Thank you for coming here tonight … It is a pleasure to be giving the Ralph Miliband Lecture … and thank you to the staff at the London School of Economics who have made this series possible …

Ralph Miliband had a great mind and was a brilliant writer … His seminal works, ‘Parliamentary Socialism’ and ‘The State in Capitalist Society’ are thought-provoking analyses … that have stood the test of time … and demonstrate the towering intellect for which he was renowned.

Ralph was someone who I knew well and respected greatly … We used to meet regularly at Tony Benn’s house in Holland Park to discuss politics … and had someone wonderful wide-ranging discussions … in what was called the Independent Left Corresponding Society … In many ways it was my university education.

For anyone who doesn’t know, Tony Benn had Keir Hardie’s chair in his house … I sat in it many times … It was extraordinarily uncomfortable – and I always thought that the discomfort was an incentive not to talk for too long at meetings … though perhaps the greater incentive should have been to arrive on time … when the comfortable chairs were still available.

Ralph once said that believing the Labour Party could promote socialism was – and I quote – “the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone” … As I’m Labour leader now, I suppose it falls to me to try to prove him wrong!

Introduction

To me, the starting point of socialism is not economic structures … it derives from a philosophy … that everyone should care for everyone else … That is not exclusive to socialism … it is the philosophy at the heart of all of the world’s major religions …

Socialism is about delivering the political programme to put that into practice … to create a society in which socially, and economically, we can ensure everyone is protected and cared for. The demand for a fundamental shift in ownership and power in society that Ralph Miliband argued for is about making that a reality.

But public’s faith in politics to change society … to improve people’s lives … has been fundamentally shaken … To rebuild the politics of hope … we have to restore that confidence.

So tonight I want to set out how we – as socialists – can rebuild the politics of hope …
When talking about the post-war era of politics Tony Benn said … “Democracy transferred power from the wallet to the ballot … what people couldn’t afford for themselves they could vote for instead”.

Tony understood that it was democracy that unlocked the potential for socialist politics to deliver … and his generation did … It was especially the radical Labour government of 1945 that delivered so many of the social achievements of which we Labour members are so proud: … the National Health Service … the welfare state … council housing … comprehensive education … institutions that were about the collective improvement of all.

This confidence that politics could change lives for the better … was so powerful it endured … largely untouched … through successive Labour and Conservative governments in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

In that era too, elected government – centrally or locally – was responsible for running things … the railways and buses … electricity and gas … and other utilities like water and telecommunications.

Government had an industrial strategy … it stepped in to support strategic industries or businesses if they needed support … whether that was nationalising Rolls Royce under the Conservative administration of Edward Heath … or the proactive investment in technology of the first Wilson government.

And as a trade union official in the AUEW … I advised Tony Benn in the second Wilson government … on the nationalisation of shipbuilding and aerospace.

Losing hope

That era ended with the individualistic and neoliberal creed of the Thatcher government … which systematically dismantled the institutions of collective power and administration:

• Trade unions were shackled by what became the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe
• Local government was constrained … and many of its functions forcibly outsourced
• And central government was removed from administering much at all … as Thatcher rolled back the public realm

This latter point was an abdication of political and economic responsibility … instead of previous governments seeing full employment as a fundamental responsibility … the Thatcher government saw unemployment as a cause for individual blame.

Norman Tebbit’s “get on your bike” … Peter Lilley’s “little list” … and John Major’s exhortation to “condemn a little more and understand a little less” … were all about diverting responsibility for social failure from government to individuals.

There was more to this than mere moralising too … the Conservative governments systematically dismantled public services … and the tax base that underpinned them.

Massive tax cuts, particularly for wealthy individuals and corporations … meant worse public provision for all.

And so the use of public provision … whether in housing, social security or transport … was deemed to be illustrative of a personal failure … as Thatcher said about anyone riding a bus over aged 25.
This wasn’t just a phenomenon in the UK but in the US driven by Reagan too … The maxim of Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes “… I like paying my taxes, with them I buy civilisation” … was replaced by “greed is good”.

The economics of Milton Friedman … what became the neo-con agenda … so ruthlessly and brutally tested in Chile … dominated in the US

People lost faith in the idea of government supporting their aspirations … I am not talking here about the aspiration of the delusional Del Boys … “This time next year Rodney, we’ll be millionaires” … the importation of the individualist American Dream …

… As an aside, the US comedian George Carlin once said … “They call it the American Dream, because you have to be asleep to believe it”.

But real aspiration is the aspiration for a secure home … a secure job … a productive job that satisfies and enriches life … the security of knowing your loved ones will be well cared for when they get old or fall sick … the security of knowing your children, nieces or nephews will attend a good school … the aspiration to know your family, friends and neighbours are getting on OK too … and that you have the time, opportunity and the facilities to enjoy some decent leisure time.

These are the things that make the good life … and democratic government has both the responsibility, and the capacity, to guarantee them.

A government that runs as little as it can get away with … has no industrial strategy … has privatised key parts of the economy necessary for a decent life … has abdicated its social and economic responsibilities.

People will not trust … and will not have faith … in a government that abdicates its responsibilities through privatisation, deregulation and neglect.

People know that to change things you need power … when government appears powerless to change things … people won’t have faith in it to change things … when government gives its powers away … people lose faith in it.

I rebelled against the New Labour government several times … several hundred times … because, among many good things that government did, I was convinced some of its actions and inactions … reinforced the Thatcher agenda and inheritance.

And the period New Labour undermined trust too – New Labour was often unfairly tarnished with the label ‘spin’ … it spun no more than its predecessor governments … or indeed its successors … But it did go to war on a falsehood … We don’t need the Chilcot report in a few weeks’ time to tell us all what we know … There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq … … there was no ability to attack within 45 minutes … and the deal had been done with President Bush well in advance.

Labour was also in office when the MPs expenses scandal broke … Politicians from all parties were implicated in unethical and sometimes outright illegal behaviour …

It provided clear evidence for the cynics … “politicians are all in it for themselves” … ‘they don’t care about us or about creating a better society, they care about themselves’ …

Huge damages was done to all politics …

As someone who has spent 33 years in Parliament, let me be clear … I don’t think it is true that all or even most politicians are in it for themselves … but the perception is real, and as elected
politicians we have a duty to challenge it … not just in our words, but in our actions too – and that is the fundamental failure.

But perhaps the biggest event, of recent times, to damage confidence in politics was the banking crash … a global banking crash … that happened under a Labour government… and that unleashed the most profound economic crisis since the 1930s.

The bailout was necessary to avoid a much bigger fallout … but the opportunity for systematic change was missed … politicians were too cautious … too unambitious … too lacking in vision to see the opportunity for fundamental reform … the sort of fundamental reform that great governments do. Banks were part-nationalised… but not used as motors of investment and essential economic change.

People felt that the banks were bailed out … while they were suffering … they felt excessive greed had been allowed to fester unrestrained … and people felt government was reactive, not proactive … and too passive.

This was reflected in the clear trend of decline in voter turnout at general elections … an increasing share of the population … those who grew up under Thatcher and Major particularly … who saw no hope in government … and didn’t bother to vote.

This was rational … they didn’t believe politicians either could or would change things in any substantial way … they didn’t see that politics could improve their life … so they didn’t vote.

And people lost faith in Labour … because we conceded too much ground to the Conservatives … let me give just two examples.

Firstly on the welfare state … which I am proud to defend … Labour created the social security system to defeat poverty, homelessness and destitution … and we much to defeat those injustices … But we were too timid … the opinion polls told us people didn’t like welfare so we didn’t make the arguments.

I say this as a general point … opinion polls should not make policy, they should inform strategy … They tell you where public opinion is at the present time … As a political party, as a Labour movement, we have to decide whether we to bolster that view or to challenge that view … If the government of Harold Wilson had received pollsters’ advice in the 1960s … then it would never have scrapped the death penalty … legalised homosexuality … legalised abortion …

As Harold Wilson himself said … “The Labour party is a moral crusade or it is nothing.”

So I am proud that two of the biggest reversals we have achieved under our leadership have been … stopping the tax credit cuts that would have been introduced in April … and have taken an average of £1,000 away from 3 million families … And then stopping the cuts to Personal Independence Payments for disabled people in the Budget this year … over £4 billion that the government disgracefully planned to take away from disabled people.

Secondly, on immigration … we must stand up to the divisive rhetoric of UKIP … and increasingly of the Tories … and be clear in saying that it is this government’s cuts that are putting a strain on public services …

This again is another risk if politics fail … if politicians fail to deliver a decent society and fail to create opportunities for all … then feelings of frustration and alienation can grow … and those feelings can easily be manipulated by the divisive politics of xenophobia and hate.

Speaking in a lecture series dedicated to Ralph Miliband … himself a refugee … this seems an important point to make …
Rebuilding hope

The politics of hope are not an inevitable reaction when politics fails … the politics of hope have to be rebuilt.

It has taken social movements to do that … movements like those in Latin America … like those sweeping across southern Europe … and that is shaking up the Democrat race in the US.

In the UK, we face a Conservative government bearing many of the hallmarks of the Thatcher governments … a determination to roll back the state … to cut taxes on the richest and on corporations … and to attack trade unions.

A government that is unprincipled and unashamed to play the politics of division … demonising people on welfare as ‘scroungers’ and ‘shirkers’ … referring to people fleeing persecution as “a swarm” or “a bunch of migrants”.

They sought to abdicate their responsibilities when it came to the crisis in the steel industry … and it was only concerted pressure from the trade unions, from Labour MP and from the steel communities … that forced the government to change position.

So while their intentions are ideologically identical to the Thatcher government to roll back the state … this is a government that can be rolled back … because they are out of sync with mainstream public opinion … their policies are unpopular and people can see that the Labour opposition is standing up to them.

Since I became Leader I’ve had several conversations with Ed Miliband … I value his counsel and advice … Ed understood that trust had been eroded, and knew that it had to be rebuilt … He also rejected the politics of division, setting out his vision of a ‘One Nation Britain’

At the last election Ed said … “I want to under promise and over-deliver” … speaking with a candour and modesty that many people believe few politicians possess.

But did that modesty … and the modesty of Labour’s manifesto at the last general election … did it actually reinforce the view that politics can’t change things for the better … or has only limited ability to do so? … I don’t know the answer, but I do know that our country requires major change.

For Labour to win a majority at the general election in 2020 … we need to win in seats that we have not won in for several decades … maybe we have to win some seats that we have never won before …

That is an ambitious task … and that is without the gerrymandering of the electorate through individual voter registration … and that is without the gerrymandering of parliamentary constituencies through the boundary review – based on the gerrymander electoral roll.

So Labour will be ambitious and bold at the 2020 election … we will make big promises … and if we’re elected we will deliver them … we will do so as part of a movement … a movement that empowers ordinary people … and that:

- … ensures everyone has housing security
- … delivers greater security at work
- … ensures no one suffers indignity in old age
- … ensures every young person has the opportunities to maximise their talents
- … and that ensures we tackle the grotesque inequality that holds people back
Ralph Miliband described socialism as … “the fundamental recasting of the social order” … Labour must aim for nothing less.

Our aim now is to build a movement … a social movement … from the disadvantaged … to the dispossessed … to the people who want a government that supports them to get on in life.

The reversals and u-turns we have achieved … whether over disability benefits or just recently on forced academisation … they have been achieved by people putting pressure on Parliament … disabled people getting organised or teachers, councillors and parents lobbying their MPs.

When he was a Labour MP, David Miliband talked about building a “Movement for Change” … That is what we have to deliver … going beyond the constraints of internal Labour Party politics … and looking outwards to our communities … to transform society and to mobilise society in that task.

The best local Labour parties are already doing that … the new members that doubled party membership last year want Labour to win elections … just as long-standing members do too … but they also want our party to be engaged in local communities and to take action now … to campaign, to inform, to protest too …

And there is a role for Labour parties and local members … to be our message carriers … on the streets and via social media … to overcome the ‘free press’ … which is freely owned by a small group of billionaire tax dodgers.

The Labour Party has doubled in membership … our youth membership has trebled … I think our ambition should double or treble too … in redefining what a political party does …

So rebuilding the politics of hope demands two things … firstly, that we inspire people with a vision that fully uses the power of government to transform society … to tackle the problems that people face … and to fundamentally redistribute wealth and power, so that we live in a more equal society in which the economy functions for the good of all.

Secondly, we have to rebuild trust – that is what ‘straight-talking, honest politics’ is about … We will take on difficult debates, whether that’s over welfare or immigration … we will confront powerful interests … and we will involve people – consulting widely on the proposals and the changes we plan to make.

Last summer, during the leadership campaign … my campaign asked members and supporters for their views on a range of policy issues … from industrial strategy in the North … and policy for rural areas … to issues facing women … and those confronting young people.

The response to those consultations was astounding … in just a few days, the Northern Futures consultation alone received 1,200 detailed submissions … if you give people the ability to contribute then they will.

Economy of the future

That goes for our economy too … which is why John McDonnell has been talking a lot about the contribution that co-operatives can make to our economy.

About empowering people to come together to take control of their own lives … This is the complete opposite of what the Conservatives have done – passing responsibility without the support and resources to enable people to take control.
John has rightly talked about establishing a “right to own” for workers… to stop jobs and companies being treated like possessions on a Monopoly board … and to give workers the first refusal on taking over a company when it changes hands.

We are learning from the decentralised social ownership models … in Germany’s energy system … which can play a role in both the transition to a carbon-free future … and in putting power into the hands of local communities.

And we need to decentralise our country … with a National Investment Bank to truly rebalance the economy … achieved through a network of regional banks attuned to the needs and opportunities of local economies.

It is something that Ralph Miliband talked about in his final book, Socialism for a Sceptical Age, when he talked about … “a partnership between a socialist government on the one hand and a variety of grass roots agencies on the other”.

The economy of the future will not be the economy of the past … we cannot and should not want to … turn the clock back to 1945 or to 1997 …

This government has utterly failed against every single one of its economic targets …

• They have failed to eradicate the deficit
• Failed to meet their target on the debt
• Failed to rebalance the economy
• Failed to address the productivity crisis

And the ‘march of the makers’ is … five years on … still nowhere to be seen … That’s the fabulous thing about George Osborne’s five year forecasts … they’re always five years away from happening.

We have said ‘Austerity is a political choice not an economic necessity’

This government has consistently made the case for austerity … George Osborne has staked his economic credibility on his austerity economics … and they are failing to deliver.

That is why the economic agenda being set out by John McDonnell is so vital to this project … He is setting about rebuilding the economics of hope

And like we are trying to do more widely … he is taking the message out around the country with his New Economics tour … engaging people in debate about how to build an economy that works for all … and all underpinned by an Economic Advisory Council comprised of some of the most respected names in the field.

We believe that economic justice and economic credibility must go hand-in-hand … and it must be ecologically sustainable too.

Conclusion

And our desire for economic and social justice cannot stop at our borders … Human rights know no borders … we share the world … we share humanity … climate change affects all of us … like pollution, it refuses to respect national borders.

Anyone of us in different circumstances could be refugees … like those fleeing across the Mediterranean … or across the English Channel like Ralph Miliband did 75 years ago.
Government can and must act to ensure that the many benefit from technological advance … not just the few … and government must ensure global corporations can be held to account.

We also have to put forward proposals that tackle intergenerational poverty … and ensure that the next generation is not worse off than the last.

So I’ll conclude my remarks by saying this:

I don’t underestimate the scale of the task in front of us … we won the Labour leadership with three aims:

• To change the Labour Party
• To change politics; and
• To change the government in 2020

If we are to rebuild the politics of hope … we need three things:

• A vision to inspire people that politics has the power to make a positive difference to their lives
• Trust – that people believe both that we can and that we will change things for the better
• And, finally … the involvement and engagement of people to make the first two possible.

There is no point being in politics if you are not ambitious … not for yourself … but to make your community … your country … and our world … a better and more just place.

If that sounds like the kind of project in which you want to be involved … then get involved … you are welcome … and let’s rebuild the politics of hope.

END