

# The Hidden Agenda

The True Face of Cameron's Conservatives

David Blunkett

January 2010

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## Introduction

It is my intention to deal with four substantial areas which form the backcloth to the general election battle – but which also illustrate the challenge which faces our democratic system in the years ahead.

The first is the philosophical difference that divides the two major parties. The Liberal Democrats fall pretty well into the Tory camp on this issue, which encompasses not just the question of the role of government in the 21st century but also, even more importantly, the nature of our democracy. Is the representative political process to be used as a counterweight to the power of wealth and privilege – or merely as its subset?

The second is a spin-off of the contradictions which currently bedevil the debate about how best to decentralise power and decisionmaking within the political (as opposed to economic market) process. The corollary of the philosophical divide so little debated (if understood) in this country is the contradiction of those who rail against the central state – the ‘nanny state’ – but, in every other aspect of public life, wish to use the structure and influence of government to promote their own view of how society should operate. This touches on the inherent nature of the important dialogue about ‘freedom from’ as opposed to ‘freedom to’ – the mobilisation of reciprocity and mutuality through democratic means.

The third – and again this is an important area as we struggle to provide a balance between civil society and the political process – is the question of accountability: accountability in terms of arm’s-length, publicly-funded agencies; accountability in terms of decentralised decision-taking; and accountability in terms of a ‘new managerialism’, which perversely drives power into the

hands of providers rather than users or consumers of services, goods and, yes, finance. Just after the 2001 election, I wrote in my book *Politics and Progress* that our 'long-term goals must include greater redistribution of power and responsibility across society and towards local communities' – but that national government cannot abdicate its own responsibility for ensuring high standards of public service delivery.<sup>1</sup> This question of who is responsible for what and to whom has been brought into even sharper focus by the global financial crisis and the need to search for community solutions to the inevitable problems that will result as parties of whatever stripe seek to deal with the budget deficit.

And the fourth? The real danger arising out of the ashes of the parliamentary allowances scandal. No, not the diversion of constitutional change, whether in terms of electoral systems or a befuddled restructuring of our second chamber; but rather something much more insidious – namely, a substantial reduction in parliamentary representation. The redrawing of electoral boundaries based on a massive electoral under-registration in our most deprived and least participatory urban areas.

All four of these major issues hang together because they touch on the very core of restoring an understanding of and a willingness to participate in our democratic procedures – and the institutions, flawed or otherwise, which are essential to any functioning democratic state. Such issues are essentially underpinned by the need to recognise that democracy, within a global or transnational setting, is about engagement and not just consent; about finding new ways of enabling people to exercise influence beyond ownership, wealth or acquired (as opposed to earned) influence. In other words, the development of a thriving civil society which itself provides solutions and not just demands; offers challenges but also

1. David Blunkett: *Politics and Progress: Renewing Democracy and Civil Society* (Politico's, 2001).

answers; and balances, in the public sphere, the rights we need for citizenship and the duties and responsibilities which justify and secure such rights.

## Philosophy

At the end of last year, there was a flurry (albeit no more than feathers in the wind) of speculation as to whether New Labour would revert back to Old Labour and engage in an election campaign underpinned by a suggestion of ‘class war’. This was never going to be the case – but it did allow people to come out with their feather dusters to fight a non-existent battle for the heart of the party. It was not simply that the Crewe & Nantwich byelection was a fiasco (and could be seen to be such by any student lucky enough to be taught citizenship in their school); but that ‘class’ as we knew it died in the immediate postwar era. Even when the bulk of the population could be described as ‘working class’, a very large percentage of them – with the exception of 1945 – voted Tory.

What we espoused from the very early days of what became known as the Labour Movement – namely, aspiration – was never about envy but about self-determination, self-reliance and the desire for a better life. What we now call social mobility (on which I have written and broadcast extensively, notably in my pamphlet *The Inclusive Society?* published by Progress two years ago)<sup>2</sup> was described essentially as ‘equality of opportunity’; and mutuality was the means by which we could give people a foothold on the ladder of life, irrespective of the level of wealth and privilege from which they came.

It is, of course, a simple fact that the family you are born into, the house you grow up in, the school and university you go to and the career opportunities you are exposed to make all the difference

2. David Blunkett: *The Inclusive Society? Social Mobility in 21st Century Britain* (Progress, 2008), [http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/prog/documents/pamph\\_inclusive.pdf](http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/prog/documents/pamph_inclusive.pdf)

in the world to your life chances. The issue, however, is not the individual and their background, but how possible it is to ensure that young people from my constituency of Sheffield Brightside are,

given their ability, tenacity and self-determination, able to reach the upper echelons of the civil service, the judiciary and the banking and legal system. I am a trustee of the Social Mobility Foundation, which seeks in its own small way to address this issue; but underpinning it is a much more profound question. Which institutions and forces within our free market economy and political democracy speak,

work and deliver for those without inherited assets, or the means and knowledge to live a different life or offer alternative routes to success for their children?

But the real paradox is why those who espouse and believe in the power of mutuality, the important role of government as a counterweight to the power and influence of global finance and the free market, are not in the ascendancy. If there has been a moment in recent history when unfettered greed, self-interest and the predominance of what Margaret Thatcher used to call the shareholding, property-owning democracy has signally failed us, it has to be now ... and yet those whose very being, roots and *raison d'être* lie within that sphere are the ones eagerly rubbing their hands in anticipation of a Conservative election victory. Some in international finance (what might be described as the 'provisional

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wing'!) are cheered on by large swathes of our media and those with access to public platforms in a drive to achieve a confluence of the economic and the political in their favour.

Quite in contrast to this sort of self-interest, the overriding concern for anyone who seeks to be an elected representative should not be who you went to school or university with, or who you eat with (although it does influence you). It should be the question of whose voice you are articulating; whose needs you are feeling and reflecting; and whose interests you espouse and seek to enhance.

There are no judges living in my constituency, no national journalists or broadcasters, no senior civil servants (although we do have quite a large civil service function in Sheffield) and only a few doctors and headteachers. My voice is the voice of the community I grew up in and it is deployed in the community's interests, not my own. My fight to ensure that pupils enjoyed schools which had roofs that didn't leak, access to toilets inside rather than outside the building, a possibility of getting to secondary school with the ability to read and write, the opportunity of staying on at the age of 16 and the chance of a job, is entirely dependent on the growth of mutuality in local communities and responsibility being taken by government for investment and radical change.

To empower parents to play a part in running schools; in decisions about regeneration of their locality; in running their own social housing; in building their confidence through engagement with Sure Start, adult learning and community development – direct backing is necessary at local and at national level.

As Danny Dorling, the internationally-renowned Professor of Human Geography, and his team at the University of Sheffield showed in their recent report, *A Tale of Two Cities*, there are gross inequalities in my home city (and in the country as a

whole) which stem not from the individual or family alone, but from the critical core – the multilayered, multifaceted and intergenerational disadvantage. This can be multiplied still further by the dysfunctional nature of literally a handful of families, or by the pulling of the plug on essential funding necessary to ensure that civil society can work and that, in a complex urban environment, embers of hope and aspiration can be kindled and nurtured into a flame of positive self-help.<sup>3</sup>

This is where the philosophical divide, readily identified in terms of the economic, monetarist and free market international experiments of the 1980s, is now being reflected by the modern Conservative party in terms of social policy. Hence the need to remember the retrenchment into a bygone era undergone by some on the democratic left when we were debating the need for economic change and recognising the undeniable impact of globalisation, which led them to resist the necessary modernisation and reforms now associated with Tony Blair. This has to be avoided in dealing with the clever traps being set by modern Conservatism.

For the Conservatives are right in suggesting that we need to enable men and women to make decisions for themselves, to engage in a bottom-up approach – Lord help me, I was writing about it over a quarter of a century ago<sup>4</sup> – and that, therefore, big government (or what they would describe as ‘statism’) is not the answer. The trap is for them to suggest that we are in favour of ‘big government’ and the dead hand of the state, while they are in favour of ‘freeing up’ people and institutions to do things for themselves.

This is, of course, not the real dividing line. The real one is much more subtle – and deeper. In the 1980s, Thatcher turned the tables. She claimed that it wasn’t *government* that was responsible for economic calamity and for 3 million men and women seeking

<sup>3</sup> Danny Dorling et al: *A Tale of Two Cities: The Sheffield Project* (University of Sheffield, 2009). <http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/research/sheffield/>

<sup>4</sup> In *Building from the Bottom: The Sheffield Experience*, a pamphlet co-written with Geoff Green and published by the Fabian Society in 1983.

work and claiming benefits; it wasn't her 'fault' that rapid economic change was destroying the communities, the wellbeing and the very fabric of the society on which people rested ... it was 'inevitable'. It was not just the 'enemy within' which she and her ministers blamed; but the failure of the *nation* to understand that it was their job, not that of the government, to work their way through the enormous economic, technical and global changes. This was the Thatcherite mantra of the day.

Under the tutelage of Oliver Letwin and David Willetts, the Conservative party is now embarking on a similar ploy in relation to social policy and our social ills. The so-called 'broken society', as the former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith so disparagingly put it, is the fault of government, they say; but the solutions are not those for which government should take direct responsibility. It is not 'the job' of government, but rather of society itself. At least they recognise that there is such a thing!

This has the advantage, of course, of putting the ball back into the court of the very people who are struggling to make ends meet and to develop community-based answers to major problems; the same communities that had, all those years ago, to find their own solutions in the face of unemployment, deep deprivation and inequality. The self-help groups, the Goose and Burial Clubs, so vividly spelt out by EP Thompson in his seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Yes, we know all about self-help and self-determination. But the Tories seek to make mutuality and collective action through public policy the scapegoat, not the answer. And this is even cleverer. For just as Thatcher sought to claim that government was not 'responsible' for the ills of economic trauma, so the Conservatives are now claiming that they would not be 'responsible' for what they

describe, superficially and attractively, as ‘the job of family and neighbourhood’.

Of course, it is the job of the family to nurture and develop children to know the difference between right and wrong; to want to learn and have an inquiring mind; to be inspired to do well for themselves and those around them. Of course it is the job of a functioning community to provide at the level of civil society answers which cannot be provided by government alone. Of course, volunteering – which I have espoused all my life – and voluntary action are absolutely essential to any functioning democracy and what is sometimes called the ‘Third Sector’ is an essential part of any left-of-centre answer to the future of our nation – as spelt out in my review of policy in this area, *Mutual Action, Common Purpose*, undertaken for the prime minister and published over a year ago.<sup>5</sup>

But it is an enabling state, a supportive government, an open and functioning representative democracy, which allows participative democracy to thrive. It is the role of government to ensure that people have the wherewithal to make their own decisions, to develop their talents, to be able to contribute not only for themselves and their families but also to a successful nation in a highly competitive and complex world. The former cabinet minister James Purnell, writing in the *Guardian* on 11 January, put it very succinctly: people must not only ‘earn enough to live and achieve some respite from debt and usury’, but also live in ‘a society where people build a common life in the places where they live and work’.

That is, of course, the divide. We wish to use political democracy as a counterweight to the driving forces behind international finance and the free market – self-interest and profit.

It is not that either is inherently wrong. It is that, on their own, they are wrong. Self-interest drives ambition, energy, enterprise

<sup>5</sup> David Blunkett *et al*: *Mutual Action, Common Purpose: Empowering the Third Sector* (Fabian Society, 2009), [http://fabians.org.uk/images/stories/pdfs/mutual\\_action\\_common\\_purpose.pdf](http://fabians.org.uk/images/stories/pdfs/mutual_action_common_purpose.pdf)

and innovation; and profit is ‘surplus’ that allows for reinvestment, progress and the oiling of the wheels of the very system that our government, this government, has led the fight to prop up in the face of international financial meltdown. We have saved ourselves from the system because, had we not, millions of people would have been the victims of the failure of the financial and market system itself. The forces behind that system were the ones arguing against greater regulation – and are still arguing it today. Indeed, they are not just arguing, but threatening. Listen to the words of the head of JP Morgan about moving out of London; or reflect on what was said by the head of Goldman Sachs, who, rather surprisingly given the \$700bn bailout in the US, modestly acknowledged that he was doing ‘God’s work’ (at least on 13 January this year he had the decency to say that things ‘didn’t work out very well’, which is probably the understatement of 2010); or marvel at the endearing naiveté of the chairman of Barclays, who in an interview with the BBC in December said that he ‘got it’, then went on to argue that he had ‘many mouths to feed’ in the upper echelons of the bank!

Of course, the Conservatives’ response to the financial crisis includes their proposal to abolish the Financial Services Authority. In one breath, they condemn over-regulation; and in the next, they have the gall to suggest that the government did not regulate sufficiently strongly. Playing off the Bank of England against the

“The Conservatives’ response to the financial crisis includes their proposal to abolish the Financial Services Authority. In one breath, they condemn over-regulation; and in the next, they have the gall to suggest that the government did not regulate sufficiently strongly”

need for a regulator with wider powers to protect the public and not simply to regulate the banking industry through appropriate deposits and reserves, is a subtle but revealing indication of whose side the Tories are on.

I make these points because this aspect of our free society, of our open democracy, is with us to stay. But the interests reflected, the arguments put, are only given a counterweight by our political democracy.

Here is the rub. If you put the political power that comes through government in the hands of those who are advocates of and apologists for that unfettered materialism, you have done away with that countervailing force, and combined the two elements into one voice, one set of interests, one channel of influence.

## Contradictions

It may be felt that the most obvious contradiction of the Conservative stance is to want to actually be elected on a modern franchise to a present-day elected parliament at all! Of course, that would be grossly naïve. It isn't just that people gain political office for the kudos and personal influence – there is actually very little of that on all sides – but rather that those seeking to 'stop' their opponents doing something, or to 'free up' other parts of the decisionmaking process from 'interference', need to be elected in order to achieve those goals. The architect of the NHS, Aneurin Bevan, was brutally frank when he assessed what it was that brought so many people into the political arena when the full franchise took away the obvious and distorted privilege of those few previously entitled to vote. His phrase may not be elegant, but it describes exactly how, having recognised the possibilities, the better-off engaged in making the most of modern government. As he put it, 'they know how to

suck at the teats of the State'. The terrible irony is, of course, that the better-off have always done best out of investment in public services; and the most disadvantaged have suffered the most when those same public services have experienced disinvestment. As Professor Richard Titmuss once proclaimed: 'services that are mainly for the poor will be, inevitably, poor services'. Those who have bought themselves out of poor services have nothing to lose from a Conservative government; but those who can't have everything to lose.

The new irony is the contradictory nature of the stance taken by both the traditional and libertarian right (because we should recognise that these two arms co-exist, just as the liberal/libertarian left co-exists with people like me). They proclaim a commitment to decentralisation and putting power 'in the hands of people', while at the same time seeking to determine the behaviour of individuals and institutions within their own conservative philosophical framework. Of course, there have always been what is now described as 'one-nation Tories'; the Disraeli-ites who genuinely believe in benevolence and the efficacy of the trickle-down effect emanating from the truly successful. But even acknowledging this, they always proceeded on the basis of offering just enough to avoid the catastrophe of genuine radical change. Even a hundred years ago, the provision of something as progressive as school breakfasts was driven by economic necessity, as the emerging commercial demands required children who could learn sufficiently to function as clerical workers.

David Cameron's Conservatism is certainly not that of Disraeli. It is riddled with confusion and contradictions. Schools are to be freed up – but a particular form of phonics should be taught within a particular form of literacy lesson, with a particular form of history

and a particular set of books to be studied. Patients should have greater choice – but decisionmaking should be put in the hands of ‘local’ hospital managers, consultants and other unspecified professionals. Local government (and this is the most nauseating claim of them all) should be ‘freed up’ from central control – but as we saw in the 1980s (and as I experienced personally), councils should not be allowed to raise local revenue as they will, not be free to intervene or support schools which are clearly failing and should be encouraged, as we can see from Hammersmith & Fulham and Barnet, to provide minimalist ‘budget airline’ services. Another example is the Tory-controlled Northampton County Council, who has just completely wiped out its budget for music in schools and has put the entire onus on individual schools and parents – a move which self-evidently hinders those disadvantaged people who have never been able to buy a musical instrument for their child. Another is the refusal of the Tories’ transport spokesman to coordinate initiatives and pilot programmes for dedicated, safe school transport, claiming instead that it is solely a matter for local authorities. Of course, the Conservative-controlled Surrey County Council has just abandoned an organised school bus programme for young people in their area called Pegasus, saying that they have to cut costs. As I discovered from my chairmanship of a commission which investigated the benefits of school transport schemes,<sup>6</sup> this will push up energy, building and traffic management costs, while increasing congestion and carbon emissions – hardly progressive Conservatism!

In fact, this is the very reverse of the ‘municipal socialism’ for which Joseph Chamberlain became famous in Birmingham and which used to be the bedrock of dynamic, innovative local government. As with much of Cameron’s approach, there is nothing

6 Report of the Yellow School Bus Commission (September 2008). See [www.ysbcommission.com](http://www.ysbcommission.com)

new about this Tory agenda – in 1987 I wrote of the Tory threat to local government in my book *Democracy in Crisis*<sup>7</sup> – but these examples of how the Conservatives are scaling back local services, with the greatest impact being felt by the most disadvantaged, are instructive when it comes to considering how a Cameron government nationally would act.

But as we shall see in looking at issues around accountability, we are not free of contradictions either – and I should know, having lost votes in cabinet committees arguing that, if previous methods of governing had worked, we would not be facing the challenges of urban blight and gross inequality with which we wrestled in government.<sup>8</sup> We, too, want to target resources to those who most need them, to communities which desperately need protecting – as they never have been previously – from global economic crises and from the impact of a system over which the men and women having to live with it have absolutely no control or influence whatsoever. Yet we follow the mantra of ‘localism’ to the point where we provide grant aid on the basis of the local authority, not the part of the local authority in greatest need. So, for instance, grants given for financial inclusion – that’s debt advice to the rest of us – were available last year to Bournemouth, but not to Sheffield. As the Tale of Two Cities report showed graphically, Sheffield, which has a population of over half a million, also has one of the wealthiest constituencies in Britain in the shape of Sheffield Hallam, represented by one Nick Clegg. As the Liberal Democrat-controlled city council is redistributing wealth away from the poorest areas and into those which are better off, and as central government grants are given on the totality of the local authority area, those communities most requiring support, now that regeneration programmes and European Objective 1 funding have disappeared, are being left to fend for themselves.

<sup>7</sup> David Blunkett & Keith Jackson: *Democracy in Crisis: The Town Halls Respond* (Hogarth Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> As related in *The Blunkett Tapes: My Life in the Bear Pit* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

Financial inclusion is a critical case in point here. In my pamphlet *A Ladder Out of Poverty*, published by the Resolution Foundation in 2006, I argued that taking out loans and using credit is, of course, the responsibility of the individual; but providing protection to those who are exploited by, for instance, loan sharks must be the job of government.<sup>9</sup> Government has the potential not only to do good in terms of protecting people from poverty but also in increasing self-reliance and personal responsibility – giving people the option of affordable credit and enabling them to manage their own finances. This is why money guidance – publicly and privately funded – is so critical; and why it is so disappointing that we have, as a government, made so little progress, despite our stated intention to do so.

Our sometime inability to empower and stand by those individuals and communities most in need is compounded by what I discovered in government as being the Treasury's obsession with avoiding earmarked or ringfenced funding. The 'single pot' had and still has superficial attractions. You don't 'define' or centrally determine where the money should go and it is left to that most attractive of all propositions to those of us who were nurtured on localism, the local authority. The trouble is that if you are providing specific funding for a specific purpose, but you don't ringfence the funding for that purpose, the purpose gets lost in the process; the people expecting to receive the funding don't get it; and the frustrations radiate out, turning disengagement from local democracy into distrust and disgust with central authority.

The same is true, of course, of health funding and announcements made over the years that this or that amount of money was going to be provided for this or that cause. The money on the whole was indeed provided – the problem is it was not ringfenced, so that

<sup>9</sup> David Blunkett: *A Ladder Out of Poverty: From State-Dependence to Self-Reliance* (Resolution Foundation, 2006). [http://www.resolution-foundation.org/documents/Aladderoutofpoverty\\_000.pdf](http://www.resolution-foundation.org/documents/Aladderoutofpoverty_000.pdf)

primary care trusts, who are the ‘commissioners’ of services with all the pressure on them, are free to use the money in other ways in order to protect other ongoing services. (One answer to this problem would be to ringfence funding and to have earmarked devolved grants for a specific time, with a taper that allows clarity about whether the local authority, PCT or the like have actually taken on board what needed to be done and have sought to use the money that was allocated for a specific purpose at least initially for that purpose.)

An example of this is the Audit Commission report in relation to the extraordinarily progressive strategy for tackling dementia and the £150m allocated to facilitate it. As the national vice-president of the Alzheimer’s Society, I might be forgiven for making this point vigorously. The problem is that at local level the money allocated and the strategy developed nationally appears to have passed by those actually making the decisions. In simple terms, the money has been absorbed into existing budgetary requirements. Another twist here is that the Audit Commission itself, in other pronouncements, has been encouraging PCTs to adopt a laissez-faire policy in relation to tackling public health challenges, rather than recognising the necessity of underpinning capacity-building, community-based approaches to building social capital and to developing preventative healthcare in a holistic manner.

Where some areas do preserve a service via promised funding and others do not, we end up with that most dreaded phenomena of modern society: the ‘postcode lottery’, much decried by, in particular, the opposition. The current debate about government proposals for social care demonstrates this dilemma admirably, with the Tories denouncing any form of national solution. In a strange way, even the extreme cold snap which the country is

currently experiencing illustrates the point. Branches of the news media which are always calling for less government have been quick to demand that government take responsibility for what, essentially, has to be the local government and Highways Agency function of ordering, storing and prioritising the use of salt. Equally, those responsible for the planning and retention of gas supplies have suddenly disappeared and any problems are, again, laid at the government's door. All of this makes it impossible to hold to account those who are *actually* responsible, or to have a sensible system where people have to think ahead themselves, rather than expect someone else – the nanny state, perhaps! – to tell them what to do.

As issues wax and wane in the headlines, it is fashionable to parade one's credentials for localism; but in reality, of course, no one is in favour of postcode lotteries. As a society, we want some semblance of national standards and central government having the ability to effect change at a national level – otherwise, why would we bother electing members of parliament? In resolving these important issues of how best to configure public services, we always seek a balance – but we do so on the basis of delivering the service, not on some esoteric theoretical principle that bears no resemblance to what is happening in people's lives.

So, as in life more generally, the overall objective is often sound ... but the implementation and the impact is not. This is partly, but not wholly, why the frustration of good intentions leads to lack of delivery, lack of trust and a lack of belief that our representative democracy can deliver the goods.

There is the other contradiction. We know that it is necessary to be in government to make difficult decisions, to prioritise and, at the moment, to do everything possible to protect those who would

otherwise lose out from draconian cutbacks and an unnecessarily speedy rebalancing of the public finances. But we also know that government cannot do it all and should not promise to do it all. What it can do is be the enabler, the facilitator and, yes, where appropriate, the intervener. It should help civil society to work more effectively; tackle dysfunctionality; protect the most vulnerable; and reform and modernise, enabling the nation to face increased competitiveness and global pressures. Putting the 'glue' back into society entails someone knowing what the 'glue' is – and having some idea of the delivery mechanism for injecting it!

Most importantly, government must equip all of us to contribute, from the bottom up, to the great issues of our day. We need to recognise that people want a welfare state that is a springboard, rather than a safety net; and that they want the welfare state to help people to help themselves, rather than helping themselves to other people's hard-earned resources. We need a something-for-something society that acknowledges the need for people to uphold their responsibilities and duties – as well as promoting their rights.

I make the case for the power of government to change people's lives on the basis of the evidence of the last 13 years. Sadly, we all too often take for granted the massive change which we have wrought – the 2 million children taken out of absolute poverty, or the nearly 1 million pensioners, who are now no more likely than any other group in society to be living on the breadline.

Just imagine if there hadn't been a Labour government over this period and the investment and commitment hadn't gone in to lifting those people out of poverty. Just imagine if we hadn't transformed the education system, with the resulting massive improvement in primary school children's ability to read and write; imagine them struggling in vain to learn in buildings that had

not been completely renovated. Imagine if there hadn't been the investment in health – in Accident & Emergency and reducing by almost a quarter the number of deaths from heart disease. Imagine the situation for people fearfully waiting for a cancer diagnosis, with the waiting times that used to exist before the money was put in. Imagine a world without the minimum wage, the child tax credits, the increases in child benefit. Imagine a world without the measures taken through the New Deal to get men and women into work. Imagine a world where the government had disengaged from its responsibilities for caring and support to older people – from the increase in retirement pension through to the winter fuel payments, the free television licences, the public transport arrangements and all the other things that people take for granted.<sup>10</sup>

We may not have managed to eliminate poverty, but we have undoubtedly turned the tide from the 1980s and early 1990s, where the momentum was in the direction of increased inequality and injustice. That achievement and all of the other changes which we have brought about should be a matter of pride for the entire Labour movement – and they speak to the power of government to enable people to make a positive change in their own lives.

## Accountability

We now come to accountability, which incorporates its own contradictions.

There are some subtle nuances here. Responsibility, accountability and answerability form part of a continuum. Protection and policing – which even the most vehement libertarian would accept is a legitimate role for government – incorporate all three of these elements, as was pointed out in *A People's Police Force*, the review of police accountability which I produced for the party last year<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I explored these and other changes brought in by the Labour Government since 1997 in *Then & Now: A Country Transformed* (Unison Labour Link, 2007), <http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B3223z.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> David Blunkett: *A People's Police Force: Police Accountability in the Modern Era* (2009), <http://davidblunkett.typepad.com/files/a-peoples-police-force-2.pdf>

and which has been substantially incorporated in the policing white paper published in December.

But we get into entirely different territory when, for instance, the government endeavours to ensure that people have the knowledge and information required to take responsibility for and to be answerable for – and I use this as an example only – their own health. The ‘nanny state’ is evoked on many occasions to suggest that it is not the role of government to ‘interfere’ with what people eat or drink; what they do to themselves, or their family. In the next breath, of course, the demand that ‘somebody should do something about it’ is heard loud and clear, as in so many other areas of our lives!

Where public health ends and private health begins is, of course, an interesting area for debate. As indicated earlier, it is vital that we have greater clarity from the progressive left about precisely where the boundaries lie between public and private; between individual and mutual; and the responsibilities of the individual and the family and those of wider society. What we do to each other obviously has a major bearing on this. That is why the libertarians who opposed a ban on smoking in public places have to answer the question as to how an individual can be responsible for their own health if someone else is undermining it! This goes back, of course, to the creation of clean water and proper sewage facilities; to the argument that we hold in common the desire for people to be well housed and to have a national health service that meets our needs; to knowing that what we do has an impact on each other. We may not be our brother’s keeper, but we are certainly our sister’s protector – so we act mutually. We act through civil society, or through local, national and international institutions. We act in such a way that, collectively, we enable people to take responsibility for themselves

and to contribute to the greater good. In essence, this is subsidiarity, based on mutuality.

But to make it work in a modern, information-based and technological era, we also need to work out how best to develop an agreed formula for relinquishing some of our own sovereignty as individuals and families, in addition to the casting of a vote in an election. This is particularly true in relation to our civil liberties and to the often irrational debate in respect of information collation, retention and data-sharing. Retaining control of our own identity, having a rational say over what can be held, how it can be used and who has access to it, are all essential questions relating to who is accountable to us for what they do in our name.

However, the debate focuses – as it so often does in the UK – on the one area in which there is accountability, albeit inadequate, and where vigorous checks and balances do exist – namely, the public arena. The ‘private’ operation of collecting information via loyalty cards and other mechanisms in the retail sector, the operation of Facebook, the intrusion of Google and the multiplicity of private operations are just as much a part of the ‘political’ sphere as are those run by government departments. Accountability at this level requires just as much attention.

Just as we have had to combat over the years the nonsense that privately operated services are inherently good, while publicly operated and funded services are inherently bad, so now we need to avoid the pitfall of believing that any publicly operated or justified information technology system is inherently flawed, while the private free-for-all is inherently ‘free’ from interference.

We also need to determine how, with the obsession with keeping agencies at arm’s-length from government, we can hold to account those who operate much as government departments used to

do when they were directly accountable, through ministers, to parliament. The difference is that the new agencies are, with the exception of reports from select committees, virtually immune from political, as opposed to media, scrutiny – unless, of course, there is a crisis of some kind.

When there is a crisis – even where, as with NHS foundation trusts, decisionmaking and delivery have been devolved – the secretary of state ends up at the despatch box, answering for something he or she has had no hand in and is not either politically or managerially responsible for. Self-evidently, this does not hold to account those who theoretically have some sort of accountability – be it via the vague requirements on strategic health authorities or the unclear answerability of the chair and non-executive members of the foundation trust; nor does it make clear where the buck stops at managerial level when it comes to the redress available. The work of the Appointments Commission in placing men and women on, for instance, primary care trusts – and appointments to foundation trusts reflects the same dilemma – replicates almost exactly the background and profile of executive directors with non-executives whose accountancy skills are more highly prized than their level of community activism. A greater engagement in the appointment of genuinely local representatives would certainly help, but the debate has hardly begun. Of course, the Conservatives’ ‘big idea’ on this subject – their proposed independent board for running the NHS – would simply make matters even more muddled.

As indicated in the police accountability paper mentioned earlier, it is possible to develop forms of answerability direct to communities. The Communities in Control white paper from the Department for Communities and Local Government, published in July 2008 (which followed a number of publications from

government, including the Edith Khan lecture and associated pamphlet I delivered back in 2003),<sup>12</sup> gave local communities the power to petition their councils to take action in their area. In essence, we sought to empower local people to call for answers from those who serve them; to be able to trigger inspections (and audit) when things continue to be unsatisfactory; and, in the modern era, to allow both for communities themselves (where real decisionmaking has been decentralised to them) or, through more formalised representative local government where this has not been the case, to actually move to alternative suppliers of services. What has become known as ‘contestability’ need not be ‘marketisation’; and the reform of public services needs to take on a whole range of new options, from direct local participation and control through to public services being drawn in from different localities and sources.

The fundamental challenge in relation to accountability must also rest with government sorting out what it feels it still remains accountable for. How can the secretary of state for children, schools and families be held to account for standards at local level, if all the mechanisms which existed – including the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, established in 1997 – have been laid aside? The secretary of state no longer has any levers to pull (and that was certainly true pre-1997) and there are no clear mechanisms for genuine accountability at any other level of the delivery of services. Parent power has not been developed because the support mechanisms do not exist, or because parents themselves are not sufficiently well-versed with the education system to steel themselves to the task. We therefore revert back to the complete mish-mash of failure which undoubtedly resulted in hundreds of thousands of children in the most disadvantaged and deprived parts of our communities being completely neglected and betrayed.

<sup>12</sup> David Blunkett: *Civil Renewal: A New Agenda* (Home Office/CSV, 2003). <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151927.pdf>

So, by all means, let us have a complete shake-up of the system, whether for health, education, policing or the delivery of other community-based services. But let us also try and work out who is to be held to account for what; what redress is available; who is answering to us and why; and what the alternatives are. Without clear answers to these questions, those who can afford to find their own answerability through the use of ‘consumer’ democracy will do so. They will simply buy what it is that they want, from whomever they want it; and they will demand accountability from the provider themselves.

This is, of course, why we need to start empowering the consumer; not just the consumer of publicly-funded services (whether delivered publicly or not), but the consumer more widely. There is a major challenge here which the Labour party’s document *The Consumer and the Community*, published all of 20 years ago, endeavoured to address. It is surely time for this area of empowerment and influence to be given much greater salience – from those depositing their funds in banks, through those investing in pensions, across to those buying private goods and services, or using information technology.

## Gerrymander

Which brings us to the question of squaring not so much a circle as a triangle. First, a philosophy from the resurgent libertarian right, which sees public policy and service delivery in Thatcherite terms – disengaging from the major economic and industrial challenges for the nation. Second, the contradiction that those who need public services most, who lack the power to be a part of the so-called property-owning, shareholding democracy which would give them some purchase in the ‘market democracy’, are least

likely to participate in the formal representative political process.

Third, the lack of accountability, leading to disillusionment and disengagement from the very mechanisms and *raison d'être* of government, which, if it were connecting with people, would act in an educative way, demonstrating that, where private wealth and privilege do not exist, it is political democracy that provides the very empowerment people are crying out for.

**“ We are faced with the determination of David Cameron and the Conservatives to ‘slim down’ parliament, on the grounds that in the wake of the expenses scandal this will ‘save public money’; and the tacit acceptance of the political class as a whole that democracy costs us too much ”**

We are faced with the determination of David Cameron and the Conservatives to ‘slim down’ parliament, on

the grounds that in the wake of the expenses scandal this will ‘save public money’; and the tacit acceptance of the political class as a whole that democracy costs us too much. This leads inexorably to the permanent disablement of those who are most dependent on a functioning government.

Let us put this at its bluntest. The Conservatives intend to take 65-80 seats out of parliament. They will do so by re-ordering constituency boundaries (which have only just been re-ordered), based on a reassessment of electoral numbers. They will, to boot, return to the ‘West Lothian question’ and undoubtedly suggest that where devolution exists there should be less direct representation in Westminster (although, oddly enough, they do not include the mayor of London in their definition).

Here is the challenge. In the last boundary reorganisation, it was absolutely clear in cities like my own that the number of men and women registering to vote – on which the reassessment of boundaries will be based – was in inverse proportion to their disadvantage: the wealthier the area, the higher the registration. Although there is a legal requirement to register and electoral registration officers are supposed to canvass each household and maintain an up-to-date list (going to the trouble of following through in areas of high mobility and turnover), this is in name only.

It is estimated that in the most deprived constituencies, there is an under-registration of between 10 and 20%. I estimated that in my own constituency, we were probably somewhere around 12% down at the time of the last boundary change. This, reflected in the north and east of the city, resulted in the loss of half a seat on the previous six representatives elected from the city of Sheffield. The fact that those most dependent on the franchise neither register nor vote in substantial numbers is reminiscent of the famous book by Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* – where non-voters, by their abstention, effectively hand power to the people who are substantially responsible for a failure to give them the hope, aspiration and support needed to become full citizens in a participative democracy. As has happened so often in history, we are in danger of having a situation where the very poor will give to the very rich – although in this case, they are about to do so voluntarily!

You do not have to be a psephologist or a statistician to grasp the significance of what is likely to happen. The so-called ‘bias’ in favour of urban areas – and I do not accept that this is a reality at all, for the reasons outlined above – will be reversed. More affluent areas, the more widely flung geographic constituencies and

suburban areas, will be over-represented. Transient populations will not be recognised. Deep disadvantage and disconnection, reflected in non-registration, will significantly skew the political process. The power which comes with wealth, assets and educational or employment success will be reinforced – because the counterweight, the countervailing power of politics, will be diminished for those who need it most.

That is the greatest danger arising out of last year's revelations in relation to parliament on allowances and claims. Disaffection and disgust with the political process – just at the moment that disaffection and disgust with the powerful and privileged should have been at its height – will now be reinforced by using that very disillusionment to disempower the political process itself.

Whether through the implementation of rightwing philosophy in terms of economic and social policy, or through direct tampering with the electoral process, the legacy of 2009 will offer the greatest contradiction of all. For those who should have been held to account have now turned the tables, so that those who should not have been accountable are now adjudged to be no longer worthy of our trust in providing that counterweight. The bankers retain their bonuses; MPs are reviled; those wishing to return to the free-for-all which contributed to global meltdown continue along unscathed; and those most needed to provide protection and appropriate regulation face condemnation at the ballot box.

As my old mentor and friend, the late Professor Sir Bernard Crick, outlined so graphically over 40 years ago in the pages of *In Defence of Politics*, it is the politics of popular democracy that we need most of all at a moment when it has lost its salience and support. That is the bitterest of pills to swallow and surely, profoundly, the cruellest twist of all.

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