

CORBYN'S LABOUR, CHARITIES AND VOLUNTEERING: WHAT SHOULD THE LEFT'S APPROACH LOOK LIKE?

Please not this is the text of the speech as it was prepared. It may differ from the version that was delivered.

It is a huge honour to be invited to give this lecture at the request of NCVO, though somewhat unsettling to talk about political questions in a time of unprecedented political tumult, when you don't know whether the government will still be in charge by the time you finish speaking.

The question here, as I understand it, is: is socialism and charity compatible? That the socialist left has a knee-jerk opposition to charity is a bit of a myth. Jeremy Corbyn has himself personally encouraged charitable giving in others, not least when the Conservative MP Ben Bradley libelled the Labour leader as a Czech spy, ending with the Mansfield politician not only having to tweet an apology, but being compelled to donate thousands of pounds to a local food bank and a homeless charity.

But let me try and sum up the socialist worldview and how that helps us understand a socialist approach to charity. The left believes that poverty, insecurity, unemployment and homelessness are social problems: that is, the inevitable defects of a broken social order. As a consequence, they need to be addressed with collective solutions.

This philosophy is on a collision course with the ideology that has been hegemonic for over a generation, that largely associated with Thatcherism, which saw poverty and unemployment not principally as social defects, but as individual failings. It was Margaret Thatcher's right-hand man, Norman Tebbit, who – as social unrest swept the country as mass unemployment consumed entire communities because of the Tory government's ideologically-driven economic policies – infamously said that when his father was unemployed in the 1980s, 'he didn't riot, he got on his bike and he looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it'. 'Get on your bike' became almost a national cliché, summing up a philosophy which condemned the unemployed for being masters of their own fate, because they were feckless and workshy.

Or as Margaret Thatcher put it: 'In Western countries we are left with the problems which aren't poverty. All right, there may be poverty because people don't know how to budget, don't know how to spend their earnings, but now you are left with the really hard fundamental character – personality defect.'

This is a convenient rationale for many reasons. One: it justifies rolling back the welfare state: after all, if poverty and unemployment aren't social problems, but to do with our own individual failings, then why have a welfare state? In this worldview social security merely exists to subsidise and encourage fecklessness. Two: it was a convenient justification and rationalisation of exploding levels of inequality. Those at the top deserve to

be there, because they are the hardest working, the brightest, the best. Those at the bottom, conversely, also deserve to be there, because they are lazy, work-shy and feckless.

Drawing on how the left understands social injustice, we understand the need for charity in the here and now to exist, but its existence is a failing of our current social order, one not run to meet the needs and aspirations of the majority, but one tailored to serve the interests of profit for a tiny elite. Charities often have to exist because the government itself has failed to offer adequate services to meet people's needs. In a nation with vast wealth such as our own, the failure to solve injustice is not due to a lack of resources, but to a lack of willpower. But until such a society is built, then charity is not only necessary, but a lifeline for the otherwise abandoned.

We also believe that the impulses behind charity are the same impulses we need to encourage and harness if we are to build a democratic socialist society. They are of compassion, of committing to improve society and to remove injustice, of having a collective approach to doing so, and of believing in helping others beyond ourselves, our immediate families and friends.

The food bank is perhaps emblematic of this. When I visited a Doncaster foodbank last year, I was struck by the compassion, the commitment, the dedication of volunteers giving up precious time to look after people struggling to eat. But that a single food bank should have to exist in a nation as wealthy as this is a damning indictment of British society in the 21st century.

Critically, a socialist in 2018 believes that the existing social order is so rotten, broken and bankrupt, that it can't be tinkered with, it has to be replaced altogether. And to understand that, it's worth laying out the sheer scale of injustice which doesn't just scar society, but which defines our society, and which is – I would submit – at the root of the political tumult and chaos which now threatens to overwhelm us.

Since the financial crash, the wealth of the richest 1,000 Britons has more than doubled. The biggest economic crisis that our country has faced since the Great Depression, and yet it has remained boomtime for those at the top. Yet workers have suffered the longest squeeze in their wages since the Napoleonic War, and the worst squeeze of any industrialised country other than Greece.

We are relentlessly told that work is the route out of poverty, and yet most people in poverty in Britain are in work, earning their poverty day after day. Last year, there was the biggest hike in the number of children living in poverty since 1988. And according to a study this year by the Royal Society of Arts, over a quarter of British workers don't feel 'like they earn enough to maintain a decent standard of living', nearly a fifth struggled to make ends meet, and over a third believed they were 'just about managing'. As living standards stagnate, millions are driven into debt: consumer debt has soared to over £200 billion. We have 1.9 million pensioners – people who dedicated their lives to building this country up – condemned to poverty, while the rate of older people who freeze to death in their homes each year is twice that of Finland.

This is one of the richest countries that have ever existed, and yet more than 8 million households struggle to provide enough food, while 4.7 million sometimes have to go without food. Hundreds of thousands of people are driven to food banks to satisfy the most basic need of all, other than breathing and drinking water – to eat.

Up to ten million British workers now toil in insecure jobs, whether that be those on zero-hour contracts, the temporary workers, reluctant part-time workers, those in bogus self-employment, those in the Uber and Deliveroo economy. They are often denied basic rights workers once took rightly for granted – like paid leave, holiday pay, or a minimum wage.

Then there's the ever-growing housing crisis. The mass sell-off of social housing has left hundreds of thousands of families languishing on waiting lists: denied should be a basic right in a prosperous nation, to have a decent, affordable, comfortable home. Four out of ten council houses sold off are now owned by buy to let landlords, charging rents twice as high as social rents. As homeownership collapses, particularly among younger Britons, a generation is driven into a private rented sector with rip-off rents and insecure contracts.

It was once seen as almost a birth right that the next generation would have a better lot in life than their parents. Not so for this one. They are saddled with debt for daring to dream to a university education from which all of society benefits. Their youth services have been decimated. Their living standards have slumped by over 10% in the last decade. They are often trapped on insecure work contracts: like young people I've met who get text messages at 6 o'clock in the morning telling them if they have any hours that day. It's a chilling return to a supposedly bygone era when dockworkers would march to the yard, hoping to get work, often to go home disappointed. No sick leave, forget about maternity or paternity leave: and no security, either. How do you settle down, with a family, not knowing how much you're getting paid next month or next week?

As the report by UN envoy Philip Alston put it, the ideologically-driven austerity policies of the last near-decade have inflicted 'great misery' on Britain's people, with 'punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous' austerity policies, with 14 million left in poverty, and 1.5 million utterly destitute. It all too often has fallen to charity to try and pick up the pieces of this shockingly broken order.

The question has to be asked, though: for whose welfare does this society serve? When the banks plunged Britain into crisis, a lost decade ago, they became the most lavished benefit claimants in Britain. But there were key differences with other benefit claimants: firstly, the huge sums of money were given, but secondly, the lack of any strings attached. They continued to pay more bonuses than every EU country put together, and continued not to lend properly to small businesses, helping to choke off recovery from a crisis they had themselves caused. Compare and contrast to benefit claimants, whose pathetic, derisory amounts of state support have become ever more conditional, with ever multiplying strings attached, or their support has simply been stripped away altogether.

Take 60-year-old army veteran Stephen Taylor from Manchester. He was unemployed, but desperately looking for work: it's tough to get work at that age, but he was doing everything he could. While he was looking for work, he volunteered for the Royal Legion, selling poppies for maimed and injured former comrades of his.

He sold those poppies at a supermarket where he applied for work, unsuccessfully. He had his benefited stopped sanctioned, for four weeks, on the basis that his volunteering for a charity showed he wasn't trying hard enough to look for work.

That is the society in which we live. One in which the banks can plunge Britain into calamity, get bailed out by the state, no questions asked, whilst the derisory state support for retired army veterans volunteering for the Royal Legion is stripped away. What else can we call that than socialism for the rich, and sink or swim capitalism for everybody else?

Now, it is clear that only a radical and far reaching social transformation of British society is a solution to these ills, one which radically redistributes wealth and power, one which challenges the vested interests who plunge this country into crisis after crisis, then walk away whistling whilst immigrants and the poor are scapegoated for all the injustices they have caused. But what of the meantime?

'Charity is a cold, grey loveless thing. If a rich man wants to help the poor, he should pay his taxes gladly, not dole out money at a whim.' This is a quote often ascribed to Clement Attlee, Labour's post-war prime minister, but was actually the invention of his biographer, Francis Beckett, who eloquently summed up the philosophy of Attleeism. Let me try and explain how I understand it. A few years ago, I interviewed Steve Varley, the charming northern chairman of Ernst & Young, one of the big four accountancy firms. He spoke to me, with much pride, of how his company was the headline sponsor of Pride in London, the country's biggest celebration of LGBT equality. He's a member of the Social Business Trust, which backs social entrepreneurs: one project he's particularly proud of is BikeWorks which takes ex-prison offenders and helps train them as bike mechanics. Another charity he supports helps women get back into work after having kids. 'They're really inspiring women, so I get a lot from that.'

The problem here is that Ernst & Young facilitate tax avoidance on a colossal scale. In another indictment of how power works in this country, they are seconded to the Treasury, help draw up the tax laws, then tell their clients how to avoid the laws they themselves have helped to design. These accountancy firms help deprive the exchequer of billions of pounds which would otherwise go to services, to housing, to combatting poverty and hardship. And yet they can make themselves look compassionate and caring by spending far, far less on charitable projects.

The point of the welfare state was to be radically different from what existed in the 19th century, when those in need did depend on charity. But not only was this charity far less resourced than the welfare state that would be born, but it was patchwork, it was a lottery system based on where you lived, and it was based on the whims of the rich and powerful.

The principle of progressive taxation is not just about those with the broadest shoulders should carry the greatest weights. It should also be based on the understanding that the wealthy depend the most on state largesse. They depend on vast public sector on research and development, whose innovations are often turned into profitable products. Take the iPhone: touchscreen technology, Siri, the chip, GPS, the internet – all

public-sector innovations. They depend on a justice system to defend their property, intellectual and physical. They depend on an education system to train up their workforce, and a health service to keep them healthy so they can work. They depend on billions being spent on in-work benefits, because they don't pay them enough for them to live on. They depend on state-maintained infrastructure, like road and rail. We could go on.

Yes, there are billionaire philanthropists who commit to sharing their wealth to charitable causes. But consider U2: Bono has established a reputation for campaigning for the world's neediest, but his band moved their tax affairs from Ireland to the Netherlands to avoid tax, amongst other tax schemes. Cash stashed in tax havens is worth 10% of the world's economy, and global losses from multinational corporations shifting their profits are about \$500bn a year. Philanthropy makes the rich look good, but far more money is hidden away from the tax authorities through tax avoidance.

There's also the fact that progressive taxation also ensures that how money is allocated and spent is democratically accountable, rather than dependent on the personal whims and interests of the philanthropist. In the US, for example, only 12% of philanthropic money goes to human services: it is much more likely to be spent on arts and higher education. Those deciding how it is spent are themselves often very unrepresentative of the wider population: in the US, 85% of charitable foundation members are white, while just 7% are African Americans.

But it is worth disentangling charity from philanthropy, and looking at the incredible and inspiring work that charities, and those who work for them, do – and how it is threatened by government policy. In 2010, David Cameron announced plans for a Big Society – remember that? - which the left, rightly as it turned out, saw as cover for rolling back the frontiers of the state. Rather than heralding a new era of charity, many charities dependent on funding from local and central government were decimated across the country. Research by the Lloyds Bank Foundation found that small and medium-sized charities were hit the worst by austerity: in the first half decade after the crash, charities with annual incomes of less than half a million lost 44% of their income from local government and 26% from central government, while those with incomes between half a million and a million lost 40% of local government funding and 32% from central government.

Consider the range of charities hit. By 2014, some of London's LGBTQ charities had suffered falls in public sector funding of a half. One LGBTQ mental health charity, Pace, was forced to close down in 2014; last year, Gay Advice Darlington and Durham – which helped thousands for two decades – closed down; while other LGBTQ charities are struggling to stay afloat in Isle of Wight, Bournemouth, and Eastleigh. We live in a society where LGBTQ people have far higher levels of mental distress than the rest of the population, where alcohol and drug abuse as a result is much higher, and where homophobic and transphobic abuse and bigotry remains rife. The devastation inflicted on these charities will inflict misery and pain on people who desperately need support.

Or take domestic violence refuges, which have suffered local authority cuts of nearly a quarter since 2010. These refuges do desperately important work in a country with pandemic male violence: with 1.4 million women suffering domestic violence a year, 400,000 women sexually assaulted, up to 95,000 women raped, and one to two women killed each by a former or current male partner. Women's safety, even lives, are being put at risk. There are countless other examples – but this underlines why Labour must commit to reversing the Tories' austerity measures, and ensure that these charities, which do critical work, are properly supported.

Charities' leadership, too, have been increasingly unable – and sadly sometimes unwilling – to speak out against government policies. The Tories' so-called Lobbying Act did not tackle the pernicious influence of corporate money and influence in British politics: in reality it was a gagging bill, which sought to wrap charities in red tape and stop them speaking out about issues the public need to hear. There were revelations in October of how charities working with universal credit claimants were silenced from criticising the then work and pensions secretary Esther McVey with the use of gagging clauses. Another example is the government's disastrous privatisation of probation: again, recent revelations have exposed the fact that at least 40 charities have been gagged. The left in power must repeal the gagging bill and give charities the freedom to speak out. Fiona Weir, the chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, was right last year to draw attention to research showing 63% of people think charities should highlight government policies they believe negatively impact people, with just 6% dissenting. 'We should stop squandering our unique position,' she correctly said. 'We are grounded in communities, connected to people's daily experience and we know all too well when government policies don't work.'

We have seen courageous activism in the third sector. One example I'd like to pay particular tribute is Stonewall under the inspiring leadership of Ruth Hunt. Stonewall was, I'm afraid to say, timid and weak for too much of its history. Hunt has changed that, providing strong leadership on trans rights – despite a vicious media campaign comparable to the anti-gay moral panics of the past – as well as everything from cuts to LGBTQ services and racism within LGBTQ communities. She offers a template for other charities to emulate.

The next Labour government must commit to reversing cuts to our public services – but also to reversing outsourcing, too. The way in which outsourcing seeks to be supposedly more 'efficient' is by cutting labour costs. As a report published by the National Coalition for Independent Action, that has left many senior managers in the charity sector being paid handsomely at the expense of workers. No other sector has such a low proportion of workers on permanent contracts and, as the report says, outsourcing has led to a race to the bottom. The danger, too, is that outsourcing to charities sugar-coats broader policies of privatisation and marketisation. The public sector must of course work with charities, and learn from their experiences – but public services must be delivered in-house by workers with decent salaries, pensions and terms and conditions. We must encourage and celebrate volunteering: an estimated 15 million or so volunteer in some capacity at least once a month. It is a civic mindedness and generosity we should applaud and nurture. Volunteering should never, though, become a substitute for properly paid work, a means of filling in gaps in public services caused by cuts. People's idealism and compassion should be encouraged, but not exploited. One of the

possible benefits of a universal basic income – which Labour have rightly pledged to examine – is it could remove the financial barriers that exist for many people when it comes to volunteering.

People working in charities have helped transform the lives of millions of people. They rank among the pillars of our society: from the food banks to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation with their ground-breaking research on poverty, from women's refuges to climate change. On a personal note, my father sadly died of cancer at the beginning of this year: the support, care, and indeed love he received from Marie Curie nurses is something I will cherish for the rest of my life.

We must, too, work for a society where charity is no longer necessary, either because the government provides properly funded and resourced services, or because the social ill or injustice has been eliminated. That does mean rejecting a social order which is bankrupt, broken and fundamentally unjust, and building a society run in the interests of the majority, not the selfish vested interests. The sense of compassion, commitment, and solidarity that drives people to work for charities and to volunteer: without it, we cannot build a new society. And even as our country collapses into its worst peacetime crisis in modern times, that new society is within our reach.