
Image, Values and Policy – From Here to the Next Election

A Policy Speech to The Bow Group, by Andrew Lansley CBE MP

October 2001

Andrew Lansley addressed The Bow Group in Blackpool last October about the challenges facing the Conservative Party following its defeat in the 2001 General Election.

For the last seventeen years, I have been intimately concerned with policy-making in the Conservative Party. From sitting alongside Norman Tebbit in his hospital bed in 1984, when he set the allocation for the BT share sale, through to William Hague preparing the Common Sense Revolution two years ago and our strategy for the General Election.

We did many things that worked; and I have made my share of mistakes. We won elections; and we've lost them. David Davis was right yesterday to say that we should stop apologising for the past. I agree; but we should not stop learning from the past. The future is a different country. They do things differently there; yet we need a map if we are to navigate confidently and preparing such a route-map means understanding the terrain.

I became a politician because I want the opportunity to put into practice the principles in which I believe and to improve the prospects and the opportunities for the people I represent. If we do not win power, we will not be able to achieve this. There is no substitute for success. Freedom to debate ideas is important in Opposition, but the cohesion, unity and discipline needed for victory are essential. That is why I will contribute my ideas, but when the need is for unity, I will be there.

In my address to you today, I want to sound a warning. Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. We are in danger of seeking to repeat the processes of recent years, without understanding that they will not suffice.

I have titled my address: Image, Values and Policy. I have done so because I want to offer something; I have learnt over the last four years that if, as an Opposition, we want to be heard on policy, then we will only do so if we have the Image, and the perceived values, which will re-connect us with the public and make them want to listen to us.

I stress this fact because over recent years, we have tested to destruction the proposition that we can develop and announce new policies without addressing conclusively the issues of Image and Values. We should have known better. I should have known better. The 1992 General Election Campaign was a success because not only did we reactivate the negative perceptions of Labour's image and values, but also because John Major's advent as Prime Minister gave the Conservative Party a new image and perceived values of commitment to 'Thatcherism with a human face'. That election campaign, like so many others, appeared to turn on the day to day arguments over policies, statistics, gaffes and speeches. It didn't. No more did the 2001 Election. Election campaigns can never do more than activate pre-existing perceptions of the Parties. Elections are not won or lost in four weeks. They are won and lost over four years. The 1997 Election was substantially lost in September 1992; from that, in the event, there was no way out.

After 1997, we set out to change and renew the Conservative Party. To double our membership, with many more young people, to involve the Party membership directly in policy, including policy ballots; to Listen to Britain, so we should never be out of touch again; to put public service reform, and health and education in particular, at the forefront of our policy renewal. The Common Sense Revolution in October 1999 had flagship policies on Education — Free Schools, and Parent's Guarantee — and Health — the Patient's guarantee. A year ago our Conference was introduced by a policy initiative on reform in our Cities, and a message of tolerance and inclusiveness.

These were right things to do then; it is right to be stressing the same policy objectives now, but we must not delude ourselves. Look at what happened. In 1999, after the Party Conference, we made progress in the public's mind for several weeks, then the Section 28 row, Shaun Woodward's defection and the Lord Archer debacle took over and by January 2000

we were worse off than ever. At last year's Party Conference our message of tolerance lasted three days until the row over zero tolerance of cannabis took over and internal division and intolerance was left as the enduring image of the Party.

These are painful recollections, but they are necessary. Unity and discipline would have limited these problems, but we have to understand that what they demonstrated was that in a matter of moments, revisiting the negative images of our Party can undo the work of months of policy formulation.

By the time of the Election campaign this year we had literally hundreds of policies. The electorate hardly knew any of them. Many of our policy ideas had already been taken by Labour. We called for budget delegation to schools — Labour followed. We called for abandonment of school exclusions targets — Labour followed. We called for Partner Schools with a range of school providers — Labour followed with their City Academies. We called for the Patient's Guarantee — Labour offered the pledged time for cancer referral. We called for stand-alone surgical units — Labour followed. We called for waiting time targets — Labour followed. We called for a cull of health authorities — Labour followed.

It was never true to say that the Conservative Party, before or under William Hague's Leadership, did not put health and education reform at the fore. We did — we do. But the public believed otherwise, denied us credibility on these issues and Labour could misrepresent us as committed to cuts and privatisation — and the electorate believed it.

We have now to be realistic. The greatest loyalty to our Party is to tell the truth. In Government, you are judged by what you do. In Opposition, you are judged for who you are.

From here to the next election, we have to tell the public who we are; and what we stand for. We have to renew the Image of the Conservative Party. We have to articulate consistently the values of Conservatism which reflect and reinforce that image. Then, as opportunities arise and with a limited number of carefully chosen policy initiatives, we have to announce policies which consistently reflect and reinforce those values.

Let me start with image. We are like a major brand which has lost the confidence of its customers. Without stretching the analogy too far, perhaps we are

like Marks and Spencer's: a declining number of loyal customers; some products seen as worth buying, but overall perceived as out-of date, out-of touch, with products which just won't sell. To be fair to them they have tried to merchandise but it is still early days for them as perhaps it is for us. More to the point, for them as for us, the act of buying into our brand is not seen as a positive, forward-looking, exciting statement of who you are.

New product lines are not the prime answer. Quality in product design is necessary, but not sufficient. Renewing the brand's appeal is the only way; bringing the customer through the door is the only way. A brand with values which people identify with. We now have to bring voters through the door of the Conservative Party. We have to make membership of the Conservative Party an exciting option. We have to make being a Conservative a source of interest and respect. We have to make voting conservative a positive statement of who we are, and what we want from our lives.

I have said some hard things about where we are. Over recent months, I have stressed our need to recognise the faults in ourselves, so we can promote real change. That recognition is the prerequisite to a process of change. If we say there is nothing wrong, then each time intolerance emerges in our Party, it will say we are out-of-touch. Recognising our need to change does not diminish us, it says we live in the real world. Recognising the reality of discrimination in British society and in the Conservative Party does not change us, it is the only way to be acknowledged to be living in the real world; and to achieve the tolerance and inclusiveness we need so much; and which is the mark of democracy. We are fighting for democracy; the treatment of minorities is a mark and test of civilisation and democracy.

The image issue should not be discussed in terms of personalities within the Conservative Party; the issue is the personality of the Conservative Party.

So, to start with, when the public see the Conservative Party, they should see people like themselves.

One senior colleague said to me that the need was for the Conservative Party to start liking itself again. Nonsense. We have never suffered from a lack of mutual liking. The issue is that those outside our Party need to like us again, and to respect us. Not just the former Conservatives coming back. Our objective must be to reach out by the next election to the

twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings who have never voted Conservative, but who - as they acquire interests and responsibilities - are thinking long-term about who represents them.

They will be like Chris and Debbie, in our former Party Political Broadcasts — young, aspirational, interested in issues (but not much in politics), concerned, socially liberal, caring about schools, transport and local health services, but also sceptical about bureaucracy, especially European bureaucracy.

It means younger members speaking for us in public and in the media. Bringing forward those in local government, younger people, women, those from ethnic minorities who are better represented there than in Parliament. Giving leadership to Councillors, who are tackling real-life issues. Rebuilding our City organisations.

It means a new system for the selection of Parliamentary candidates, so that the Conservative Parliamentary Party after the next election has a large number of women MPs and a substantial number drawn from the ethnic minority communities. It means adopting equal opportunities policies inside the Conservative Party and in each Association. It means building a Conservative Future and Network, to enable our younger networks of members to grow and recruit others. It means recreating the NHS Task Force and, with an Education equivalent, to create networks of committed professionals who speak with credibility from a Conservative viewpoint.

It means more than these important organisational changes. It means a break with the past. We don't have to denigrate past achievements in order to recognise that elections are fought about the future, not about the past.

I detect that, even if our Party resents any repudiation of the past, recognition from the top down is clear that we have to live in the future and leave behind the past, including all its internal divisions.

For Labour, the break with the past was symbolically achieved through the abandonment of Clause IV. A new Leader for Labour brought forward in Blair someone who was to all intents and purposes a blank sheet of paper on which they could write. Labour's project was clear: New Image, New Values, then some New Policies.

Of course, it is right to say that we shouldn't try to ape

Labour. Our task is more complex. Conservatism has brand values which we should not abandon. We have to retain the positive values of our brand while creating a new perception of the Party and its future.

One helpful way of thinking about who we are and our values is to approach it from the public's point of view.

What do they want from a political party?

In varying degrees, the public want three things: opportunity, security and hope in the future. We have to show how our values directly will offer these.

Conservatism is an organic political philosophy. It grows and changes. It has appeared in the recent past to be dominated by economic liberalism. That is not enough. We are also a Party of social progress; of recognition of our responsibilities to others. We are the Party of our constitution and for pragmatic, tested, incremental change. We are the Party of Freedom and the rule of law, seeing liberty as an ideal, but recognising the need to constrain abuses to liberty. None of these are principles we need to abandon. However, these are all part of the philosophy of Conservatism that needs to be translated into values with which people can identify.

So let us be clear about those simple values: of Freedom, of Security, of Community, of Opportunity and of Respect.

Freedom because it is at the heart of our distinctive appeal, and setting people free is a value with which young people can respond. Security because ours is not a 'devil take the hindmost' philosophy. Freedom is the incentive, security the protection from fear; community the mechanism, distinct from the state and bureaucracy, opportunity our means of identifying with aspirational young people and respect our means of showing that we are open to the cultures and lifestyle differences which are so much a part of our life in Britain today.

It is important to speak of our values consistently. Not to chop and change. The mission of the Conservative Party is not changed annually. Our task, in giving the people of Britain new opportunity, security and hope in the future is enduring and has to be restated, continually and consistently.

Restating our values implies structuring the continuing review of policy explicitly around these values:

For Freedom, it means a policy of tax simplification and of the transfer of funding and control out of the state bureaucracy and into the hands of individuals and their families. It means challenging the growth of state bureaucracy and of 'political correctness', which is not about respecting differences, but about patronising control of language and attitudes.

For Security, it means big increases in local policing and commitments to health service standards. Not just about choice but also about equity in health, so there is no 'two nations' in health care.

Community means the dismantling of central government control and direction and creating local agreements between local government, business organisations, community bodies, voluntary groups, charities, faith communities, committed to joint working and agreed local service design, including diverse local design of how traditional central government services - including benefit systems, health and education - are provided.

Opportunity means commitment to standards in education and to a focus on skills; it also means the opportunity for participation in further and higher education. It may mean, for example, recognising that if families or individuals meet their costs of maintenance in Higher Education, then the costs of tuition should be met by the taxpayer. Opportunity means providing real and substantial help to parents in looking after children, making real their choice in whether to look after young children at home or to go out to work.

Respect means not being colour-blind, but aware and active in designing services and policies in response to cultural differences, faith communities and lifestyle choices. It means stopping the gratuitous offence of treating gay couples as if theirs is a 'pretended' family relationship. It means reaching out to support development internationally and promoting an environmental agenda domestically and internationally.



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