
Gordon Brown Charts The Way For Democratic Socialism In The 1990s

More than 380 people attended the ninth John P. Mackintosh Memorial Lecture at Prestonpans Community Centre on Friday evening when Mr Gordon Brown MP, Opposition spokesman on Treasury Affairs, chose as his subject: "Democratic Socialism: Into the 1990s". Here is an edited version of Mr Brown's lecture.

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Over the years my admiration for John Mackintosh has grown. Talents such as his are needed more than ever today.

His passionate conviction would surely have been applied to defending the case for the NHS — Socialism in action — against its selfish, short-sighted and mercenary detractors.

His oratorical skill would have been deployed in an assault on the Poll Tax, that final abnegation of Government responsibility for fairness in taxation.

His energy and enthusiasm would have been devoted alongside his great constituency party to the cause of creating a Scottish Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

Most of all, John Mackintosh would have thrown himself into the huge debate, engulfing both Eastern and Western Europe today, about the redefinition and reappraisal of socialism, the reshaping of it into a bold, democratic and radical socialism for the 1990s.

He would have delighted in the knowledge that the long night of Thatcherite rule was coming to an end and insisted that socialism was about controlling the economy in the interests of the community and about fairness in the distribution of wealth and income.

Like John Mackintosh I am committed to the cause of social justice. I cannot accept that it is moral for more than two million people to be forgotten as unemployed, four million to be denied minimal decencies on means tested benefits, 15 million of our fellow citizens — four million of them children — to be on low incomes, and many at or on the margins of poverty.

With his attention to detail and his intolerance of hypocrisy, John Mackintosh would have ridiculed the sort of statements that the Social Security Minister John Moore made when he claimed that there was no real poverty, now no real deprivation.

Mr Moore's claim is that those fighting poverty would find poverty in paradise: the truth is that those Government Ministers creating poverty would deny poverty even at their back door.

I challenge Mr Moore to deny that after 10 years of his Government the poorest four million households have suffered an average cut of six per cent in their living standards, are on average £2 a week worse off and have received none of the windfall benefits that have come from North Sea oil.

And I challenge him to deny that in the 1980s hundreds of teenagers are sleeping rough: rootless, homeless and penniless in cardboard cities, that hundreds of thousands of pensioners faced with housing benefits cuts are having to choose between heating and eating, and that with the Poll Tax, the freezing of child benefit, the reductions on housing benefit and the imposition of a new state charity social fund the Government, having created poverty on a scale not seen since the war, is even now withdrawing from any responsibility for the relief of that poverty.

I believe that there is an overwhelming moral case for tackling these problems of poverty, ensuring opportunity in youth, sufficiency in family life and dignity in retirement, and I am convinced that the vast majority of people support our social values.

One thing strikes us about the problems we face as we end the '80s. They cannot be solved by leaving them to the market alone. It has brought the seedy legacy of the last decade, which more of the same can only make worse.

Yet still Mrs Thatcher and the Right propagate the myth that somehow all progress is the result of isolated individuals pursuing their self-interests through the market place with no assistance from the community and that any collective provision that does not arise from the unleashing of market forces is inefficient and unworkable.

Indeed, at least until this government and this Prime Minister, it was accepted that without the support of the community acting on the side of the individual, equality of opportunity would be horrible.

In just about every instance the public provision, which the Tories now seek to undermine, was brought into being by the clear failure of the free market system to serve society. In education the free market failed, leaving a patchwork of uneven local provision denying both individuals and society the benefit of an education system.

In health care the free market failed and was seen to have failed intolerably when nurses had to leave the beds of their patients to raise funds in charity flag days for the vital equipment that local charitable hospitals needed. In coal, transport and energy the free market failed, exhausted and undercapitalised, its equipment and technology obsolete and under-funded, unable to meet national needs it had to be brought under public control. The public sector arose because the private sector had failed and was seen to have failed.

Quite simply, people are more healthy, better educated, more prosperous, enjoy a fairer society and are more free not because of any triumph of the free market system but because of its taming.

Market forces must serve public objectives and if our society leaves the market to its own devices, our economic prospects will deteriorate further, our country will become more run down, more unbalanced and more divided and the vital investments that we need for our future will simply not be made.

We need first of all to create the best educated, best trained, highest skilled work force in the world. Yet it is a source of shame that even after 10 oil-rich years, with unparalleled investment opportunities for this country, that today we have more young people leaving school early, leaving school without qualifications, fewer with qualifications in the work force; fewer university and college students than even South Korea; and investing a smaller share of our national income in education and training than most European competitors.

Education must be given a greater prominence. In past decades the aim was educational rights for all between five and 16 and for a minority beyond 16.

Now our longer term objective, something that will take many years, should be to move towards the right of education at any time, in any study, in any age group – what is sometimes called recurrent permanent lifelong education.

Education must take place throughout life. The same is true of investment in our research effort. Since 1979 we have invested a smaller share of our national income in our future research than most EEC countries.

No longer is the business of innovation a once and for all breakthrough in new designs or products.

In the new global economy where nearly everyone has access to the machines and the money to turn new ideas into standardised mass products it will be those countries which are in the business of continuous innovation, in not just the laboratory but on the factory floor, transforming new ideas into incrementally better products that are tailor made for customers that will do best.

It is what is called "collective entrepreneurialism", a whole world away from Mrs Thatcher's image of the lone inventor in his garage.

The private sector or market forces, cannot do the job on its own. In no other developed nation is it even being asked to try.

We must take science and research seriously. That is why under Labour there would be more collaborative research.

Unique amongst our competitors we had £120 billion of North Sea oil giving us unprecedented investment opportunities. Yet over 10 years we have invested a

smaller share of national income than most European countries — Spain, Portugal, Turkey and Greece included.

It is a short-sighted argument that jobs, prosperity and international trading success come from one source and one source only: the thrifty and energetic individuals who start businesses, generate profits and subsequently invest them to create more jobs, prosperity and success.

The truth is that, welcome as the development of new business is, such endeavour represents only a part of the real world.

In the real economy there are no virtues of private investment that are not also the virtues of all investment, public as well as private.

If it is good for the private sector to invest in houses or buses it is surely good for the public sector to invest in railways and schools.

One area where investment is crucial is the regions. Regional policy must be involved to bring investment and balanced economic development throughout the country.

For more than 30 years after 1945 there was a consensus that greater equality enhanced opportunity and improved efficiency, that the elimination of poverty augmented purchasing power to the benefit of industry, and that political liberty, economic opportunity and social security were mutually reinforcing.

For 10 years there has been an attempt to change that ideological climate. Instead of freedom guaranteed by economic opportunity and social security, it is, the New Right tell us, possible only with *laissez-faire* economics and social inequality. In their brave, new economic order there has to be unfairness, they say, if there is to be incentives.

For them the values upon which economic growth depends demand rewards for those who are already rich, and the real threat of deprivation as a minimal incentive at the bottom.

They have sought to establish in people's minds that there is an irreconcilable conflict between social justice and economic prosperity.

All the available evidence shows that it is the countries with the best social welfare and most effective public intervention, coupled with fairer taxes, that have done better in recent years.

Our charge is that the Thatcher Government has abandoned its responsibility to act on behalf of the whole community to advance our economic prospects.