

David Cameron: General Well-Being speech

Rt Hon David Cameron, Thursday, July 20 2006

“It’s a great honour to be here as you launch your latest batch of graduates into the world. I hope that people in this room will go on literally to change the world – to change the face of our planet, by changing the way we interact with the world around us.

I’m told that about half of all Forum graduates go into business or the City.

That’s great news.

I wholeheartedly support Forum’s emphasis on changing business from within.

Business has a huge opportunity to change the world for the better - and a huge responsibility.

And just as Britain once led the world in industrialization, I hope that we will in the future lead the world in sustainability, thanks to the passion of talented young people like those of you graduating today.

Today I’d like to say a few words about sustainable development and my Party’s commitment to it.

The challenges it poses.

And the opportunities it creates.

I’d also like to put our commitment to sustainability in the context of the idea that is at the heart of our policy review: General Well-Being.

I want to explain what this new agenda means.

The clear direction that it sets for my Party and for politics generally.

And why I believe that the modern Conservative Party is best placed to translate this new political agenda into real and lasting change.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In February, we published our Party’s new statement of aims and values, called Built to Last.

Right at the top, it makes clear that our aim is to improve the quality of life for everyone through a dynamic economy, a strong society, and a sustainable environment.

That triple focus is of course the foundation of real sustainability.

But in the context of sustainable development, there are two vital things about Built to Last.

LONG TERM THINKING

The first is reflected in the name of the document.

We’re serious about developing policy for the long term.

I think there has been far too much short-term policy-making in recent years.

Time and again we’ve seen policy initiatives announced to get headlines in the media which then fall apart, fail to deliver, and end up being abandoned or reversed.

We’ve seen it in the Home Office with more than 50 major pieces of legislation and after all of it a clear failure to get to grips with crime and its causes.

Crime is Tony Blair’s biggest broken promise.

It shows his greatest weaknesses: short term policy making; incompetent administration; top-down interference and complete lack of follow through.

We've seen it in the health service with countless initiatives and reorganizations which in many cases take us back to where we were nine years ago.

And we've seen it in education where it's much the same story - endless upheavals that have gone round and round in circles leaving schools and teachers bewildered and frustrated.

If we're serious about building a dynamic economy, a strong society and a sustainable environment for the long term, we've got to slow down and take the time to get things right.

We've got to know where we're going before we start legislating.

We've got to realize that legislating is not the only answer to everything.

And above all we've got to join up our thinking, balancing the often contradictory demands of economic, social and environmental progress.

That is real sustainability.

Policy that is built to last.

And that is how we are approaching our policy review.

I'm not interested in here today, gone tomorrow fast food politics.

That's no way to run a country.

If people want McPolicies, they can get them from the Labour Party.

I'm interested in real ideas, long term solutions.

That's what sustainability is all about.

ENVIRONMENT AS A PRIORITY

The second aspect of Built to Last that is relevant to sustainable development is the prominence it gives to the environment.

For the first time in British politics, a major political party has given the environment equal billing alongside economic and social matters.

That is a huge change, and one I am proud of.

But if you think about it, it's not really that surprising for a Conservative politician to have pushed the environment so high up the political agenda.

Our Party has been around for hundreds of years.

Conservation is in our bones.

I know that it's easy to take the mickey out of my personal commitment to green issues – cycling to work, putting a wind turbine on my house and so on.

But trying to be part of the change we want to see in the world is exciting and satisfying.

Because in the end, it's personal commitment that will make all the difference – the kind of commitment that you have all shown.

Government can't on its own deliver a sustainable environment.

It can set the right frameworks – and I believe that there's far more that government can and should do.

But sustainable development also depends on the billions of personal decisions that are taken every day – in businesses, in communities and in individuals' lives.

I'd like to focus on three specific priorities today.

EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION

The first is to recognize that this is a challenge for the next generation.

If we're going to reduce greenhouse gases by 60% by 2050, it will be those leaving colleges and universities now that will have to lead business and the public sector to deliver that over the next twenty or so years.

Climate change is real.

People care about it, are worried about it, and want to know what to do about it.

That means more education about sustainability.

As my colleague, David Willetts, pointed out in a speech yesterday, it seems sometimes as if we have forgotten the full purpose of education.

Education shouldn't just be about passing tests and sitting exams.

It should be about bringing up children to be rounded people, able to participate fully and positively in the world around them.

The Forum Leadership for Sustainable Development Masters is a fantastic example of the sort of course we need to create sustainability-literate leaders for the future.

ENVIRONMENTAL INNOVATION

The second environmental priority I'd like to focus on is the massive power of innovation to help meet the climate change challenge.

I want to recapture climate change from the pessimists.

I am fundamentally optimistic about our ability to get this right.

I know that Britain is today lagging behind many other countries in our response to climate change.

But it doesn't always have to be like that.

We here in Britain can lead the world in a decade if we act decisively today.

That does mean radical changes in the way we live, work and play.

But that doesn't mean putting a brake on progress – far from it.

When I think about climate change and our response to it, I don't think of doom and gloom, costs and sacrifice.

I think of the almost unlimited power of innovation, the new technologies, the new products and services, and the progress they can bring for our planet and all mankind.

Let's look at an example.

Britain's farming industry has had an incredibly tough time.

BSE. Foot and mouth. Falling incomes. Farmers leaving the industry.

Almost nothing to be positive about.

But the new environmental technologies bring new hope.

Biomass crops and biogas to provide heat and electricity.

Biodiesel and bioethanol to make our cars cleaner and to reduce dependence on oil.

Combined heat and power to make us more energy efficient.

Farmers can play a leading role in the technologies of the future.

I'd like to give you just one statistic about the global potential of renewable technology.

Some have argued that with the right solar power technology, and international electricity grids, the entire world's electricity can be generated from about one per cent of the Sahara desert's surface.

Instead of being left behind, Britain should be leading the way.

I want to do all I can to encourage environmental innovation and make it easier for people and organizations everywhere to make green choices and green investments.

As a party, we're already making real progress on policy in this vital area.

Since the start of the year, we've announced a series of proposals:

Setting binding annual targets for carbon emissions.

Replacing the climate change levy with a proper Carbon Levy which better distinguishes between high and low carbon production of energy.

A cap on carbon emissions for electricity generation with a proper emissions trading system.

A target for reducing average emissions from cars.

In all these areas we will provide the leadership and the framework for the new technology to come through.

And I'm delighted that my team is working with Forum on an event to showcase environmental innovation, to be held later in the year.

BUILT-IN, NOT BOLT-ON

The third priority for the environment that I'd like to mention today is the vital need for green thinking to be built in to our overall strategy, not bolted on.

We will only achieve radical progress on the environment if environmental progress is right at the heart of our vision for the future.

It's no use trying to put a green icing on the same old cake.

Environmental issues must be a key ingredient, alongside economic and social concerns.

And that's what we're doing with our emphasis on GWB – General Well-Being – as well as GDP.

GWB

Well-Being can't be measured by money or traded in markets.

It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture, and above all the strength of our relationships.

Improving our society's sense of well-being is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times

The idea that there's more to life than money is hardly new.

We have always known that money can't buy happiness.

But politics in Britain has too often sounded as though it was just about economic growth.

Of course economic growth is vital.

Capitalism is the engine of progress, and it has brought us unprecedented prosperity and opportunity.

There is, however, a yearning for more - for capitalism with commitment, for work that has meaning and for relationships that are about more than just money and markets.

A yearning for social growth and green growth as well as economic growth.

Politics needs to respond to that yearning.

It needs to recognise the value of relationships with family, friends and the world around us.

It needs to find the words to articulate, and the means to fulfil, the nation's longing for a General Well-Being that goes beyond economic prosperity.

THE NEW AGENDA

Over the past few weeks, I've been talking about some of the aspects of this new political agenda.

In the workplace, a modern vision of ethical work which enables people to strike a better balance in their lives.

New ways of supporting what I believe is the most important institution in society - the family.

And fresh thinking on how to empower communities to make life better at the local level. Today I'd like to draw these threads together, set out the direction that it takes us, and explain why I think the Conservative Party is best placed to deliver this new agenda in British politics.

DRAWING THE THREADS TOGETHER

I believe there are two central components of General Well-Being, whether in relation to working life, family life, community life or the environment.

The first is time, and the second is control.

TIME

We often hear that we're running out of time to save the planet, and that's true.

But we also lack time in our own lives: time for ourselves, time for family, time for community.

And so much of the destruction that we wreak on the environment is because of man's desire to find more time.

More speed.

More labour-saving.

More money-making, to afford more ways of beating the clock and conserving our energy for the things that matter.

Sadly it doesn't always work.

We are so busy saving time that we often don't get round to using it for the good things in life.

Now I don't want to slow down, or give up the labour-saving devices.

But I do think we need to examine how we live in terms of time.

Take an easy example: travel.

We often talk about transport as an economic issue.

And it's true that it is vital to our economy.

We are badly hampered in our competitiveness by our second-rate transport system.

But precisely because it is so important to the economy, transport has other impacts – not least on the environment.

And precisely because people travel to work, transport has a great impact on family and community life too.

To put it simply, transport affects our GWB – our General Well-Being – as well as our GDP.

GDP worries about getting workers to work in the morning.

GWB worries about getting them home again in the evening too.

And not just for family reasons.

Studies show that every 10 minutes on your journey home time takes 10 per cent off the time you give for involvement in voluntary work or community activities.

If we could improve our transport system we would not only help the natural environment.

We would help the social environment too, increasing the biodiversity of local life...

...the associations, affiliations and institutions which give us the sense and the reality of belonging.

So to put it in the language of traditional politics, I'd like us to think not just about how we give people a tax cut, but how we give them a time increase.

CONTROL

The second fundamental aspect of General Well-Being is control.

We know that happy families are ones where the parents can control their lives – travel home on time, access good healthcare and childcare and care for the elderly.

We know that happy workplaces are those where employees feel in control of their careers and involved in the direction of their company.

And the same applies in communities generally.

In the environmental area, we know that people are looking for ways to exert some control over huge global issues like climate change.

What matters is control.

There is now a good body of evidence on what promotes social happiness – or as I have called it, General Well-Being.

Levels of GDP, and the size of the state, have very little to do with it.

For a country as a whole, the strongest correlating factor of General Well-Being is not wealth – though obviously a good standard of living is necessary.

And it is not generous welfare provision – though obviously good welfare is necessary.

The correlating factor is simply this: direct democratic participation and control.

It seems that nations are more likely to develop high degrees of social capital if they also have high degrees of direct democracy - strong local government and strong traditions of voluntary action.

Intriguingly, even within a country with a high degree of democratic participation – Switzerland - people who live in Cantons with greater democratic involvement have been found to be happier than those in Cantons with less democratic involvement.

A CLEAR DIRECTION

These two central aspects of the General Well-Being agenda – time and control – take us in a very clear direction.

First, they show that well-being can't simply be required by law or delivered by government.

In 1795, Edmund Burke observed that politicians "ought to know ... what belongs to laws, and what manners alone can regulate. To these... politicians may give a leaning, but they cannot give a law".

Unlike fast food politics where every problem has a government solution, our new, more sustainable politics aims to give a leaning where we cannot and should not give a law.

This new politics acknowledges that there is more to politics than government.

That political debate can change minds and hence change nations.

That meeting profound and long-term social and environmental challenges does not mean reaching simplistically for ineffective and inappropriate regulatory levers.

In other words, that we need education and persuasion as well as compulsion.

A good example of this is public health.

For too long in our politics, discussion on health has meant discussion about the NHS.

Anyone looking at the health of our nation would conclude that some of the biggest prizes in terms of improved health and greater well-being would come through encouraging people to live healthier lifestyles.

Smoking. Obesity. Substance and alcohol abuse. Sexual health. These are the four vital challenges of public health.

To address them we need to understand the importance of shared responsibility.

Government has its responsibilities, and is failing - for example through not having hard-hitting advertising campaigns on sexual health.

But everyone has a role to play.

We're looking very closely at how to address public health issues in the longer term.

There are many areas where we need a greater sense of shared responsibility.

Whether we are talking about our economy or our public services, or our environment, or about our life at home and at work...the vital thing to recognise is that we are all in this together.

Government and politics have a part to play; but so do individuals, families, businesses, social enterprises and communities.

So the new politics of General Well-Being is a politics founded on trusting people, and on government sharing responsibility with people.

It is, in short, a politics that has high aspirations for government, but which also recognises the limitations of government.

That involves a different kind of politics - not simply different politicians, or even different policies in Westminster.

We need a much bigger role for local government, local participation and local control.

We need to abolish the Regional Assemblies and return their powers to the local authorities where they belong.

We need to untie the hands of councils when it comes to spending money.

They should be free to make their own spending priorities.

And we need a bonfire of the directives, audit systems, best value regimes, ring-fencing and all of the stark paraphernalia of the Whitehall control-freak regime that tells local authorities what they can and can't do.

We need more power and influence and control to be handed to the third sector – voluntary bodies, charities, social enterprises and community groups.

That means a more level playing field for voluntary sector bodies bidding for contracts.

It means longer contracts, reducing uncertainty for small community organizations.

And it means a change in attitude; a willingness for the public sector to let go if others can do the job better.

And we need a different way of doing politics.

We need to move from passive politics to active politics.

From distant democracy to direct democracy.

Democracy that gives people more control.

WHY CONSERVATIVES CAN DELIVER THIS AGENDA

I believe passionately that the modern Conservative Party is best equipped to deliver this new agenda and this new approach to politics.

In the 1980s, the Conservative Party understood how to increase Britain's GDP.

There were three components.

First, creating incentives.

We reduced taxes and increased private ownership so that people would have greater incentives to earn more and do better for themselves and their families.

Second, removing barriers.

We got rid of restrictive practices and outdated regulations that stood in the way of economic growth.

And third, we changed our national culture.

We created an enterprise society and restored a sense of national self-belief and pride.