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Alan Duncan speech to the Centre for Policy Studies

In his speech 'Re-civilising politics, re-civilising Britain' to the Centre for Policy Studies today, Shadow Trade and Industry Secretary, Alan Duncan, will say:

(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

The Battle of Ideas

To any Conservative of about my age, the CPS holds a remarkable place in our affections. Just as we were becoming aware of politics for the first time, it played a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes of the whole country.

The CPS had the courage to challenge and defy established orthodoxies. It brought fresh air into stale thinking, and inspired our politics, and that of other countries too.

At the time the CPS was founded, in the mid-1970s, there was bewilderment and disaffection with politics, and profound concern about where Britain was heading. There was a tide of support running away from the then Labour Government, and there was a Conservative Party working hard to re-establish itself in the affections of the voter.

As Conservatives, we learn from the past, and we look to the future. So what can we learn from the last time we were successful in opposition?

Thirty years ago the leadership took brave steps to confront the party's intellectual turmoil and put its thoughts in order. At the start of that process it was hopelessly split. And so instead of immediately launching policies,

Mrs Thatcher declared that she must first win the Battle of Ideas. I vividly remember her stating that 'Direction is more important than detail'. What she appreciated was that in politics it is essential to prepare the ground for any specific announcements about what you intend to do. People can see what you may have announced; but they won't be taken with you if they don't understand why. She identified the country's problems, but before she announced any policies to address them, she first set out her stall.

This story has two lessons. The first is a belief in the importance of ideas and principles so that a party leader can engage and educate a whole new generation of voters to his way of thinking. The second is a firm belief that politics must be an exercise in persuasion and leadership, and not just a process of harnessing transient opinions for short-term electoral gain.

The remarkable governments in our country's history - and New Labour's ten years do not figure amongst them - have all clearly outlined the main tenets of their thinking. Gladstone reformed education and the army; Disraeli championed social reform and the prospects of working people; Churchill defended us from invasion; Attlee mapped out post-war socialism; and Thatcher defined an agenda for freedom and prosperity which has been copied all over the world.

David Cameron

Of course, it is important to appreciate that history never perfectly repeats itself. The parallels between 1977 and 2007 are far from exact. Fundamentally, at the moment, most voters can pay their bills: or at least they think they can. They have yet to feel much aggrieved about their exposure to personal and national debt, the pain they might yet face with

even a marginal economic downturn, and the malign effects of a devious creep in overall taxation (and in talking of a devious creep, I refer to the phenomenon, rather than the person responsible!).

But there is now a tide running away from Labour. There has definitely been that once-in-a-generation shift so graphically labelled by Jim Callaghan, but that turn in the tide, although now heading our way, is a flow - it is not a flood. Nobody pretends there is yet a torrent of political change washing over Britain that will carry everything in its wake. The change in mood does not carry with it an inevitable outcome. In short, it's all up for grabs, and we are going to have to fight for it.

Not even his most ardent opponents can deny that David Cameron has dramatically shaken up British politics. Indeed his most ardent opponents are those who probably feel it most. The fact is, he has had a remarkable first year. Thanks to him, the Conservative Party is back on the map. We've spent a decade in the desert eating locusts, and despite our best efforts, the Party used to provoke deeply negative associations, and to most people was a bit of a turn-off, to put it mildly. 'That's a great idea', they might think.....until it was known to be our idea.

Put simply, David Cameron has dramatically decontaminated the Conservative brand, and through his own personality and the priorities he has set, has removed those negative associations we have suffered from for so long. We have not made any wild promises: we have not been rash or deceitful; but there is a thirst for certainty and clarity in the direction we have set.

A majority of the country now thinks that we are likely to win the next election. Who would have thought it only a year ago! There are two areas where we have done particularly well. The first is that David has, through his personality and rigour, restored our credibility; and the second is that, under Oliver Letwin, we have set in train an energetic and comprehensive review of all areas of public policy. Both are significant achievements.

Today's Challenge

And yet the challenge is more daunting today than it has ever been. In the last century it was easier to draw up political battle lines. Politics was broadly a contest between Left and Right. Two all-embracing creeds, socialism and capitalism, faced each other in constant war. Our enemies were more clearly defined; the political choice was clear. But since the collapse of communism, and the acceptance by most of the world of market economics, stark ideological conflict has subsided; Left and Right have somewhat converged. Many voters now see themselves somewhere between the two.

This makes life far harder for the opposition. Annoyingly, we are the victims of our own success. I remember Margaret Thatcher once telling me "I made Tony Blair electable". It is a chilling paradox, but it is true. So successful was she in winning the battle of ideas, that even our opponents felt compelled (at least notionally) to adopt market economics. And so it was, in the course of 18 years, that a number of trends and events accumulated to remove us.

After tackling Britain's deep economic problems and turning around the country's economic fortunes, people's priorities changed. They changed from economics as their primary focus, much more to social matters; our

opponents changed too; and as the country changed, the only people who didn't change were us.

Now, at last, we are changing. But the battle is less clear. Politics used to be a boxing match: now it's a tug of war, a fight for control of the centre ground which is the principal legacy of the Thatcher era.

The result is that British politics at the moment offers a difficult climate for politicians with vision and conviction. Ideological difference is less stark; people are deluded into thinking they are on a path to guaranteed prosperity; the practice of politics has sunk into the art of propaganda; and modern issues are not as potent as historic ones such as defence and economics.

And yet, even with convergent ideologies, the main challenges of government remain: on economics, we need rising living standards without inflation, and well-financed public services without the destruction of competitiveness; on social matters we need effective law and order, and high standards in health and education; and in our international relations we need responsible allies and enlightened engagement.

Social Responsibility

In the midst of these enduring challenges, the Conservative Party under David Cameron has championed a further dimension in our thinking which stands to take us beyond the polar difference of the past into a new vision for the challenges we need to confront. In everything he has said, he has spoken of social responsibility.

This takes us away from the tired dogfight between Left and Right; it takes us beyond the nihilistic practice of triangulation, by which the two parties shamelessly vie for votes by stealing each others' clothes; it transcends worn-out divisions shaped by class, age and wealth; and it focuses on the fundamental problems faced by the country we aspire to govern.

Some years ago I co-wrote a book called Saturn's Children. It caused a bit of a stir because I argued, with all the force I could muster, that the social ills we suffered from in the mid 1990s were the fault of our over-mighty state. This seemed odd at the end of a long period dominated by the rhetoric of liberty and enterprise. And yet that rhetoric, and the reality of policy, had concentrated on the economy. Society – the sphere of family and community and the public services – was just as subordinated to the government as ever. That is why we suffered the social problems I described in Saturn's Children.

And today those problems are even worse. The Daily Mirror recently listed a series of measures on which, rather grimly, Britain comes out top. Within the EU we are the fattest nation, the most apathetic voters, the worst energy wasters, the biggest porn addicts, the most violent, the greatest cocaine users. We have the worst kids' allergies, are the biggest binge drinkers, are the most burgled, have the most asthma sufferers, are the worst linguists, have the most premature babies and have the fewest organ donors.

Even this week UNICEF have shown that children in the UK have the lowest well-being in the industrialised world and we have seen a third teenager in ten days dying in south London, the victim of gun violence.

The week before, the 'Today Programme' carried an absolutely seminal broadcast of lads in south London who illustrated the plight of so many.

This random snapshot of just a few aspects of British life powerfully illustrates where our political priorities now should lie. In short, the greatest problem we need to address in Britain is that it is steadily becoming decivilised.

The social responsibility of which David Cameron has been talking addresses that challenge. It confronts the problems we face, and defines the ambitions we have for Britain, far more cogently than any other party or group has articulated. David is opening up a whole agenda for action and cultural revival which, despite its propaganda, New Labour have severely neglected.

We need to re-civilise the nation. And to do this, I believe we need concerted and vigorous action on three broad fronts. First, reversing educational degradation to improve social mobility. Second, the issue of authority. And third, politics itself – the crucial question of how to restore trust in the system of leadership and representation. Let me deal with each of these in turn.

Social Mobility

If there is one thing we should want in this country, it is that people should be upwardly mobile. We should deride anyone who participates in politics in order to fossilise advantage or keep people down. The whole purpose of political action should be the betterment of individuals and families. No such progress is possible without social mobility. A crucial measure of a country's quality is that all should be able to rise in life without facing

obstacles to their opportunity. And yet in Britain today, social mobility is in reverse.

In the last decade or so, the rich have steadily got richer. The working poor have been given more money through the tax system but still find it difficult to break free of state domination. Meanwhile the non-working poor have become poorer still. Unemployment is rising.

Labour make a lot of noise about social inclusion, but they have presided over the significant growth of an impoverished underclass. In terms of the ultimate in social mobility, a smaller proportion of Oxford & Cambridge students come from the state sector than was the case thirty years ago.

How do we reverse this trend? First and foremost, we need to restore educational standards.

Anyone who travels abroad and is familiar with other countries' schools cannot but despair at the loss of quality in our own system. More and more school leavers are ill-equipped for either life or work. Many have no basic grounding in literacy and numeracy. Many are brutal and aggressive. Many who are totally English are quite simply unable to speak English.

Behind this educational degradation lies a contempt for some people doing much better than others. Olympic sportsmen are part of an elite. If education is not about excellence, then it's not about anything. There can be no success without the risk of failure. Our culture of achievement in education has become corrupted.

It is a paradox, perhaps – and one the Left simply cannot get their collective head around – that a concentration on excellence, the aspiration to be part of an elite, actually helps those who will never rise to the very top. It is those who struggle, who suffer the most from the mediocrity and the low expectations of a system which sets them up to fail.

Social mobility is not just about the men and women who make it all the way from the bottom to the top. It's also about those who make it out of welfare and into work – the boy who grows up in a family where no-one has a job, yet gets the training to join a trade and stick to it, and raise a family of his own where work is the norm, not the exception.

In families where the lessons of home life are so dismal, the only answer is education. School has to supply the inspiration that the family does not.

So how do we go about restoring standards? The basis has to be that old-fashioned word, discipline.

Take the turnaround school in which a 15 year old was asked why the school after a period of deep problems had become a success. The unsettling answer he gave was "The teachers are no longer frightened of us." We need to empower teachers so that they can exert the control that too many parents are unwilling or unable to exert.

Once you have discipline, you can focus on the teaching itself. Again, we need to get the basics right. And that means having a fixed standard of achievement.

Talking about grade inflation - the suggestion that it is now easier to get an 'A' - has become taboo. Standards have been set so that all supposedly can rise to them. This is madness. Education should set rising standards which doesn't allow the gold standard of marking to fall.

Social responsibility means having the gumption to confront the profound challenge of educational decline in Britain and not to shirk the truth about it.

Authority

The second factor in re-civilising the nation is a more nebulous concept, but a vital one to any community. I mean the concept of authority.

I have joked in the past that these days the Conservative Party is much more about blogging than flogging. But the collapse of authority cannot remain undiscussed. If there is no fear of authority, there is no respect for it. It cannot make sense in a civilised society for children of school age to face the discipline they need in court rather than in class or in the home.

Our understanding of authority begins with our parents; how we react to authority is conditioned by our family experiences. Children without the authority and example of good parents struggle to make sense of the atmosphere of the classroom. Teachers complain about children they can not discipline and about parents who refuse to support them.

Even though most of the problems at any school are family-based, we are condemned to decline if adults and institutions remain unable to reclaim authority over younger people. Living out in real life the disturbing plot of William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' risks corroding Britain's well-being.

But if authority is learned at home and at school, the lesson should not stop there. Authority may be a nebulous concept, but it is a real thing – and it comes from real sources. It doesn't just float in the air, like a sort of gas. It derives from institutions.

Authority is not about mere bossiness or oppression. In its proper form it is the service the state can apply to society and its needs. A distinction needs to be made between the Government and the State.

People receive their moral messages through the institutions in their lives and communities. But the moral authority of the government is tied to its successes. There have been too many failed schemes introduced through the central directions of the state and so its moral authority has waned. The likes of Gordon Brown believe that action by the state can and will solve all these problems. It can't.

Many of his actions have been deliberately designed to create a growing client state with the intention of helping him politically rather than helping people socially. People have been kept in play, asking and hoping that the state will offer them another rescue scheme, but giving them instead flawed and inferior solutions.

Social responsibility means that the state on its own should not be seen as the solution; institutions other than the state have a far greater role to play.

That is why David Cameron talks so much about social enterprise and the third sector. We need to revive independent institutions with a power and a

purpose of their own. People need a more diverse and more human set of institutions than the cold and abstract membership offered by the state. That is why we are so determined to empower local government once again, and to stimulate the growth of voluntary bodies and other private associations which can take responsibility for the management of a neighbourhood.

Trust in Politics

Finally, the third element in the re-civilisation of Britain is the restoration of trust in politics.

Ten years ago I wrote a pamphlet entitled 'Beware Blair'. Given that it was published on the day John Major announced the date of the 1997 election it became the most ignored document in British political history. But in it I wrote of Tony Blair : "What are his dominant qualities? The first is a seemingly insatiable vanity, touching on vainglory. The second is a simplistic evangelism of the sort that believes that wanting a better world constitutes a serious policy. The third is a ruthlessness which is deployed only for power but never for principle. This is a potent cocktail for tragedy."

As that tragedy reaches its final act, its consequences may prove more dire for us than they do even for him. It is difficult to exaggerate the corrupting effect New Labour has had on the way we are governed.

The civil service has been browbeaten; the Foreign Office has been emasculated; critics have been ostracised, or seduced; Parliament has been neutered; and truth has taken second place to propaganda.

New Labour has corrupted honest language, fiddled statistics, bought

support, gerrymandered the constitution, and undermined almost every convention and decency in public life. One eminent professor has dubbed their style the 'politics of symbolism'.

To New Labour, politics is about news management and the practice of deceit; it is not about stating honestly what they intend to do. Statistics are twisted, announcements are faked, targets are massaged and language is distorted, all to generate the headlines which have become the main stuff of politics. Symbolic activity has become more important to the Government than real life activity. We have been living with a virtual government, and people have been taken in.

Thus a newspaper front page which converts an aspiration into a fact so it reads 'Blair to end child poverty' has become more important than the policy of ending child poverty.

As the opinion polls dictate, New Labour will shift its position. Where a tougher line on immigration used to be racist, now it is de rigeur. So perverse is their politics, so low their methods, that the more they criticise something, such as rationing in the NHS, the more you know they are going to do it. For New Labour, if you can fake sincerity, you've got it made, and Tony Blair has it to a tee. The greater his righteous indignation, the more you know you've got him bang to rights.

The most culpable practitioner, though, of New Labour's style of politics is Gordon Brown. Co-payment means charging. Investment means spending. Clinical excellence means rationing. Not one of his budgets has been an honest announcement of what is actually in it. Each and every one of them

has been a well-crafted package of deception.

Perhaps, on reflection, we are half way between 'Lord of the Flies' and 'Animal Farm'.

David Blunkett last month criticised those who promote cynicism and contempt for government, and despaired at the collapse of decencies and processes in the way our democracy is operating. Alan Milburn has admitted that social mobility is in decline and Charles Clarke has argued that we should introduce charges into health and education. How useful Labour's former Cabinet Ministers are becoming as a source of frank comment about what they have experienced and thought while sitting at the Cabinet table.

This is a disaster for any political system. We need an end to this 'popcorn politics'.

Nothing better illustrates New Labour's arrogance than their deliberate destruction of Parliament. Law is enacted to satisfy a gesture, not for justice. Debate is dead, scrutiny is almost non-existent, its powers have been weakened. So much so that, with hardly a squeak, the Chancellor can impose a retrospective tax on airlines with no reference to MPs. If he can do that, what is Parliament for?

So it is, in this decadent climate of politics, that mapping out broad principles is more difficult than ever before. Deference is dead, voters are consumers more than they are dutiful participants in the democratic process, and the appetite for ideas is hardly voracious.

Yet we must continue to apply our principles to these new challenges we face. We are doing that today, for example with Ken Clarke and his Democracy Task Force. Our democracy is an absolutely central part of our national identity, and increasing accountability, improving institutions and opening up decision making to greater transparency help to rebuild trust in politics more generally.

Permitting local communities to follow their own priorities is also critical to re-engaging people. We are championing that through the Sustainable Communities Bill which seeks to transfer powers from central government to local communities. This is forward looking and optimistic Conservatism.

Conclusion

Come the summer, Tony Blair will go and Gordon Brown will walk into No10. He will command a few months of feverish activity, and we would be wise not to underestimate him. For a while, at least, he will ride high and dominate events. Everything points to the country finding him deeply unappealing, but we cannot rely on it. He will prove frenetic, and will play clever games. He will try to trump us and wrong foot us. He will try to pull the rug from beneath us by reducing or abolishing a tax; he will turn government departments on their head; and he will use every propaganda trick in the book.

In predicting this, we should act now, and we should understand that we can afford to be bolder than we have dared be for years. There is a new mood which will not just permit us to have the courage of our convictions - it is asking us to. We must use our new-found confidence. I am more optimistic about our fortunes and our prospects than I have been for fifteen

years. We can afford to be braver, and if we are to see the social responsibility we are striving for, we must make sure that as politicians we show that courage now.