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SOCIETY

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## New questions for Socialism

Chris Smith

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## NEW QUESTIONS FOR SOCIALISM

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## INTRODUCTION: A CALL TO LIBERTARIAN LEFT

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**F**or twenty years after the mid-seventies we faced the full flood of radical right-wing ideas in Britain, and at times it seemed as if the left, and particularly the libertarian left, had lost its voice. The cluster of nostrums that we came to label as Thatcherism had taken hold: a belief that market principles could solve everything, a devotion to family-budget economics, an onslaught on the protective and supportive roles of government, a centralisation of political power, and the breathtaking allegation that there was no such thing as society.

On the democratic left of politics, we lost the intellectual ground. We could see clearly what was wrong with the offerings from the right. We railed against their increasingly malign impacts. But our opposing case had lost its intellectual edge. We fumbled with vague notions of planning and imperfectly conceived constructs of democracy and thought that we could spend our way to redemption. But we had lost the clear, coherent, ideological vision that had sustained Labour and the left through three postwar decades. We ceded the intellectual ground, and we paid dearly for it.

The hegemony of ideas from the right has, however, had its day. Partly because the practical application of those ideas by a succession of Conservative governments has run into the sand. Partly because the 1980s witnessed the failure of two grand ideologies, across the globe. The doctrine that had assumed that the state could and should do and control everything (which was never, of course, the stuff of democratic socialism) came to an overdue and judicious halt with the disappearance of statist communism from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Statism of this kind had produced neither happiness nor prosperity, and the entire world had realised it.

Almost simultaneously the rampant free-marketism of the Thatcher-Reagan



years in the West had discredited itself, with declining public services, under invested industry and ballooning government deficits. Both the old extreme ideologies had failed, and the search was on for something better, embracing public and private, individual and community. The collapse of the extremes has, in fact, led to a rediscovery of some of the truths for which democratic, libertarian socialists in Britain have always argued. These truths, crafted for a modern era, are the foundation on which the Labour Party's new appeal is based.

The journey of "New Labour" is in fact a remarkably traditional journey, based on a number of principles that fired the great socialist thinkers whose writings gave a distinctively British cast to the goals of equality and liberty, and to the tempering of both market forces and the operation of the state. For some time, with the right in intellectual ascendancy, we lost sight of these principles and their appropriate application to the world. The interwoven appeal of socialism and liberty was all but forgotten, but I believe we are now rediscovering its validity. We have of course to think rigorously about how we apply our principles to a modern world, a very changed world from that into which the Attlee government launched its great reform programme; but the principles remain the same. This pamphlet represents an attempt to define what they are all about.



## ENDURING PRINCIPLES

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If there is one idea that characterizes the democratic socialist, it is the realisation that as people we are not isolated islands, that we do share responsibilities one with another, that we are not out on our own, that there is such a thing as society. Understanding that the dignity of the individual and the well being of the surrounding community - in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, on the estate, or in the family - are wholly and utterly interdependent. The individual cannot find his or her true fulfilment except in the context of a supportive community. And similarly the community cannot function well and happily unless it respects the individuality of each member. The key thing here is that both sides of the equation have to be considered, and to focus simply on one will not produce the synthesis that leads to fulfilment. That is why neither rampant individualism nor dragooning statism works. You need each to temper the other, and you need to choose only the best of each.

That is why democratic socialists recognize that the free market cannot achieve everything. Some things and some human activities **have** to be organised in common, and cannot be left to the enterprise, however enlightened, of individuals. Let me take just two obvious examples. Virtually everyone would agree that we need safe levels of streetlighting in our streets, and that far and away the best way of achieving this objective is to have the streetlighting publicly controlled and coordinated. If each individual provided or sponsored their own lamp outside their own home, there would be some who couldn't afford to

do it, there would be others who wouldn't want to, and there would be some substantial patches with no lighting at all. The result would be crazy, with sharply divergent standards of provision that would diminish not just the lives of those living in a particular street, but of everyone else too. We all need to walk along a street at some stage, even though we have no conceivable connection with those who live along it. To ensure common provision, and to account for the inevitably shared use of the service, it is surely appropriate for the community as a whole to do the organising.

Precisely the same argument applies, though on a grander scale, with protection of the global environment. Environmental damage, and the polluting forces that lead to it, are no respecters of national or local boundaries. The sulphur dioxide emitted by power stations in one country can drift and combine with other pollutants to form acid rain in another. The radioactivity from Chernobyl has a profound effect on sheep farmers in Wales. The carbon dioxide concentrations we contribute to affect us all. We are in this together, and unless we recognize this very simple fact we will not come anywhere near resolving some potentially enormous environmental challenges we face. Even at a local level, the impact of a toxic dump, or the polluted quality of a river, is a responsibility for all of us. There may in some cases be an identifiable individual cause, and there must be the ability to call a person or company to account if they can be identified, but these are nonetheless shared problems. To claim that they can be tackled by anything other than a shared communal approach is simply daft.

A shared approach, recognizing the common purpose that is the basis of civil society, will never be acknowledged by the right in British politics. It is why they fought so long and hard against the creation of the National Health Service (and why the same impulses still affect the United States), although nowadays its sheer popularity and public acceptance has driven them to seek other ways to undermine it, whilst purporting to adopt its founding principle. **But doing and organising things together, whilst respecting the liberty of individuals, is part of the fundamental essence of our political creed.**

Indeed, I would go further: It is only by such a shared approach to many of the issues and problems of life that the true liberty of the individual can be secured. This was realised first by R. H. Tawney in his great book *Equality*. He recognised that there were two kinds of freedom, both equally important: the freedom to do particular things at particular times, and the freedom from constraints that might hold us back. The constraints he focused on were ignorance, poverty, disease and homelessness. Unless a citizen had freedom from these, then they were not truly free. Only once that framework of essential liberty was in place could individual decision-making about courses of action,



traditionally denoted as freedom, be embarked upon. Having a sense of freedom of individual action is of course important, but being in an economic and social position to make those choices in the first place is a *sine qua non*.

This is why, as socialists, we have had a traditional belief in the importance of equality as a goal of public policy. We have to hold fast to that goal. I do not mean by this an absolute equality of outcome. It would be neither feasible nor right to embrace such a position. Equality has never meant uniformity. But it means more, surely, than simply equality of opportunity - because that is where the Tawney differential comes into play. We all have an equality of opportunity to dine at the Ritz; but only some have the realistic possibility of doing so. For others, even more basic freedoms are denied. Ensuring equality of access to the fundamental Tawney freedoms is the essence of social justice. It is quite simply unjust that some have access, and others do not, because of circumstance. Society can and must set out to correct such injustices and imbalances.

Take, for example, the notion of access to a decent, weather-tight, warm, independent, and adequately sized home. It is part of the Tawney picture: freedom from homelessness, or from gross inadequacy of accommodation. But does "equality of opportunity" ensure such access? I suspect not. A young couple in an inner city area might want to set up a home of their own. They would be told they had the opportunity to take out a mortgage or go on a council or housing association waiting list. The opportunity might be there, but the reality still out of their grasp. For a couple with enough money, or in a low-priced area, the mortgage option might be real. If they were in an area with surplus council accommodation, the rented option might be real. But none of these options might be possible. That is where public policy needs to intervene. Making sure housing work is done, giving support to housing associations, realising capital receipts, and encouraging building societies to lend.

No-one would seriously argue that everybody should have an equally grand or luxurious house to live in. Where equality of this type has been tried, in Dresden or Moscow or elsewhere, it has resulted in a levelling down not up. But no-one should argue, either, that there is no need for the community to ensure freedom from homelessness. For those sleeping in doorways on the Strand, or living in damp or inadequate housing, equality must mean real access, not notional opportunity.

Equality in the essential liberties - the "freedoms from" - is surely what we should be aiming for : a way of organising the civic community that respects the equal worth of each individual. **That form of equality, combined with liberty of individual action, interwoven together as the goals of society, is a vital component of the democratic socialist project.**

It seems to me that these themes I have identified - the need for a common purpose, tackling things together rather than as isolated individuals, and the need to couple equality and liberty for the true dignity of the individual - are best combined in the concept of citizenship. The citizen is independent and interdependent, stands up for himself or herself, acts and thinks with liberty and self-assurance, and forms part of a collective of individuals, pooling some elements of liberty in order that all may flourish. The citizen has independent rights and interdependent responsibilities. The citizen recognizes that there are shared duties and contributions to be performed, but is also fiercely protective of those elements of his or her life that have an individual impact.

Democratic socialism in Britain has always been about this simple task : ensuring that we all can live and act as citizens in society. The interweaving of rights and responsibilities, common and individual action, equality and liberty, can be summed up in the pursuit of citizenship. Our task is to ensure that the dignity of citizenship can be available to all. Let us turn, now, to consider how - as we approach a new century - we can best put these principles into practice.



## ENDURING TASKS

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**F**ifty years ago Sir William Beveridge identified five Giants that needed to be tackled by the establishment of the Welfare State: want, ignorance, disease, squalor, and idleness. They resembled very much the constraints on essential liberty that concerned Tawney, and they remain as targets for public policy to address in the modern age too. We have made progress on some, more than on others. We have modern giants to add to the list too, such as insecurity and exclusion. They form a useful starting point for identifying the tasks that socialists, applying our principles to a modern world, must undertake.

One of the standing indictments against the Tories is that they have left our country more divided, more unequal in terms of income, and more ravaged by poverty, than it was when they took office. The gap between rich and poor in Britain has grown faster during the Tory years than in any other developed country except New Zealand. The income of the top decile of earners has grown by over 60%, whilst the income after housing costs of the bottom decile has fallen by 16%. No-one, surely, could be proud of such a record. Yet Tory Ministers go around telling us that poverty doesn't exist in Britain; it is something only the Third World has to worry about. The developing world does need to worry about it - and so do we, shouldering our international obligations - but there is also poverty here in Britain, needing to be tackled by enlightened governments.

The first task, therefore, I would set for modern socialists is to roll back the tide of poverty. I recently proposed in a public lecture that, in government, Labour would seek to establish a national measurement of poverty (none such exists at present), to define what precisely the components of poverty are, and to measure our progress, year by year, in tackling the problem. One of my colleagues subsequently took me on one side to warn me that I might be creat-

ing a rod for our own backs, a test against which a Labour Government could be measured. What happens, he asked, if we don't succeed in rolling back poverty? I had to say to him simply this: that if, after five years of a Labour Government, we have not succeeded in turning back the march of poverty, then we might as well pack up our bags as a political party and go home. Tackling poverty remains one of the essential tasks for modern democratic socialists. Our commitment to social justice and to fundamental liberty requires it.

The best way to eliminate poverty is to ensure that people have the chance to work. Beveridge saw this and linked his proposals for social insurance with a policy for employment. This is where the second task lies: ensuring that every citizen has the chance to find fulfilment in work, education, and creativity. The nature and quality of the work opportunities are important, alongside the simple fact of work; it is finding fulfilment, drawing the best out of people's talents in whatever way is appropriate, that is the principal aim. Work is partly about putting bread on the table; it is partly about helping to fuel the nation's economy as a whole; but it is also about engendering a sense of personal achievement.

We should view education, training, learning, work, and creative leisure, as part of a continuum for individuals. The present government has been shortsighted in running down our education and training provision. Future generations will look aghast at the way we have produced a society where an elite works harder than ever before, with too much work to do, whilst millions kick their heels with nothing to do, and a myriad of social and economic tasks go undone. This is the way our supposedly advanced society has developed, and it doesn't make any sense.

Work and fulfilment are linked intimately with the onslaught on poverty. They are also a key part of the third task for Democratic Socialists: acknowledging the citizen's right to life and health. Access to a universal, free health care service, allocated according to need rather than payment, is an obvious part of such an objective. The National Health Service, embodying these aims, remains the proudest creation of democratic socialism in Britain. It must be defended and rescued by democratic socialists. But we need to go further, and recognize that income, diet, housing, pollution, and lifestyle all have a profound impact on health. I still find it astonishing that in its 1992 Report *Health of the Nation* the Tory Government failed to mention poverty anywhere in the document. Those growing up with disadvantage and economic difficulty have a worse health prognosis than the rest. Those in the least privileged circumstances can expect, on average, to live eight years less than the most privileged. Diseases like TB have increased sharply amongst the poorest, but not amongst the richest. The health agenda has to include the right accessible delivery mechanisms



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for health care and link with the whole of governmental activity. Only in this way can we address the inequalities and absence of fulfilment in life itself.

These three tasks of public policy repeat in many ways the great Beveridge themes. They remind us how stuttering our progress has been over the fifty years since Beveridge, and that for nearly two decades we have been heading backwards. But there are other vital tasks which go beyond Beveridge. I would set out three in particular.

The first is to seek the empowerment of ordinary citizens. Too often today people feel they have no control over what happens in their lives, especially when decisions are taken by supposedly representative authorities. At a micro level this applies, for example, to the tenants on a housing estate with an inefficient public sector landlord, or to the patients of a general practitioner struck off his list for no apparent or stated reason, or to parents frustrated by a lack of responsiveness from their child's school.

At a macro level, it applies to the relationship between the citizen and an increasingly centralised and secretive state. The people of Scotland and Wales have too little say in how their own countries are governed. The people of London have no democratic coherent voice for the capital city as a whole. Local government has seen its powers cut and its finance constrained in year after year of governmental legislation. Too much of what our government does goes on behind closed doors. At best, we are free once every five years. At worst, we have a profoundly undemocratic system of government that regards the governed with contempt and requires radical reform. Empowering citizens to take a real part in decision-making, at all levels of authority, must be one of our modern tasks.

Secondly, we must protect diversity in society. In the past, many people in the Labour movement regarded their principal task as being to address the evils of class discrimination that disfigured British society. Class distinctions still scar our lives, and need to be addressed. But in recent years we have learned to tackle some of the other forms of discrimination that affect us. Many women find their progression through a business career brought to an abrupt halt. Many black and Asian citizens find themselves the subject of vicious and unprovoked attack. Lesbians and gay men find that the law itself discriminates against them. People with disabilities find that there is no legal protection against unwarranted and unjust treatment. As democratic socialists, we should practise a politics of inclusion: creating a society in which diversity is nurtured and cherished, where we value the difference in people, and seek to protect those for whom a difference marks them out as potential victims of prejudice or discrimination.



The third new task I would set has forced its way into our consciousness in recent years: the need to husband our natural resources and protect the environment in which we live and on which we depend. This, more than any other issue, has to be tackled by all of us, acting together. You cannot buy or privatise your own little piece of air. But you can join with others to start tackling the sources of pollution and make the necessary decisions in transport, energy, industrial and local government policy, to do so. As with health, the environment is an issue of social justice too. It is most often those who live in the poorest and most disadvantaged neighbourhoods who suffer most from environmental degradation. And there is growing evidence that taking the environment seriously does not necessarily mean the sort of hair-shirt-ism that has often been the caricature of environmentalists. Putting environmental considerations into industrial processes, and looking at value for resource depletion and waste generation alongside value for money, makes supreme financial as well as environmental sense.

Environmentalists have taught us, in recent years, to think in the long term. This is novel and difficult for most politicians. The trader on the floor of the Stock Exchange thinks primarily about what is going to happen in the next five minutes. The politician tends not to look much beyond the next election. Most business people think in relatively short term trends. Even the Japanese, most forward-thinking of all, plan for twenty year time horizons. The environmentalist thinks half a century ahead. This presents an acute dilemma for most political analysts and actors: if the short term dictates one solution, and the long term another, how do you ensure that long term validity dictates the policy choice? We are getting slightly better, as a world, at making these choices - the reduction in CFC usage by international agreement is a case in point, however imperfect and tardy - but it remains a dilemma for politicians acting in the here and now. The more open you can be about the dilemma, however, the easier the conundrum becomes to resolve. That lesson has come with the knowledge that the new environmental issues are central to our future.

## MODERN DILEMMAS

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The dilemma over the long-term and the short-term, the right and the expedient, is not the only difficulty that the modern world imposes on us as we seek to put modern socialism into practice. I have identified six tasks which would bring us nearer to a just society: tackling poverty, achieving fulfilment, ensuring life and health, empowering the citizen, protecting diversity, and responding to the future needs of our environment. All of them relate directly to the fundamental principles of acting together and of uniting equality with liberty. But they bring difficulties too. We must be aware of these as we struggle to achieve our objectives.

One difficulty stems from the need to create an inclusive politics, that acknowledges and supports diversity. It is a difficulty that particularly confronts the Labour Party. For many years the Labour Party in Britain was the party of the organised working class. That was its genesis, and the more academic desire to promote the general good ran wholly in tandem with the interests of organised labour. Labour still is the party of the organised working class, and rightly so. But there is now a much broader picture to be considered, and the promotion of the general good has tended to take precedence in recent years. That is understandable, but what happens when some start to argue that Labour has lost its commitment to the working class, and instead is chasing after the interests of minorities that have a specialist appeal? This is a false dichotomy; as is the dichotomy between the interests of the working and middle classes, which I shall return to shortly. Demanding equal treatment for unequal minorities is part and parcel of the commitment Labour has always had to the needs of working people. There is no distinction between the two. No-one is seeking preferential treatment for any group in society; and the message must

be stressed that the promotion of the general good - including the needs of minorities - marches hand in hand with the interests of the working class, organised or (as is, sadly, increasingly the case) unorganised.

A similar development has taken place in our conception of the relationship between capital and labour. The traditional analysis perceived a perpetual antagonism between the two pillars, between those who supplied the capital and took the profit, and those who supplied their labour and received inadequate reward. Although tensions persist, and sometimes erupt into difficulty, there is a broad recognition on all sides of industry now that perpetual antagonism is not a recipe for success. In addition, however, there is also a dawning realisation that enterprise is not based simply on two pillars, of capital and labour, but on four: the customers of the company are a third, and the wider surrounding community the fourth. The customers may be profoundly affected by decisions on price or quality, and the surrounding community by emissions, waste, and the leanness of the industrial process. We are seeing the gradual development of a more complex and interdependent relationship between all these parties than was ever dreamed of. Our political analysis - like our industrial analysis - has to understand that.

A further dilemma, for those of us who argue that the market cannot do everything, and that some things have to be decided in common, is that public bureaucracies often aren't good at running things. Sometimes they are: the Post Office, and the National Health Service in pre-internal market days, are two obvious examples. But walk in to many local authority housing departments, or more significantly talk to many local authority tenants, and the difficulties become immediately apparent. The solution however does not lie in substituting a private sector organisation or bureaucracy for a public one. It lies in reforming the way the public sector operates, to produce a better result. Foremost among the ways to bring this about is the introduction of greater democracy, and real decision-making power for those in receipt of the service. The enormous success of many tenant management initiatives, sometimes on the most difficult estates, is an argument for the intelligent dispersal of power downwards. Public sector ethics and purpose must be maintained whilst removing the bureaucracy that has wrapped itself round too much of our public service.

There are, however, two other difficult dilemmas for parties of the left around the world.

The first of these is the tax-and-spend dilemma. In the past it was often assumed by socialists that the way to solve particular social problems was to spend more. It was often less clear where money was going to come from; and it was frequently unclear what specifically it would be spent on; but more spending



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from the public purse was the answer to most problems. Along came the right, and immediately added up the extra spending, compounded it with a few noughts for good measure, divided it by the number of tax payers and told everyone that was going to be their extra bill. Both approaches were of course dishonest. But the sheer power of the tax issue cannot be wished away by anyone on the left of politics who went through the gruelling experience of the 1992 general election. Right-wing rhetoric and mythology have demonised the judicious balancing of spending and taxation for any party seeking election. It does not make for sensible political debate. It ends up with parties of the right telling palpable untruths in order to put their case across. But it is a fact of modern political life.

The reality is that the assumption from the left in the first place was flawed. The answer to most problems isn't automatically to spend more money. As in the case of how to run public bureaucracies, the answer may lie in a better ordering of existing affairs, a more efficient way of running things, a diversion of existing resources from one unnecessary task to another essential one. Tax-and-spend is an inappropriate label for the left to embrace, or for the right to lampoon. Getting better value for existing money is the first task. Ensuring that the fruits of economic growth are fairly used is the second. Thinking about the fair balance of taxation in a democracy of citizens is the third. And all the while we have to be conscious that the ordinary people of Britain do not want, and certainly do not deserve, a clobbering of extra taxes.

This thought leads to the left's second dilemma : who does a party of the left in the modern world seek to stand for? A year or two ago, someone recounted to me their understanding of this question, and it ran something like this. If, thirty years ago, you had asked what the difference between the main political parties in Britain was, the answer might well have been that the Tory Party stood for the rich, and the establishment, and the elite, and the privileged; and the Labour Party stood for the rest, and the rest included "me" the ordinary citizen. If you had asked the same question five years ago, the answer would probably have been that the Labour Party stood for the poor, and the dispossessed, and the minorities, and the disadvantaged; and the Tory Party stood for the rest, and the rest included "me" the ordinary citizen. This is a crude formulation, but if you want a thumbnail reason for Labour's defeat in four successive elections, I think it is buried somewhere in that perception.

What Labour's philosophy and practice had for decades brilliantly succeeded in doing was to unite the interests of the dispossessed with the interests and ambitions of the ordinary person. For twenty years Mrs Thatcher and the Tories managed, somehow, to break that link. They convinced people - wholly

fallaciously - that their interests somehow ran in tandem with those of the rich and the powerful. They generated what J. K. Galbraith characterised as the "culture of contentment", which divided off the top two-thirds of society from the bottom third, and generated a seemingly permanent electoral majority as a result. The most crucial task undertaken by New Labour - and undertaken, I believe, successfully - has been to drive a wedge into that Thatcherite construct, and instead to reunite the ambitions and perceptions of the average citizen with those of the more vulnerable in our society. Of course as a party, as adherents to important principles of the democratic left, we cannot possibly abandon our commitment to the disadvantaged and the dispossessed. But making that commitment march hand in hand with the aspirations of the great majority of ordinary people: that is the crucial task, and it is an achievable one.

## OUR NEW MESSAGE

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I believe strenuously that "New Labour" is about recapturing the best of what Labour has always stood for in the past. Understanding the need for commonality in tempering market excess, balancing equality and liberty, developing the concept of citizenship: these are fundamental values we have long held. Their application to the tasks of public policy, be it in relation to poverty or to the global environment, are both old and new. The need to unite our commitment to the vulnerable with our appeal to the average voter has always been there, whenever we have been serious about achieving power to change society for the better.

For a period, however, we allowed some of our message and some of our beliefs to become obscured by a devotion to a form of statism - under the fond illusion that state-centralised solutions were always best. State solutions can sometimes be best, especially when combined with empowerment of citizens to shape state decisions. But they are not always so, and there have been times in the recent past of our party when we failed to appreciate that simple truth. New Labour has been about revitalising our old values and beliefs, stripping them of some of the excessive statism that had become encrusted upon them, and applying them to the needs of a modern world. Not so much "new", I believe, as a rediscovery of the best of our past.

There is one other profound change we have made. For a period our socialism tended to be institution-centred; now it has become people-centred. We win no plaudits by being devoted to particular institutions or forms of organisation simply because they have always been there, or because they offered a solution at the time they were created. We need to ask a rigorous question, about how well or poorly they fulfil their purpose in the here and now. Are they serving people in the way in they were supposed to? If not, what changes are required to ensure they do? The test must be how effective any mechanism or



method of organisation is at achieving the benefits we want to secure for our people and our society. It is a real test, and a radical one, provided we stand fast to our principles. But it does not need to get stuck in a groove, and there have been times in the recent past when that has tended to happen.

To those, therefore, who sometimes wonder whether there is any real difference between the modern democratic socialism of New Labour and the occasional - increasingly rare - moderate observations of some of the Tory Party, I would say resoundingly and fiercely that there is. There is a clear and fundamental difference in our basic principles. There is a real difference in the tasks we set ourselves as a Party in putting those principles into action. There is even a difference in the dilemmas and difficulties we face in seeking to govern and to secure change. The Tories will never understand about the need for common purpose, or the true rights of citizenship, or the fundamental freedoms that we need to secure for all. They will never acknowledge the need to tackle poverty or to empower ordinary people - indeed, their entire record has sent our country in precisely the opposite direction. Of course we cannot change everything overnight. Of course we are going to have to make progress step by step. Some of the scars of the Tory years may never fully heal. But the direction will be different, the purpose will be different, and the progress can be real. That new direction, rediscovering old values, is long overdue.

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