

**Tackling Social Exclusion**  
**Speech to Christian Socialist Movement Conference at Walsingham, 31<sup>st</sup>**  
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**Social Exclusion**

Who do we mean when we talk about social exclusion? We could look at this in lots of ways. We could be referring to those people who leave school with no qualifications at all, that's about 7% of the population. Or we could be referring to people who are very long term unemployed - that's 7 or 8% of the population. Or we could be talking about the people who live in the areas with the highest rates of crime. Between 7 and 10% of the population live in areas which account for half of the crimes committed in Britain. Or we could be talking about people who fit all those descriptions - and no doubt there is a big overlap between them. And that's one of the points here - there is a large and growing group of people who, however you choose to measure it, are excluded from the growing prosperity of Britain as a whole.

Last month, the Government's Social Exclusion unit published this report, *Bringing Britain together*. It's a very frank and a very brutal description of how Britain is after 18 years of Tory rule. I recommend it - and what a relief it is to have a Government which admits these problems. I can remember Peter Lilley claiming that poverty was a figment of people's imagination - that it just didn't exist. It's vital that we have a Government which does recognise the problems, because recognising them is the first step to tackling them.

**Let me just read a couple of paragraphs from the report.**

Over the last generation, this has become a more divided country. While most areas have benefited from rising living standards, the poorest neighbourhoods have tended to become more rundown, more prone to crime, and more cut off from the labour market. The national picture conceals pockets of intense deprivation where the problems of unemployment and crime are acute and hopelessly tangled up with poor health, housing and education ... These neighbourhoods are not all the isolated high rise council estates of popular stereotype. Many are publicly owned, but others are privately rented or even owner occupied.

Between 1979 and 1994-5 net incomes after housing costs of the richest tenth of the population grew by 68%, while those of the bottom tenth fell by 8%. The proportion of children growing up in households with below half the average income grew from 10% in 1979 to 32% in 1994-5. At the same time the geography of poverty changed too ... Some of the most deprived neighbourhoods now lie only a mile or two from prosperous city centres where employers find it hard to fill vacancies.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of the report is the graph comparing mortality ratios in deprived communities with the country as a whole - and it shows not just that people die earlier in places like Oldham and Newcastle and Hackney, but that the divergence with better off parts of the country is just getting consistently worse.

That's the position and the Government is committed to changing things for the better. Tony Blair's first speech as Prime Minister marked out social exclusion as a priority for Government action. In his forward to last month's report, he said "*Our goal is simple: it is to bridge the gap between the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of Britain*". That's what the Government is committed to do.

### **A central concern for Christians**

The announcement of the New Deal for Communities in response to that report is the latest in a series of Government strategies to tackle the joined up problems of social exclusion. Over the last year I have visited a number of organisations involved in the other branches of Government action in this area. I have been particularly impressed by church based organisations, imaginatively making the most of new opportunities which the Government is creating to fulfil the call to help the poor and broken in spirit. It is a joy to see this practical expression of faith.

This Government has acknowledged the potential of the churches' contribution for social and economic regeneration. Three weeks ago I spoke at CSM's conference for evangelical Christians, conscious of course that the modern evangelical tradition in our churches has not been conspicuous for its contribution to social and economic reform. But I pointed out there that its easy to forget the extent to which the evangelical tradition was in the past characterised by passionate concern to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

John Wesley himself, at the close of the first wave in 1780 of the evangelical awakening, at about the time of his visit to Walsingham and just a few years before this chapel was built, urged his followers to establish 'strangers' friend and benevolent societies'. From that time on, on average six charities were established each week until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the charity sector had grown so big that the Government established the Charity Commissioners to try and keep things under control. It is estimated that three quarters of the charitable organisations operating at that time had been set up by Evangelical Christians. Their achievements were immense. Lord Shaftesbury, the leading figure of Victorian evangelicalism, told his biographer: *"I am satisfied that most of the great philanthropic movements of the time have sprung from [the Evangelicals]."*

But it would be wrong to present the evangelical contribution merely as philanthropic, voluntary activity. They championed the doctrine of benevolent state intervention, and were active in all the humanitarian legislative initiatives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

- Lord Shaftesbury himself led the campaign to outlaw the employment of young boys as chimney sweeps and in coal mines, and to limit factory work to ten hours. He was also responsible for the start of decent treatment for the mentally ill and in 1853 he secured the first legislation on the provision of housing for working people.
- Elizabeth Fry, who lived in what is now Plashet Park in my constituency of East Ham, started visiting women prisoners at Newgate in 1813, teaching them to sew and reading the Bible to them, and her experiences turned her into a powerful and effective campaigner for prison reform with a profound influence on the 1820s prisons legislation.

The real significance of all this was to establish it as the right and duty of the state to intervene in matters of industry and commerce to protect the interests of employees, establishing a precedent for involvement which led to the establishment of the welfare state.

There can no doubt that the evangelicals' campaigns were effective. But this wasn't because there was only a handful of virtuous and prominent campaigners for reform. It was because those leaders were backed by the entire evangelical

movement - enormous, coherent, insistent, committed and well organised. They understood that it was not enough simply to preach to people. The poor and excluded and marginalised had to be released from their poverty if they were to be able to respond to the preaching.

### **Consistent with their faith**

And of course, in tackling what we today call social exclusion, those Christians were being faithful to the Bible whose authority they acknowledged. There are 28 references in the Old Testament to the word 'orphan'. Many of those refer also to widows and aliens - clearly the socially excluded of Old Testament times. For example:

*Deuteronomy 10.18-19: The Lord makes sure that orphans and widows are treated fairly; he loves the foreigners who live with our people and gives them food and clothes. So then, show love for those foreigners, because you were once foreigners in Egypt.*

*Psalm 10.17-18: You will listen, O Lord, to the prayers of the lowly; you will give them courage. You will hear the cries of the oppressed and the orphans; you will judge in their favour.*

*Jeremiah 22.3: Do what is just and right. Protect the person who is being cheated from the one who is cheating him. Do not ill treat or oppress foreigners, orphans or widows.*

So those in the last century who were engaged in tackling the social exclusion around them, were being obedient to the teaching of the Bible. They were being obedient too to the clear teaching and example of Jesus, who *"of his own free will gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant"*. It was Jesus who pronounced blessing on those who were spiritually poor, who were merciful to others and who worked for peace; who was criticised by the Pharisees for eating with outcasts - precisely the socially excluded of his time. To all this he responded by saying *"I have come not to call respectable people, but outcasts"*.

In taking on social exclusion, those Christians of the last century were acting in a manner completely consistent with their faith. Tackling social exclusion should be as high a priority for our churches, as it was for them. And, of course, there are many, many much more recent examples we can draw inspiration from across the spectrum of Christian traditions, from the Salvation Army to the powerful body of Catholic social teaching which has wielded powerful and immensely positive influence.

### **The Third Way**

There is one particular reason why I believe the mind set of this Government is much closer to the mind set of Christians, in comparison to that of previous reforming Governments. Frank Field articulated this well when he was Minister of State at the Department of Social Security, when commenting on the welfare model associated with the highly influential thinking of the social scientist Richard Titmuss:

*Instead of realising politicians wrestle with both the angel and serpent in each of us, Titmuss' welfare cornerstone was made from altruism operating to a degree that is not always achieved by families. This sanitised post-Christian view of human character held by Titmuss resulted in an approach to welfare which helped make Labour unelectable for so much of my political career ... An assumption was elevated that welfare provision allowed the altruism we try to practise within the*

*family to operate on the great stage of public affairs ... The ethical basis underlying socialism lost a Christian perspective. Fallen man was replaced by one where human nature could be perfected. It became politically incorrect for the Left to question this stance.*

Our Government has a more realistic understanding of what people are and it corresponds with the one that Christians have always held. We are made in the image of God, but we are fallen. Its no good assuming that we are essentially virtuous - we aren't. We cannot simply be given rights and expected to exercise them responsibly. Those rights need to be balanced by the requirement to fulfill our responsibilities. Rights balanced by responsibilities. That understanding underpins what the Government describes as the third way.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Third Way* is also the title of a magazine of political and social comment which has circulated among Christians in Britain for a quarter of a century. The title *Third Way* was taken from some remarks by Os Guinness in his early 1970s book *The Dust of Death*: "*How often in the contemporary discussion a sensitive modern person knows that he cannot accept either of the polarised alternatives offered to him. ... In Christianity, however, there can be a Third Way, a true middle ground which has a basis, is never compromise and is far from silent.*"

That sounds remarkably Blairite!

### **The Blair agenda**

The Blair Government has made tackling social exclusion central to its programme. Its approach rests on assumptions that Christians can feel very comfortable with. I want to illustrate how this is working in practice by referring to three elements of the Government's programme, drawing on how I see them working out in my constituency in the East End of London and in my work as a Minister.

The three areas are:

- the New Deal for the young jobless and long term unemployed
- Health Action Zones in deprived areas
- The reform of benefits for disabled people, announced this week.

The common theme of all of these is the concentration of resources on people who are socially excluded, to help them become included. That's the third way - neither spending cuts to pay for tax reductions, nor vast new spending programmes undermining the economy, but careful recasting of priorities, identifying the key problems of exclusion which need addressing most urgently and concentrating resources to tackle them.

### **The New Deal**

The churches' report on Unemployment and the Future of Work, published just before the general election, described the predicament of those socially excluded through unemployment like this:

*"It is wrong in such prosperous times as ours, for men and women to be deprived for long periods of the chance to earn their living ... it is wrong to allow children to grow up where the right and duty to work are forgotten after generations of unemployment".*

The New Deal is this Government's response. It is a pledge in effect on behalf of the whole community that we are no longer willing to accept the miserable effects on individuals and their families of long term unemployment, the corrosion of community in areas where it is concentrated, the sheer waste of all that potential unfulfilled and the dangers of so many of the younger generation being cut off from the habits and opportunities of work. Nobody - and least of all no young person - should be abandoned into unemployability.

One of the things I have found most encouraging in the New Deal has been the level of interest in tackling unemployment among the churches - through a growing number of church-based employment initiatives around the country. Church-based projects of that kind are coming up with many of the best and most imaginative ways to tackle the big problems facing our society - doing so because of their commitment to Jesus and not despite it, not for a moment compromising their commitment, but taking it as a strong starting point for serving the community in which they are based.

The New Deal is being designed to contribute to the regeneration of local communities, not just through the move from welfare into work, and the provision of training, but directly, through environmental and voluntary work carried out by the young people on the New Deal.

But this is no repeat of the discredited schemes of the past. The New Deal is a serious national effort to tackle youth and long term unemployment - driven by passionate commitment at the heart of Government, characterised by high quality and providing real opportunities to help people into work. 30,000 young people so far have moved into a job through New Deal, and another 5000 have moved into work through the New Deal for lone parents.

Let me just sketch the outline now of how the New Deal works for young people aged 18 to 24 who have been unemployed or claiming Job Seekers Allowance for more than six months. Everyone in that category receives help from the New Deal. Others will too, but the lion's share of the resources available will be focused on young people. They will be offered a choice from a range of options:

- work with an employer, with the employer being offered £60 per week for six months as a contribution to the costs of taking on the young person. Some self employment and part time work are also be allowed under this option
- six months work with a voluntary sector organisation, or with the new Environment Taskforce
- full time education or training for up to 12 months, either in basic skills or leading to a relevant vocational qualification, without loss of benefit.

All the work options come with a guarantee of the equivalent of one day's training per week, funded at £750 per head over the six month period.

Each young person taking part in the New Deal will enter through a 'gateway' - an intensive period of counselling and guidance lasting between one and four months. With this help, many will find work straightaway. For others, the gateway will include the development of personal action plans and tackling difficulties which may present barriers to them gaining work. It will provide, in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies, special help for those whose difficulties have been compounded by homelessness, drug abuse, law-breaking or other serious problems. This Gateway phase marks the New Deal out from anything which has been attempted before.

The approach is to make a careful assessment of how each person can most effectively be helped, rather as the Christian societies did in the last century. Every participant will be assigned an employment service caseworker to help them before, during and after their participation in the programme. In addition, mentors are being recruited, especially to help the five or ten per cent of the participants who face the most formidable challenges.

The emphasis is on improving employability, equipping participants with the skills to get work and hold on to it. But for those who reach the end without finding work, there will be follow through help, and further training for those who need it.

There is careful monitoring of ethnic minority participation in the New Deal. Amongst young people, unemployment in the ethnic minority communities is 2 or 3 or more times higher than in the rest of the population. More than a third of young Afro-Caribbean people are unemployed, and nearly 30% of those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds. We must ensure that, in future, those young people have a fair share of the opportunities available, which they most certainly do not have today.

One of the most impressive things for me about the New Deal is the way in which the Employment Service which operates it has been transformed. Under the previous Government, its job was to clamp down on the amount of Job Seekers Allowance which people were receiving. This Government has given those same people the job of helping people back into work - and its provided training and support to allow them to do it. And the result has been very impressive - with Employment Service staff rising with immense enthusiasm and commitment to the new challenge they have been given, and succeeding. After all, nearly all those people went to work for the Employment Service because they wanted to help people into work - and, at last, with a Labour Government, they've been given the chance to do it.

### **Health Action Zones**

High levels of unemployment and poor housing contribute to poor health. Lucy O'Rourke, a recently qualified doctor writes the following of her experiences of health in my area of East London:

*"Housing is key to so many of the illnesses I see. Most housing is pretty poor ... my patients problems range from the psychological; anxiety, drug abuse and depression to the physical; TB, scabies, head lice and food poisoning"*

In East London the facts are startling. In the area covered by East London and City Health Authority which serves 613, 000 people, there are up to 40,000 thousand homeless people, 25% unemployment and 40% of children live in non-earning households, the mortality rate is 14% higher than the national average. Diabetes is twice the national average and the incidence of mental health problems and infant death are very high.

Last Autumn, the Health Secretary Frank Dobson said that the key to a fair, modern and strong health system is eliminating health inequalities in deprived areas like ours. "Why," he said, "shouldn't people in deprived areas expect and receive the same healthcare as the good people of Surrey?" With that aim in mind he announced the establishment of Health Action Zones across the country.

The idea is to concentrate resources and bring people together in areas like mine where the health service is struggling the most, to develop and implement a locally agreed strategy for improving the health of local people. That's a health

action zone. It will need the services of a wide variety of health and social service professionals. While each is able to tackle part of the problem, there have always been barriers to them working far more effectively together.

So East London has been declared a Health Action Zone. We will be seeing new one stop primary care centres - with a pharmacy, optician, dentist and GP - to replace the dreadful shabby surgeries which far too many East End doctors still have to work in. One of the previous Government's health ministers cheerfully informed me on one occasion that 75% of Newham GP surgeries did not meet the Government's own minimum standards, but he didn't seem too anxious to do anything about it.

In other areas there will be the joint management of budgets by social services and the health authority. Plans for the Zone are being drawn up now and the projects will start in earnest next April.

So its another example of the same principle - acknowledging the problems where they exist and concentrating effort - money and energy - on making radical improvements there.

### **Disability benefits**

The third area of policy is the one which I was given responsibility for after the Prime Minister's summer reshuffle - disability benefits - and which the Social Security Secretary Alistair Darling made a major announcement about this week. We currently spend over a quarter of the welfare budget - £27 billion out of £98 billion - on a range of disability benefits.

In our green paper earlier in the year on the reform of welfare, we said the fundamental principle we were applying was "work for those who can, and security for those who cannot". In addition, we wanted to re-focus the disability benefit system to increase the help being given to the most severely disabled. Both of those principles received overwhelming support.

There are a million disabled people in Britain without jobs who say they want to work. The Government wants to help them achieve their ambitions. We don't want to abandon people to social exclusion through disability, writing them off as they have been in the past. And disabled people don't want that either. I receive a lot of letters from disabled people making that point to me. Somebody wrote to me recently: *"I would rather be doing a job than drawing benefit. I would love to have a career and not have to rely on the Government and the taxpayer"*. We support that aspiration and we want to reform the system which makes it so hard, to make it possible for many more disabled people to work.

In the past, the choice was seen as either cutting spending on benefits to save public money, or helping disabled people by increasing benefits. What we have proposed this week is - dare I say it - a third way. It involves pruning incapacity benefit currently being paid to people for whom it was never really intended, or who don't really need it - changes which are justified in their own right. And then using some of the savings to increase and improve the benefits available to severely disabled people. We particularly want to help families with disabled children, and people who are disabled at birth or in childhood, and that's what our proposals published this week will do.

We want to bring people in for advice earlier, so that they have a chance of returning to work quickly after the onset of illness, because the longer it is left the harder it is for them to return. We want to help them stay in their existing

jobs, because often, given a little help, people don't need to pack up work at all. We are looking at other ideas like allowing people to retain benefit after they have started work for a period, to make it easier to return to work.

On giving active help for disabled people who wish to work, we have already launched the New Deal for the Disabled and the Chancellor set aside £195 million to fund it for the life of this Parliament. The money is being used to fund innovative projects which will help disabled people into work, and to pay for personal advisers to specialise in helping disabled people who want to work. I see this as a very important initiative. We don't know how it will work out - it is an experiment - no doubt some ideas will work and others will flop - but it reflects the Government's determination to find out what will actually work, so that nobody should be excluded and that everyone who can should have the chance to work.

### **A call for engagement**

As the beneficiaries of the supreme love of Christ, we have been liberated to display the most demanding sort of love - the self sacrificing love that Christ has shown to us.

What are we to make of it when:

- The first meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party after the election was held in Church House
- A significant proportion of the Cabinet are members of the Christian Socialist Movement
- When the Chancellor of the Exchequer describes the retiring Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, as his boyhood hero
- Or when the Leader's speech at the Labour Party conference was preceded, as it was this year, by a group singing the marvellous African chorus *Marching in the Light of God?*

It means that right at the heart of this Government, the concepts and ideas and language which animate and inspire it are very, very close to the ideas and language which animate and inspire us as Christians. That provides for us as Christians a window of opportunity to influence and shape this Government's programme in a way that I suspect has never been feasible before. I hope that we shall take that opportunity and I have no doubt that the Government will be better for our doing so.

For too long our churches have been inward looking, largely comfortable and contented. Patchily, hesitantly but increasingly, our churches have begun to engage again, and Britain's political agenda is just beginning to benefit as a result. The most impressive initiative to date has been the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the relief of unsustainable third world debt, by the Millennium. It is a secular campaign but rooted in the teaching of the Bible, and it has been taken up with great enthusiasm across a wide spectrum of churches. It is the churches that have provided the backbone for the campaign and forced the issue on to the politicians' agenda. It would not have been there otherwise. And the 50,000 people who turned up to lobby the G8 meeting at Birmingham in June were overwhelmingly from the churches - just like the great church-based campaigns for reform of the last century.

I hope we are going to see more and more church contributions in our local communities to tackling the problems of social exclusion. Our faith demands it. And the Government is providing a framework for churches to do it in. The impact

of working for social inclusion can be powerful. The evidence that church-based projects are often more effective than their secular counterparts, because of the commitment which they bring and the credibility of churches in their communities, is compelling.

Creating a new Britain requires the inclusion of many people who have been excluded in the past. If we are to succeed, our churches - as faithful witnesses to the gospel - need to be key players again, now and in the future. And we as Christians need to play our part in sharing our commitment and shaping the policies of our party, to take forward this ambitious but practical programme through this Parliament and, I hope, through the next General Election into the next Parliament as well. Its going to take not just one term, but a programme of reform sustained across two terms or more to achieve the changes we want to see. And as Christian Socialists, for the reasons I've set out this morning, we have a vital role in making it happen.