



THE 2009 KEITH JOSEPH MEMORIAL LECTURE

“THE PROBLEM OF INTEGRITY IN MODERN POLITICS”

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The true worth of a poet can never be known till subsequent generations have delivered their verdict. So it is with politicians. Heady contemporary reputations can vanish. The perspective of time can magnify the significance of apparently secondary figures. It can convert failure into heroic struggle, and all too often change what looked like success in contemporary eyes into a story of cowardice and squandered opportunities. The real test of a statesman is whether his ideas remain as alive after their death as they were during their lifetime.

Sir Keith Joseph passes that test. It is now 14 years since Sir Keith died, and no less than 13 years since Baroness Thatcher delivered the first of these CPS lectures in his memory. There is no greater tribute to the historical and moral legacy bequeathed to us by Sir Keith than the fact that his enormous political achievement has never been so relevant.

The reason for this, however, is disturbing. We are living through a period of economic collapse, social degradation, and desperate political uncertainty. One epoch – the era inaugurated in 1979 by the Conservative administration led by Baroness Thatcher – has come to an end. However, the future is menacing and opaque. No new settlement has emerged.

Most political leaders are asked to do little more than administrate conventional wisdom and to express the spirit of the age. At times of crisis, such as the one through which we are now living, they need themselves to create the conventional wisdom and themselves to define the spirit of the age. This is a far more arduous, rigorous and perilous undertaking. It calls for wisdom, raw nerve and depths of moral courage which remain untapped during ordinary times.

It was exactly these superlative qualities that made Sir Keith Joseph such a very great man. Thirty five years ago he was the first politician to provide a coherent response to the collapse of the post-war economic settlement. Our ruling elite continued to analyse the financial and social catastrophe of the mid-1970s in traditional terms. But Sir Keith – in an act of quite astonishing courage for a front



rank politician – departed from the orthodox. This meant that he was misrepresented, he was insulted, and in career terms he may have paid a heavy price. In those lonely speeches made in those now far-off times, Sir Keith Joseph invented a revolutionary new political economy. In doing so he changed British history and saved us from stagnation and disaster.

Today, as in the 1970s, our economic system has collapsed and once again our Political Class is trapped by defunct paradigms. Once again we urgently need a fresh analysis. So far many high reputations have been destroyed. But no powerful and original voice has emerged to guide us out of the crisis. In tonight's lecture, I will try and show what lessons we can learn from the heroic example of Sir Keith Joseph.

I will start by isolating the personal qualities which Sir Keith brought to British politics. I need to do this because, without them, Sir Keith would never have been able to discern the truth about human affairs in the way that he did in the 1970s.

I will then ask a very troubling question. Does nobody now possess the qualities which Sir Keith brought to British public life? Or do they still lurk there somewhere – and is it something about the structure of our contemporary politics which prevents a figure of Sir Keith's remarkable integrity making a mark on the public stage?

And finally I am going to set out the nature of the economic and moral conundrum which confronts Britain today, and argue that Sir Keith's sharp and clear-sighted prescriptions of 30 years ago are still utterly relevant, timely and cannot be ignored.

But first, Keith Joseph the man. I have been a reporter at Westminster over almost twenty years. During that time I have realised that British politics is governed by two almost infallible rules. The first is this: *the nastier a politician appears to be, the nicer he or she really is*. This rule works equally well in reverse.

Indeed it was spelt out quite explicitly by Tony Blair in conversation with the Foreign Secretary David Miliband just as he was about to enter parliament for the first time eight years ago.

This is what Blair told Miliband: 'go around smiling at everyone and get other people to shoot them.' This appalling anecdote appears in Chris Mullin's diaries, published this week: the book contains a wealth of further material on Political



Class behaviour. And while I am on the subject of Blair anecdotes, I cannot resist passing on the response by Lord Butler, Cabinet Secretary for three prime ministers when asked how they reacted when he disagreed with them.

Robin Butler says that Margaret Thatcher would hit the roof. John Major would say nothing, just look very hurt. Tony Blair would pause for dramatic effect and then say: 'I so agree with you.'

But there is also a sound structural reason why agreeing with everyone you deal with is very dangerous. You get forced into a whole series of contradictory positions, and therefore are forced towards deception and betrayal.

Sir Keith, by contrast, was agonisingly honest in his personal dealing. This straightforwardness did make him seem unbending and austere, and accounts in part for why a large number of people who did not know Sir Keith hated him so much that they would seek to physically attack him. Yet this refusal to hide behind artifice and deceit was utterly consistent. A key test for any member of the Political Class is how they handle day to day transactions with non-combatants. There is huge testimony about Sir Keith's endless courtesy. He never spoke to *anyone* as if they were a non-person. He never insisted on his own status. He was often drawn into elaborate conversations with people of no public consequence. He completely grasped the distinction between his own private role and the grand offices of state that he occupied. Oliver Letwin, who was Special Adviser to Sir Keith Joseph when he was Secretary of State for Education, recalls how 'he had the habit of explaining his own actions by saying NOT 'I must do such and such' but rather 'the holder of my office must do such and such.' – as if to deny that he was himself, by anything but chance, the holder of his own office.'

This indifference to the trappings of power meant that Sir Keith never lost touch with voters or – like so many ministers – locked in a cocoon. It meant that he was free from the jealousy and careerism that scars so many political lives. He could never have abused his office for private gain – as so many cabinet ministers, and it is very important to acknowledge, Tory MPs do today. Sir Keith would never have briefed against a colleague. To quote Oliver Letwin again, 'Keith's politics may have been on occasion eccentric, but they were never sullied by the slightest obeisance to the expedient or the slightest demagogic appeal or the slightest concern with his own advancement.'



Above all this indifference to his own interests liberated Sir Keith. Instead of serving himself, he could serve his country – and above all he was a servant of the truth, and therefore possessed the mettle to serve up the truth to the British people at a moment of national crisis.

This brings me onto my second rule. *Never pay much attention to what a politician says: watch what he or she does.* If a front bench spokesman says on the Today Programme – and they do, about half a dozen times a week that their position on such and such is very clear, what they really mean is that it is unclear. So-called ‘radical’ reforms are a certain sign of timidity. New Labour once announced an ‘ethical’ foreign policy. It now emerges that this was the prelude to the systematic smashing of the Geneva Convention, and the reintroduction of the barbaric practice of torture as a basic tool of our foreign and security policy. Several years ago Gordon Brown, when still Chancellor of the Exchequer, placed the slogan ‘a budget for the family’ on top of the copious literature accompanying his annual financial statement. This was the budget that abolished the married couples allowance. Tony Blair even announced that his government would eradicate sleaze. There are literally thousands of such examples, and from all political parties.

Yet Sir Keith Joseph was an exception to this rule. You could never distinguish what he said from what he did. Indeed he possessed, as everybody in this room knows, an agonised personal integrity. The question is this: has something gone so horribly wrong with the parameters of modern public discourse that honesty and mainstream political activity are no longer compatible?

Here is Sir Patrick Neill’s description of how, as Warden of All Souls, he travelled to London to attend a meeting summoned by Sir Keith to discuss the future of universities.

Somebody round the table raised a novel point. Keith treated the point with deep respect. A silence followed. He buried his head in his hands. I cannot tell for how long he was quiet. Such silences seem to trespass on eternity. Then he raised his head and gave expression to a fully considered and entirely convincing response.

Had Sir Keith tried this creative, civilised and thoughtful method of discourse on Newsnight or the Today Programme he would have been represented as deranged and his career destroyed. Instead of responding in an intelligent and



candid way modern politicians must at once emerge with a fluent response. That means a trite and dishonest response.

Or consider Sir Keith's speeches. I have been reading these carefully over the last few weeks in preparation for this lecture. They are so – readable. 21st century political discourse essentially has two modes. One is the staccato construction – full of short, verbless sentences – used by modern political leaders for addressing a mass or televised audience. The other is the obscure technocratic gobbledegook reserved for experts, at which the prime minister (among others) excels.

Sir Keith's lectures of the mid 1970s – they cry out to be republished and I would urge the CPS to do so as a matter of urgency – remind us that there is another political language available out there. It's the kind of discourse that Radio 4 at its best still does so well. It does not patronise, shares certain cultural assumptions between speaker and audience, and uses the ordinary rhetorical techniques of serious general conversation. Half a century ago most of British political debate was conducted through this kind of language, and I would suggest that a rich electoral reward awaits the first mainstream politician who returns to it.

But it is not just the style of these speeches that demands examination. Of even greater interest is Sir Keith's intellectual method. This was remorselessly empirical, as one would expect from a scholar of jurisprudence at Oxford. Sir Keith would set out to discover the facts, establish a profound grasp of the principles, test his own beliefs to destruction, and only then reach a conclusion.

It was because he adopted this austere, painful and rigorous methodology that he was able to look so very deeply into the nature of things. Remember, Sir Keith was only interested in the truth, over and above paltry party advantage. When he was in the Shadow Cabinet in the late 1970s, unemployment kept surging up. A conventional opposition spokesman would have made much of this. However, Sir Keith had studied the facts and concluded that the employment figures of the day greatly magnified the problem of joblessness because they included several hundred thousand members of a transient working population who were claiming benefit because they were between jobs. So, to the mortification of colleagues, Sir Keith always played down the official figures. This is, of course, the *exact opposite* of the technique used by contemporary ministers, who, as has become depressingly well-documented, automatically distort or invent statistics that will help them make their case.



There is also reason to doubt whether, supposing Sir Keith were alive today, he would even be able to obtain the facts he needed. Several months ago, in a pamphlet for the CPS, the Tory MP Brooks Newmark set out to discover the true scale of the national debt, as opposed to the fabricated number used in the prime minister's public utterances and in Treasury press releases. He did the best he could but, as Newmark acknowledges, the task was beyond him. The figures covering the private finance initiative, public sector pension liabilities, and other numbers essential for a realistic understanding of our contemporary financial predicament, simply do not exist. I would like to remark here that this state of affairs is changing for the better, and I would like to pay tribute to the independence of mind shown by Sir Michael Scholar since his arrival as chairman of the UK Statistics Authority. Sir Michael appears to have consistently resisted government pressure to collaborate in the distortion or suppression of statistics, and this is a new and remarkable development.

And at least there are grounds for believing that the handful of Treasury statistics which Brooks Newmark was able to access were reliable. This is not the case in other government departments, where Sir Keith Joseph's careful method – based on the proposition that there is a known body of facts around which an informed public debate can take place – has simply become impossible. Schools standards are an example of this. Here we have entered a sophisticated zone of intellectual enquiry where our feet have left the ground and the ability to make any kind of rational argument has therefore been lost. The basis and nature of the data has been changed so often and in so many different ways that it is no longer possible to have any confidence in what is being measured. Those who try to cope with departmental accounts tell me that these are another very striking example. When Sir Keith was in opposition, these annual documents were reasonably clear, informative and easy to understand. Today they are opaque, poorly written and scripted for the purposes of concealment. White Papers are another case in point, and I would commend the analysis that Sir Christopher Foster has done in this field, drawing attention to sloppy drafting and inadequate marshalling of evidence.

The great *Guardian* editor CP Scott famously noted: 'Comment is free, but facts are sacred' The great thing that has changed in British public life since CP Scott shut up shop is that facts are no longer sacred. This calls into question the very possibility of democracy, which depends on uncontested facts around which political opponents can then enter a well-informed public debate.



I once met an accountant who was doing business with certain companies that were connected with the mafia. He told me that these companies kept three sets of books. One was for public consumption, and was a total fabrication. A second was for the benefit of the taxman and, though some of its claims were slightly more easy to verify, it was nevertheless largely false. The third was the real set of accounts, and although my auditor friend had made some informed guesses about what they might contain, he had never managed to obtain access to these.

Britain is not a public company, and nor is it run by the mafia. Nevertheless the same sort of general distinction can be made between a false public ledger and the real one, between the remorselessly upbeat official world where educational standards are rising, knife crime is falling, public finances are under control, and British agents are never complicit in torture – and the real one.

And the emergence of this fraudulent official ledger means that something really interesting has taken place in Britain. We have abandoned the idea that there is an independent reality which is out there and subject to independent verification – and adopted instead a different kind of political epistemology. The purpose of public argument has moved right away from truths that can be proven to narratives that can be constructed. This is formally recognised by the ruling elite. Peter Mandelson, one of the inventors of the new politics, speaks of the need to ‘create the truth’. Apologists for the new ruling elite celebrate this proposition. Here is the Cambridge University lecturer in political philosophy David Runciman in his recent and very well-received book on political hypocrisy: ‘it is never a question of truth versus lies; it is, at best, a choice between different kinds of truth against different kinds of lies.’

So we have entered a postmodern public discourse populated by rival truth claims. I will try and sketch out the effects of this discourse on British government. The core insight is that appearance and reality have become identical. The surface counts for everything. Government therefore ceases to be about getting things done – it’s about being seen to get things done.

To give just one example: quite a large part of the civil service is no longer dedicated to administrative tasks. All departments now contain a group of dedicated individuals whose role – though it is never described in exactly this way – is actually the manipulation of outcomes to ensure that government targets are met. Ten years ago, before the fraudulent energy group Enron went bust, investors would be taken to visit the company’s trading floor in Houston,



Texas. They would see a large room full of apparently busy people. Actually they were generating no wealth at all – it was a fictional show. Appearance had taken over from reality. That is what has happened to quite large parts of our civil service.

This has led to a startling state of affairs. Britain has never enjoyed such an apparently active central government as over the last ten years. There have never been so many initiatives, press releases, New Deals, action plans. The key thing to understand is that all of this activity carries on almost entirely independently of life as it is lived by ordinary people. Despite official statistics produced by state employees to prove that they work, this blizzard of activity is actually part of a parallel universe. Douglas Carswell and Daniel Hannan have noted this phenomenon of virtual government in their new book and they summon up Tony Blair's toe-curling memo calling for 'eye-catching initiatives' as evidence. 'The memo contained one sentence which bears particular contemplation,' the authors note: 'We also need a far tougher rebuttal or, alternatively, action'. As Carswell and Hannan observe: 'Blair had grasped that, in the contemporary political climate, rebuttal *is* action.'

And this phenomenon is not merely confined to initiatives, press releases, government announcements and similar epiphenomena. It has also captured the legislative process. *The Times* columnist Matthew Parris was I think the first observer to note the emergence of "declaratory" legislation. 'New laws and proposed new laws,' Parris accurately noted in a *Times* article early last year, 'are being touted around as though they were a specialised branch of advertising, rather than rules to be interpreted, enforced and obeyed.' These laws, he noted, 'do not so much do the right thing, as say the right thing.' The Hunting Act was one example. Hunting has carried on unabated. Harriet Harman's equalities legislation, six weeks ago, was a manifestation of the same phenomenon, clearly designed to make a public statement, and not containing any practical measure that would have any effect on everyday life. A related version of the same basic phenomenon is the Act of Parliament which the government has no intention of putting into practice. Tony Blair promptly set about undermining the Crime and Security Act of 2001 which banned bribery overseas. The moment a case came up – the alleged BAE kickbacks to Saudi Arabia – the prime minister blocked the police investigation. Similarly with the Freedom of Information Act. Ever since its introduction ministers have worked flat out to thwart the information commissioner, by refusing to publish cabinet minutes ahead of the Iraq War, prevent the disclosure of MPs' expenses, and in all kinds of other ways.



The economic crisis has also produced a wealth of fresh examples of this fabricated political activity. Take the second week of January. On Monday Gordon Brown spoke of creating '100,000' new jobs. Upon examination, this figure fell apart. It emerged that the prime minister only meant 'up to' 100,000 jobs and then that he was also referring to the protection of existing jobs.

On Tuesday came the announcement of 35,000 apprenticeships. But that figure swiftly collapsed as it emerged on Newsnight that employment minister Tony McNulty 'didn't know' if they were new apprenticeships.

On Wednesday the prime minister was in Liverpool with the cheerful news that the government was unveiling £35 million extra to help business start-ups. But then came the depressing revelation that this wasn't new money after all.

Friday saw Gordon Brown go to Swindon to open a school. But that wasn't new either. The school had originally been opened eighteen months before.

A very nice example is the vast amount of government effort devoted to Fred Goodwin's pension – for tonight I've stripped him of his knighthood. Huge attention, from the prime minister, inside the cabinet, and among Treasury civil servants, has been devoted to this subject and it has dominated the news agenda for days. Yet it has no bearing on the profound economic crisis. What is going on here is a classic exercise in manipulation. The core concern of government is not, as one would hope and expect, to get Britain out of a mess. It is to divert attention onto Fred Goodwin – and to get itself out of a mess.

There are all kinds of other examples of this kind of fabricated political activity. And even though we are talking about illusory activity, there is an effect on the real world. Passing legislation that you never mean to enforce undermines respect for the rule of law, because it sends out the message that law-breaking has been sanctioned by the government. Announcing and reannouncing initiatives to solve pressing problems facing ordinary people that are never designed to take effect may gain an incumbent government a short term advantage. But in the medium to long term this constant building up of false expectations causes ordinary voters to lose their faith in politics, and to look elsewhere.

Today, for the first time in almost two decades, there is a realistic prospect that the Conservative party will win the next election. Much – rightly so – will be made



of the ideological contrast between Conservative and Labour, even though sometimes I find it rather hard to detect.

But I very much hope that there will also be a very strong philosophical distinction between the two parties. New Labour cannot be fully understood until it is grasped that it is Britain's first post-modern government. The movement which surged to power in 1997 was formed less by Marx and Methodism and more by Foucault, Derrida and Richard Rorty.

If the Conservatives are to govern effectively over the next decade they need to turn their back on a philosophical doctrine that first took root in French philosophical salons in the 1970s. Instead of constructing the truth, as New Labour has constantly sought to do, they can start to reclaim the truth, and look back to their own roots in the British empirical tradition.

For an incoming Conservative government this means two things: one a matter of detail, and one an issue of deep principle. First of all, the Conservatives must dismantle the apparatus of postmodern government. Above all that means restoring the administrative function of the British civil service and downgrading its dominant presentational function.

But it also means looking truth in the face – and the success of David Cameron as prime minister will depend upon whether he has the courage and rigour to do this. I want to bring my speech to an end by quoting Margaret Thatcher on the occasion of the first Sir Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture. This is one of the things she said:

"In politics, integrity really lies in the conviction that it's only on the basis of truth that power should be won – or indeed can be worth winning."

I think what Margaret Thatcher was saying here is that it does not pay to secure power through clever positioning or strategic alliances. That was the tragedy of New Labour – it was not honest about what it would do in office, which is why it failed as a government. David Cameron, I would guess, must be very straightforward with the British people. And that means putting out a much bleaker and tougher message of what he will do in power than he has tried to do so far.



Sir Keith Joseph's speeches in the 1970s spelt out in much greater detail how to do that, and much of his social and economic analysis in those distant times remains directly applicable today. But that is a subject for another lecture.