

Speech: Iain Duncan Smith speech to the Conservative Christian Fellowship 20th anniversary celebrations

Date: Wednesday 1st December

Introduction

Let me begin by adding my congratulations to Elizabeth, David and everyone involved with the CCF on its 20th anniversary. I am pleased to be with you tonight.

Your placement at the heart of Conservative Headquarters under William Hague's leadership, where CCF remains today, is testament to your mainstream impact.

I also want to congratulate you Elizabeth, on your life peerage.

Shared values

I know the CCF has drawn much inspiration from the life and work of William Wilberforce.

Indeed in 2002 I was privileged to give the annual Wilberforce Address while leader of the Party.

And as I think of the CCF's impact in recent years I see how influential these speeches have been in helping to shape the Party's values and vision.

As the Prime Minister has noted, the Wilberforce Addresses charted our course in Opposition.

From William Hague to Dominic Grieve, leading MPs have set out a compelling agenda for reform.

And from Bishop James Jones to Cannon Andrew White, those outside the Party have stirred our conscience.

In my own Address I spoke about how Christians are called to respect the infinite dignity of every human being, to love their neighbour and work to renew society – traits Wilberforce modelled so clearly.

I also talked about the importance of personal responsibility, the centrality of family life, and the value of the Christian communities up and down our country.

It has been clear over the years that the CCF shares these very important values.

But amidst the celebrations tonight I want to use my remarks to suggest that such values, and you – the people following them – are more important to the future of our country than ever before.

Role of the CCF

As well as supporting parliamentary candidates and investing in young leaders, the CCF has undoubtedly championed the cause of those marginalised in our society.

Since Tim Montgomerie and David Burrowes decided to establish the CCF at university, it has grown from an idea into a political force.

It has helped shape the thinking and vision of many.

I think of my CCF-led visit to Easterhouse and Gallowgate in Glasgow, as Leader of the Conservative Party.

Visits like those – to many of Britain’s most deprived and disadvantaged communities – brought me face-to-face with the great social challenge of today: poverty.

That people are locked in hopelessness, breakdown and dependency in a nation as relatively prosperous as ours is today’s great social injustice.

Yet as well as coming face to face with such breakdown, it also brought me face to face with the solution.

Embedded in some of these very difficult communities we saw the best of the voluntary sector.

From FARE to Street Pastors, and from Save the Family to the Eden Project.

So many are steeped in Christian teaching.

As a result of all I have learned from so many of these projects, I have become determined to combat this poverty, and break the culture of wasted lives within.

It is this which shapes so much of what I am trying to achieve as a Secretary of State.

I know this is an agenda the CCF, and those who have led it, have been promoting in a number of ways.

Renewing One Nation and the CSJ

For instance, the influential Renewing One Nation initiative was led by a small team of reformers also integral to the CCF.

People like

- Tim Montgomerie
- David Liddington
- Lord Kalms
- Robert Halfon
- Guy Hordern
- and Karen West.

Later joined by

- Cameron Watt
- Peter Franklin
- Jill Kirby
- and Kirsten Bird.

When I set up the CSJ as an independent body I fished into the political pond and, surprise surprise, secured the services of Cameron Watt, who was a great help at the CSJ in the early years.

But it was through my friend Tim Montgomerie that Philippa Stroud came to work with me as Director at the CSJ.

Now of course she is working with me at the Department, but I am sure everyone here would agree Philippa is vital to all that I seek to achieve.

Renewing One Nation's intensification of the Party's focus on issues like family, the voluntary sector, and community action built on some of the best traditions of social reform.

What is more, alongside the CCF and later the Centre for Social Justice, it demonstrated that modern Conservatives cared about a bigger society long before entering government this year.

Although it was deliberately set above party politics, the CSJ has played its own part in moving the debate about poverty in the Party onto the responsibility we all have in breaking a chain of wasted lives and despair.

And if the Conservative party stands for anything, it has to be for unlocking aspiration and opportunities for those who don't have them.

Reconnecting with churches

As well as its good work on championing social reform, the CCF has been important in reconnecting with Christians and churches who felt detached from the

political community – and the Conservative Party in particular.

For example I know how informative the Listening to Britain's Churches initiative was under William Hague's leadership, both for the Christian community and the Party.

This process took those leading it all over the UK visiting hundreds of projects. It is where Philippa, who went on to lead the CSJ, formally connected with many of you.

The social justice challenge

This has been crucial work.

But there is one challenge above any other that still calls for our response today.

As all this work has highlighted, and as you will have encountered in your communities as church leaders, Britain's peculiarly high levels of social breakdown are devastating lives.

We have some of the highest rates of family breakdown and teenage pregnancy in Europe. And marriage has slowly been eroded from the fabric of society.

Failing schools are producing a poverty of aspiration and opportunity for our most disadvantaged children.

Worklessness is entrenched:

- Just under 4.5 million people of working age were on out of work benefits *before* the recent recession.
- Two million children are growing up in workless households – one of the worst rates in Europe.
- And there are around 2.6 million working age people on incapacity benefits, of which around 1.6 million have been claiming for 5 or more years.

Children's lives are blighted by parents misusing alcohol and drugs, and violent street gangs are indoctrinating young people with abusive behaviour and deadly weapons.

And our criminal justice system has to pick up the pieces of this breakdown on a daily basis.

In our society there is a group of people detached from the rest of us. They have been left behind.

Some people have said that worklessness and dependency persist because there aren't enough jobs – but this overlooks some important facts.

We had 63 quarters of consecutive growth from 1992 to 2008 – with 4 million more people employed in this country by the end of it – and yet even before the recession there were just under 4.5 million people on out of work benefits.

In fact, the majority of the new jobs under the previous government were taken by foreign nationals.

So even when the jobs were there, there was a group of our citizens who weren't supported or prepared to take them.

So this is not just about jobs.

While this breakdown often concentrates in specific areas, its impact spills out to us all – just look at the economic implications.

In the last decade alone, our working age welfare budget has increased by over 40 per cent in real terms.

And though there is no single authoritative figure, estimates of the costs of social breakdown suggest they are likely to be vast.

A flickering light of hope

But there is also great cause for optimism. As I travelled with the CSJ I found the voluntary sector and faith community making a difference everywhere.

In communities too often forgotten by politicians, people inspired by faith and a determination to act have helped people take control of their lives.

I think of 58i in Nottingham – rescuing prostitutes from the darkness of cars and alleyways.

Volunteer Street Pastors – protecting people in town and city centres through the early hours of the weekend.

The Whitechapel Mission – reaching out to the homeless in London.

Regenerate in Roehampton – a community hub working with every generation and need.

And Regenerate offers us a pertinent example of why such work is so important.

I'm told several weeks ago one of its workers was walking the streets at 11pm.

She found two children, aged 4 and 7, sitting on the pavement eating from a packet of biscuits. The 4-year-old girl was being looked after by her 7-year-old brother.

They told her they hadn't eaten since being given sweets for breakfast.

Their mother, who is 22 years old, has two other children – aged 3 and 1. She was nowhere to be seen.

She loves her kids, but simply has no idea how to be a parent. The father, or fathers, are nowhere to be seen either.

Tragedies like these are easily missed.

But these organisations – people like you – are on the frontline saving lives and rebuilding futures.

A fresh call

So I know social justice is a core passion of the CCF, and I commend your achievements in helping change the Conservative Party's approach to it.

But I want to end by making a fresh call to you all this evening.

The work of fighting poverty is far from complete.

For CCF 20 years marks a commendable milestone, but let it be just the beginning.

And to those here who have strived to make a difference in your communities and churches, I hope you will keep going.

The Christian community, which has achieved so much already in rising to the challenge, has to lead again.

In the last few months I have set our course in government on the path of radical reform.

But I hope the outcome of reform will be more than systemic.

I seek cultural change in Britain.

Change from the damaged – even broken – path which has created so much dysfunctionality, poverty and dependency.

By reforming our welfare system and working closely with the voluntary sector, we can achieve such change.

Conclusion

A little time ago I was accused of being full of high hopes for society which I was told simply couldn't be achieved.

To my accuser's surprise I replied yes – I have very high hopes.

But they are matched, however, by high endeavour and high purpose.

I then said that, instead of such pessimism, why hasn't he asked why our current system and the culture it has spawned have been allowed to drift along for so long.

Oh yes, high hopes – high hopes indeed.

But I think it is high time.