisions which affect them, is a more free country.

And so I gave three specific commitments.

We think it’s wrong that unelected quangos have more power than elected councillors, so we will abolish Regional Assemblies and return their powers to local councils.

We think it’s wrong that the conduct of elected councillors is constantly second-guessed by a national inspectorate that has become totally bunged up with pointless, vexatious, politically-inspired complaints... so we will abolish the Standards Board regime.

We think it’s wrong that councils have so little freedom over their spending... so we will progressively phase out ring-fenced grants.

Today, Hazel Blears has announced that she is giving people a little bit of power to spend a little bit of money.

By contrast, we would give people a lot of power to spend a lot of money.

Last month Michael Heseltine published the first of the reports from his Cities Taskforce.

This takes forward the democratic argument for localism.

Michael proposed an extension of the number and the powers of elected mayors in our major cities.

It is one of the great tragedies of our politics that local government is so little regarded by the public.

I believe elected mayors will help change public perceptions of councils – making power visible, giving it a name and a face, and so making accountability obvious and real.

This will in turn build momentum for further transfers of power from central to local government.

## **Social**

Today I want to move beyond the democracy argument.

Indeed, the real value of democracy is not its theoretical legitimacy.

Its real value is its social effect.

Democracy works because by giving people more power, you encourage them in responsibility – and so we build a better society together.

Next week Iain Duncan Smith will be presenting the report of his Social Justice Policy Group.

This was the first of the policy groups I established 18 months ago when I set up our party's Policy Review.

I believe that social breakdown is the greatest challenge we face as a nation.

Broken families. Broken neighbourhoods.

Lives blighted by addiction, generational unemployment, crime and disorder.

The cycle of fatherlessness and welfare dependency and educational failure.

According to Unicef we're the worst place in the developed world to bring up a child.

We have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe.

We have one of the worst crime rates and the highest prison population.

We have record levels of drug abuse, debt and depression.

All the grim statistics which show how far Britain has to go before we can call ourselves a truly civilised country.

Those of us who have strong families and live in safe neighbourhoods have a moral obligation to help those who don't.

Because social breakdown isn't just about the poor.

As a country we may be getting richer, but we all know this: something is wrong with our society.

Tackling social breakdown is the big challenge of our times.

And I want it to be the modern mission of my party.

I believe that the best way to help people in areas of social breakdown is to give them the tools to help themselves.

The money. The power. The responsibility. Social responsibility, not state control.

I do not want us to pay people to be idle – to compensate them for their broken lives by making brokenness slightly more comfortable.

I want to see their lives healed.

Let me give an example – children who are badly disruptive in the classroom.

Too often, these kids suffer what has memorably been called “the soft bigotry of low expectations”.

We simply write them off.

We don't think their behaviour can be turned around – we just think it can be managed.

So in primary school we tolerate a certain level of indiscipline, and dose the kids with Ritalin, and do what we can to maintain some form of order.

It's not until the real trouble begins – when the violence and disruption become too much to bear – that we send them to Pupil Referral Units or Young Offenders Institutions and try to forget about them.

If low expectations are one reason for the problem of bad behaviour in schools, explicit government policy is the other.

In 1997 the new Labour government issued a green paper announcing a new policy of “inclusion” – i.e. that more children with special needs and behavioural issues should stay in mainstream education for longer.

As late as 2004, DfES guidance was still insisting that “the proportion of children educated in special schools should fall over time”.

That's just what's happened.

There are around 9000 fewer places in special schools now than in 1997.

At the same time, there has been an increase of around 6000 in the number of children with special needs in Pupil Referral Units.

This is quite simply a national scandal.

We are closing the places kids do need and putting them in places which are wrong for them.

Meanwhile, as so many of the children with special needs actually have emotional and behavioural difficulties, our failure to provide tailored education has caused an explosion in classroom disruption.

I want to see a step-change in how we deal with children with EBD, all the way up the line – starting with the youngest.

After all, ask a primary school teacher with a class of 5 year olds, which ones are likely to be in trouble with the law in 5 or 10 years' time – and chances are, the teacher will be able to tell you with total accuracy.

So given this, why do we wait until kids are 10 or 15 before we try to intervene? Why do we wait till the problems have got worse, and the kids are bigger and more angry and more upset?

First Steps in Hillingdon, west London, is a special school for young children with severe behavioural difficulties.

Kids are referred there at age 3 or 4 if they're showing signs of disruptive behaviour.

Within a year, most are back in mainstream education.

Only a handful return to special education again.

It costs £20,000 for a place at First Steps – considerably more than the cost of a normal London state school.

But imagine if those children had to go to a special school or a PRU five years later, when they're far more resource-intensive.

Imagine how much money First Steps saves the taxpayer every year, in police costs and court costs and prison costs.

Imagine how much safer west London is because dozens of troubled five year olds didn't turn into troubled teenagers.

Imagine how many other children have benefited because the disruptive kids were taken out of the classroom early, and came back reformed characters.

Older children can also benefit from intensive alternative education.

I have visited some amazing projects across the country which totally transform the attitudes of disruptive kids, by getting to know them properly and giving them the attention they need.

Places like Amelia Farm in Wales, or Hill Holt Wood in Lincolnshire – tough but compassionate places in the country, where urban youngsters find out what they're capable of.

Projects like these cost a fraction of Pupil Referral Units, and we should be looking for a major expansion in their work.

I want us to have high expectations for all our children.

And that means higher expectations of the role of councils.

I have talked before of double devolution.

The first stage is for councils to be given the freedom to take the lead: to work with the police, with social services, with schools and with parents to identify kids in nurseries and primary schools who need intensive help.

The second stage is devolution beyond the town hall and the agencies of central government.

I have huge respect for the statutory providers of special needs and remedial education.

But I believe that independent provision – properly licensed and monitored – can be highly effective in helping the most hard-to-reach children.

So I want to enable councils to be far more imaginative in how, when and where they refer disruptive children.

Early identification of children in trouble.

Quick assessment of needs.

Independent provision where necessary.

And then an early return to mainstream education, if possible.

There is a depressing journey too many of our young people take – a journey of three letter acronyms.

From an EBD unit to a PRU. From the PRU to a YOI. And finally to an HMP.

Early intervention is the best hope we've got to get people off this journey.

And it's local schools, backed by councils which are best placed to take the lead in this.

## **Welfare**

Let me move on to another important role for local government.

When you're dealing with a troubled youngster, you're often dealing with a troubled family.

And in too many cases, troubled families are those without work.

I believe that if we could get some of the five million adults who are out of work and on benefits, into work and off benefits, we wouldn't just save the taxpayer a fortune and boost the GDP of our country.

We would deliver major social gains to the whole country.

So how should we do this? You know your local towns and villages better than I do.

And it's this knowledge we need to harness in the fight against unemployment.

Local councils can do a far better job than central government, if they're given the freedom and the power.

Kent county council, for example, achieved major reductions in the number of benefit claimants through its Supporting Independence Programme.

In some places the programme ensured that people on welfare were 30 per cent more likely to exit the benefits system and get into permanent work than people on welfare elsewhere in the South East.

That suggests to me that we need a major transfer of power, money and responsibility over welfare to local councils.

In this context I welcome the recent paper from the LGA on welfare reform, which sets the course we need to follow in this area.

National frameworks on entitlements and conditions.

Local discretion on how to apply these conditions, and on who provides the back-to-work programmes that claimants need if they are to break into the jobs market.

We should also think about the idea proposed by David Freud, of no-win, no-fee contracts for organisers of back-to-work programmes.

This would involve different fees for different classes of claimant, in order to discourage cherry-picking of the easy cases.

But for all claimants, except those who are entirely unable to work, we need to be tougher about imposing conditions on the receipt of benefits – and we need to be more flexible in offering the training and the incentives that are right for them.

This flexibility can only be done through a more local arrangement.

The current impossible tangle of tax and benefits is a direct consequence of Gordon Brown's attempt to comprehend, within one single central system, all the myriad complexities and variations of different individuals' different lives.

We can have a far simpler, and at the same time a far more sensitive welfare system, if we localise it.

National frameworks, local implementation.

Collective security provided by the welfare system, individual opportunity created by local councils.

## **Our society, your life.**

Finally, we need to make the value of reform apparent to councils and local voters.

We should look at allowing councils to keep the savings that they generate from getting people into work.

They in turn could allow providers of back-to-work services to keep the savings they make.

Or they could use the savings to reduce council tax or increase other services.

## **Conclusion**

Let me finish by putting all this in the context of history.

In the late 18th and early 19th century British society seemed on the verge of revolution.

There was chronic social breakdown in our major cities.

High rates of alcoholism, crime, single parenthood.

But – against all expectations – the tide was turned around.

By the end of the 19th century British society was far healthier, far safer than it had been at the beginning.

How did this happen? There was a change of culture – a new spirit of responsibility spread through the country.

But we also changed the way we did things politically.

We localised.

Think of Joe Chamberlain, here in Birmingham, clearing the slums and building Corporation Street.

The city fathers of Leeds and Liverpool, Newcastle and Bristol – the creators of great world cities.

We have their example to inspire us.

I take heart from that.

It is the work of a generation, at least – but it is work we can do and must do.

And we must do it through local civic responsibility.

I don't want to localise power just to enhance the prestige of our cities.

I want to do it because localism is the only way to deliver social justice.

Gordon Brown's approach to social justice is top-down state control.

We've tried it.

It hasn't worked.

On any objective measure, social injustice is greater now than 10 years ago.

You cannot mend a broken society with the clunking fist of state control.

We need a new approach: bottom-up social responsibility.

Because it's only by handing power to communities, that communities become responsible.

We saw it when families were allowed to buy their council flats in the 1980s – it wasn't just their own front garden they took responsibility for, but the state of the whole neighbourhood.

That's what I want to see on larger scale.

Self-governing cities, towns and counties – independent of Whitehall, accountable to local people, trusted to improve the quality of local life.”