

The Beckly Lecture

Methodist Conference 2008

**Building the New Jerusalem – a still unfinished task?
Rt Hon Hilary Armstrong MP**

Introduction

Good evening everyone. Thank you for inviting me here tonight. The subject of discussion here is both important to the Methodist Church and also to me personally.

The subject of the lecture today is ‘building the New Jerusalem – a still unfinished task’. All of us here tonight are united by a belief in social justice, of creating the opportunities for others to lead a fruitful and fulfilled life – these are core Methodist values. Yet we all work towards that aim in our own way. Professionally, I started that journey in the 1970s as a community worker, then social worker, and then went into politics.

I was one of the lucky politicians that managed to make it into government and eventually the Cabinet. The values I inherited from my family and also the church, helped ground me and give me extra purpose. I’m proud of the many achievements during my time in government – many blows for social justice were struck. However I’m with you today in the enviable position of a former minister. Free of constraints of collective government for the first time in eighteen years. This means I’m able to speak more freely about the choices government faces and the direction I’d like to see it move in.

I believe, for example, that we need a powerful *new* vision of a social justice delivered for all our children. They deserve to grow up having a good education, free of poverty, violence and neglect, who can become the active and fulfilled citizens of tomorrow. We now have a three tier Governmental approach of cutting child poverty, dealing with the most social excluded children and championing early intervention and wellbeing, helping to give every child in this country a fair start in life. We have to push this even further and take the next step in tackling our unfinished task.

We have to accept that the days of massive spending increases on welfare are over – and in my view not even necessary to achieving the goals we seek. We have to change behaviour on the ground, make sure that everyone faces up to their own personal responsibilities and duty to contribute towards a fair society in which everyone feels valued and secure. Government must play its part too. It must champion new and innovative schemes and make it much easier than it does today for people to fulfil their own aspirations. Because despite all of the time I have spent meeting people facing the toughest of personal challenges, I still firmly believe that everyone has high aspirations for their own lives, and even higher ones for their children.

Background in this area

I knew just how hard it is for people to develop and achieve the aspirations the rest of us take for granted. But I also know that in all deprived communities with good targeted support, people who want to turn their lives around can. I started my career, as a social worker, trying to safeguard the most vulnerable among us from the hardships brought on by deprivation. I moved into community work because I wanted to be involved in preventative work, then moved in politics because I saw how government was intervening far too late to bring about the kind of positive changes that would break the cycle of deprivation for good. It is a concern I have held throughout the last 30 years. I became an MP for a constituency whose economy and social fabric had for generations been dominated by mining and steel production, yet was then at the sharp end of Britain's disorganised transition to a modern economy. So for me memories of scarred and fractured communities, of people and families broken and dispossessed, left to flounder towards the bottom of society with no serious attempt to offer them the dignity and security of a productive working life, are all too vivid.

Since 1997 Labour in government has acted with convictions to tackle the root causes of deprivation. I'm proud of what has been achieved to help the weakest and poorest in our society, and of the revitalisation of our public service. A stable economy with investment and reform of public service has provided the opportunities, which together with people's hard work, has meant that incomes have risen and educational attainment and employment increased, and programmes like Sure Start ensure that many get a decent chance in life.

In 2006 I was made Minister for Social Exclusion, a cabinet position with the agenda of helping the bottom 2-3% of society, the socially excluded and marginalised to try and tackle the root causes. As the Minister I published a report called '*Reaching Out: An Action plan on Social Exclusion*' which helped focus and renew our drive against social exclusion throughout the life-cycle. It started with the principle of 'early intervention', and the belief that no-one should be written off – no one is too hard to reach.

Since leaving government last year I have been asked by the Prime Minister to chair a Children's Manifesto Group for the Labour party to help feed into our manifesto for the next general election. The key areas of this will again be early intervention and tackling child poverty. This is how we build our New Jerusalem and give everyone born in this country today the best start in life, the ability to pursue their dreams and goals. We've learned a lot about the challenges we face, and thanks to the early intervention pilots and trial programmes we're getting a better handle on what works. We are now in a position to have a seismic shift in the way we approach tackling social exclusion and end the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage once and for all.

1. Cutting Child Poverty

As you know, in 1999 Tony Blair set the goal to end child poverty by 2020, and halving it by 2010. No government in history has demonstrated this scale of ambition for its children – it is a historic and ambitious goal. At the time commentators, frontline workers and academics alike were staggered by the scale of the challenge we had set ourselves.

Child poverty in 1997 was the highest in Europe.

Since 1997 positive government action has now turned this around. In these days of unremittingly depressing headlines I think it's worth reminding ourselves just how much we have achieved since 1997:

- 2.5 million more people now have the opportunity to work thanks to policies like the new deal.
- The rough sleeping target, to cut numbers by two thirds, has been sustained since it was met in 2001, with homelessness down by 73% since 1998.
- On child poverty, the ambitious target set in 1999 has already led to 600,000 children being taken out of relative poverty, and 1.8 million children lifted out of absolute poverty.
- If the government had done nothing since 1997 child poverty would have risen by a further 1.7 million.
- In contrast the government has stopped this rise, and reduced relative child poverty faster than in any other country in Europe.

Work is the best route out of poverty, and has the best and most sustainable impact on reducing child poverty. That is why the approach to tackling child poverty cannot be simply about remittance; it has to be about maximising the opportunity for those who have been excluded from the labour market and find the most effective way back into it.

We have made progress with the National Minimum Wage and tax credits to make work pay; why we have Jobcentre Plus and the New Deal to help people find work. And it has worked. The 20% poorest families are £4,500 a year, or £90 a week, better off. The success in extending employment opportunities to those that were previously left behind explains the progress we have been able to make over the last decade. The number of children living in workless households has dropped by 405,000 since 1997. Eradicating child poverty therefore needs partnership = a sense of shared ownership between the individual and State; between the public, private and voluntary sectors; between families, schools and the communities in which people live.

In March this year a joint report by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Treasury called '*Ending Child Poverty: Everybody's business*' was published. It reaffirms the Government's commitment to the 2010 and 2020 targets. The report lays out what will require one of the most significant changes in the modern welfare state since its creation following the 1942 report by William Beveridge.

2 Social Exclusion

We have embraced the social exclusion agenda precisely to embody the truth that poverty is not just about income. It is also about the costs of being poor and about having the chance to earn more and do more.

We need to tackle a poverty of aspiration that is passed down through generations. Left unchecked, this can lead to reliance on benefits and dependency becoming a way of life and people thinking that the world of work is beyond their capacity. Those caught in this vicious cycle see no value in education and training, no future in opportunity, and are bogged down by contact with government agencies rather than empowered and supported by them. And we need to tackle the kind of multiple, complex and inter-related barriers that families face. The support that people need to get themselves out of poverty is more than financial. The impact of the minimum wage and tax credits have been very important, but the problems some people face, such as poor parenting, worklessness and poor health, are entrenched and have been passed down from one generation to the next. This has a direct effect on helping to keep children in poverty.

While the government can help with the financial aspect of poverty, it also has a clear role in providing safer communities and improving children's life chance. So, the enabling or active state must push to cut child poverty, to eradicate once and for all. But it will achieve this only by eliminating once and for all the cycle of inter-generational deprivation that we see today. The results of this are not isolated, and would lead to many benefits for society, like reduced crime, better health and education, less need of social services and more jobs and wealth creation.

Since 1997 people in the bottom 20% saw their incomes grow faster (2.6%) than the top 20% (2.1%). But this is not true for the bottom 2-3%. Small groups of people within the very bottom of our society have been left behind.

We as a nation are very willing to hold national debates on the wealth and privilege gathered and handed down from one generation to the next at the very top of the income scale. Some think it is simple – tax those at the very top and give it to those at the very bottom. Of course it appears easy, as it does for most things to solve inequality from the top down. Yet people who still believe today, after 60 years of the welfare state, that the challenges faced by those enduring poverty and exclusion in 2008 can be solved by straightforward transfer of wealth have not learned the lessons from our recent success – or even, for that matter, those of the 1970s.

The disadvantage these bottom few percent of society face are usually apparent early in life and can persist long into adulthood and old age. But while these patterns of early and persistent problems are troubling, predictions do not always have to come true. By tackling social exclusion, especially amongst children, it will mitigate the lifelong effects of social exclusion and prevent them being passed down to future generations.

Through early identification, support and preventative action positive change is possible. We can tackle problems before they become fully entrenched and blight the lives of both individuals and wider society. In 2006 the government set out five guiding principles to achieve this:

1. Better identification and earlier intervention
2. Systematically identifying 'what works'
3. Promoting multi-agency working
4. Personalisation with rights and responsibilities
5. Supporting achievement and managing underperformance

These five principles are still very much central to delivering on social exclusion in 2008.

3 Early Intervention and Wellbeing

We are increasingly aware that children's social and emotional development is the bedrock for their overall wellbeing. These are things like good social skills, confidence, the ability to bounce back and school readiness. Sure Start Centres are a great place for children and parents to learn these skills, and the centres are used best when they are used by parents as a gateway to further targeted support, such as parenting or self-esteem classes.

According to a NCH poll, 79% of parents agree that 'children need to be emotionally tough to get by in today's world'. NCH research has found that emotional wellbeing is a key factor in determining social mobility. This is because it has a major impact on both the emotional and social skills that enable a child or young person to gain a good education, qualifications and employment. The research shows that emotional wellbeing became four and half times more important in determining the relative life chance of children born in 1970 compared with similar children born in 1958. So our agenda must address the approach of early intervention and the promotion of children's emotional wellbeing.

From my time as a community worker until fairly recently the great debate in social care circles was 'nature versus nurture'. Did people inherit their personality traits genetically or were people born as 'clean slates' to be shaped and formed by the social environment within homes and societies?

We are lucky enough to live in an age where definitive understandings of what shapes a person's personality and behaviour are emerging and those of us with an interest in public policy must take heed. Key research has shown that from the very earliest stages in a child's life the brain's physiology begins adapting to the social circumstance around it. Quite literally, the trillions of synapses which form the connections between our brain cells are guided by the social circumstances around it. The responses and provocations of other humans, the sights, the noise, the emotional atmosphere can all shape this process. But none is more important than the key relationship in every newborn's life, that with the mother. This one early relationship could well be the template upon which all others in her or his life are shaped.

The window of opportunity is therefore frighteningly small. The physiological process that 'hard wires' behaviour seems to begin within the womb and completed by the age of two. By this time the seeds of dysfunction or even violence could well be sewn. It is a frightening thought that a human's life-chances could be so dramatically set at such an early age, yet the message to policy makers could not be clearer. We

must be targeting our resources much more finely than we ever considered necessary before.

And it is more than just about targeting, it is about being timely, too. By accepting the key role that pre-birth and the first months of life has in shaping a person's outcomes, then the only reasonable response is to intervene much earlier than we have historically thought acceptable or even moral. If we don't then we are knowingly ignoring the possibility of real change, denying a human being the possibility of a life that is free and fulfilled, and that really would be a moral outrage. For me this is the big public health challenge of our time and should be tackled as such. It is as important as the great Victorian health initiatives, eradication of smallpox and the public drive following the creation of the NHS post-war.

Early identification and intervention are critical to a child's life chances. This is not about penalising people, stigmatising or blaming. It is not the nanny state. It is saying that where it is clear – and it almost always is – that if children are at risk of being brought up in an environment which is dysfunctional, where there are multiple problems like poverty, mental health, drugs, alcohol or violence in the home, then instead of waiting until things reach crisis point, we have a responsibility to offer help to that family there and then.

Pre-birth to age two is the most critical time for a child's development. Health visitors and midwives can play a pivotal role when parents are highly receptive to external advice and support, and when they and their children need it most. Programmes like the Family Nurse Partnership can target vulnerable pregnant women with intense and tailored support from pre-birth until the child reaches two. If we are serious about extending opportunity, why wait until the odds are already stacked against the child?

'Building the New Jerusalem'

The Beveridge report in 1942 was written as a response to widespread poverty and the lack of welfare provision for the majority of the population. Where I come from in the North East some localities had over 50% of their people out of work. Beveridge's plan was to commit the country to tackling the five giants of disease, squalor, idleness, ignorance and want. Labour's response back then was universal provision. As most people who would come to use public services were aspirant and had the social capacity to exploit them, universal services were exactly the right response to the challenges of the mid 20th century. Now we have to update this provision to tackle today's updated giants of exclusion, poverty and underachievement.

There are still huge challenges that face us as a society – the 2.9 million children still living in poverty being the most important. And the answers to these challenges as I have set out must move beyond universal provision. Towards personalised intervention and targeting of those most at risk, of sharing data and information across agencies, and of identifying what works and what does not, so the right people receive the right response to their unique needs. It is a two-way process – with positive action taken by government agencies, but at the same time rights with responsibilities means a real commitment and partnership from those receiving support.

You would not think it by watching TV or reading newspapers, but there is much to celebrate about life in 21st century Britain/ A child born today will be better educated, healthier, more prosperous and safer and live longer than a child born at any other point in the history of our country.

Yet we are engulfed in pessimism. Yet after 10 years as a social and community worker, and 21 years as an MP, I remain optimistic through to my fingertips. Why? Because we know what it takes to overcome almost any challenge that faces us – environmentally, economically, and socially. The big unanswered question is whether we have the courage to do what it takes.

Eradicating child poverty and intergenerational social exclusion is not about handing out money – it is about getting in there early, confronting the problems, and building a partnership between the citizen and the state to solve it. It is going to be tough and will make some people uneasy. But when was real social change ever easy?!

So I will remain an optimist for as long as we as a society show the *potential* to come up with the ideas to solve problems, and find the courage to solve them. And when we make the move from *potential* to *action*, well then we really will have made a giant leap closer to the new Jerusalem.

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She has been a minister in the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1997-2001), the Government Chief Whip (2001-2006) and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, with responsibility for the Cabinet Office and Social Exclusion (2006-2007).

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