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The Ralph Miliband Lecture - www.lse.ac.uk/collections/miliband

‘The Politics of Climate Change’

There is no doubt that it remains a challenge to get a strong deal at Copenhagen, which covers emissions, finance for developing countries, support for new technology, action on forestry and a clear and short track to a legally binding treaty.

But we are seeing progress.

Nobody should be in any doubt that the December deadline is having a forcing effect: it is no coincidence that in the last week alone, Brazil, Russia, South Korea have all announced significant contributions to emissions reductions.

Earlier this week I was in Copenhagen for an advance discussion with many of the countries who will be there in December and it was clear that the mood was to get this done.

I am confident we can get a comprehensive agreement that is consistent with the science and the need to limit climate change to no more than two degrees of warming. That means a deal which will ensure that global emissions peak by 2020 at the latest. This would be a historic result because it would be the first time in the industrial history of the world that we have reversed the inexorable rise in emissions.

In the next few weeks, my singular focus will be on getting the most ambitious agreement we can.

But the next challenge, and this is what I want to discuss tonight, is that after Copenhagen the work of implementation of the agreement will begin.

And we need to implement what is agreed at Copenhagen, not just in one country but in every country: in democracies and dictatorships, in richer countries and poorer countries, in energy exporters and energy importers not just for a year or two, but over decades.

So today, I want to take this rare opportunity to look past Copenhagen, and talk about what it will take to get the permanent change we need.

My focus will be on the UK, not so much in terms of our transition plan and the specific policies we have already laid out and will continue to drive forward, but in terms of what might be called the grammar of politics.

The argument I want to make today is this:

The challenge of climate change is so great that we are all transition economies and I use the phrase advisedly:

The low carbon challenge is such that our system of economic production and the way we go about our daily lives will have to alter profoundly.

To secure that change, I think we need not just to change a set of policies but adapt our politics.

In particular, I want to argue that what you might call the politics of 'now' finds its limits in climate change.

The politics of now is about an offer to people to provide immediate improvements in their lives. It is the dominant part of the terms of trade of modern politics and I will argue an important part of progressive politics.

But I want also to acknowledge the harder truth which is that when it comes to the issue of climate change, the politics of now is not enough.

So we need to fashion something that goes beyond it, what you might call a politics of the common good, a phrase used recently by another Miliband lecturer, Michael Sandel.

What is a politics of the common good? To my mind, it is:

- A politics that goes beyond the satisfaction of immediate wishes to treat citizens as citizens, speaking honestly about the tough choices we face
- A politics that has at its heart the interests not only of the consumer today not even just the citizen during their own lifetime but looks to future generations and intergenerational justice
- A politics that does recognise that self-interest in a broad sense is a powerful, important and empowering motivator
- A politics that appeals to a sense of idealism about what is fair here and around the world

The challenge

If we are to tackle climate change in the years after Copenhagen, it is clear we will need to secure change of an unprecedented scale.

The change needs to be very big.

In the United Kingdom we have pledged in law to cut our emissions by eighty percent.

That means we need our electricity and transport systems and homes to be near zero carbon. So we need a dramatic increase in renewable energy – we are planning for a six fold increase by 2020.

We need to dramatically reduce the energy intensity of our homes, with better insulation and more efficient appliances an essential aspect of progress.

And if we are to electrify our transport and heating and allow for the intermittency of wind power, we need the total capacity for power generation to go up even as its carbon pollution goes down.

The changes need to happen quickly. And the change needs to be permanent.

The consensus for change cannot be like the Make Poverty History campaign that was very effective at securing agreement at Gleneagles, but less effective at building a coalition for the long term. This change needs to fundamentally rewrite the way our economy works in perpetuity.

So, it won't do to make the case for action on the basis of living through exceptional times. We need low carbon to become precisely unexceptional. Without that social acceptance, support for the policy won't endure in the way it needs to.

To make these changes requires leadership from government, but it also requires us to build and maintain consent. To take that consent for granted is a mistake and to assume we can sustain change without it would be wrong in my view too.

The politics of 'now' isn't enough

The question I want to ask is what kind of politics we need to make this happen?

At the heart of modern politics is a certain way of thinking; what you might call the politics of 'now'. The politics of now, at its best, is about meeting immediate needs and improving people's lives in ways which markets alone will not do.

Appeals to self-interest were at the core of many of the great progressive social movements of the twentieth century --- from pensions to the NHS---and will be at the core of many of those social movements in the 21st century.

Politics is about improving the lives of people and therefore there is nothing wrong with a politics that appeals to people's self-interest. I have seen it in my own constituency from tax credits to sure-start in the last decade.

But climate change poses a big challenge to the politics of now because the challenge is marked by distance.

First, temporal distance. While the politics of now looks for what are sometimes called 'quick wins', when it comes to climate change there is a significant time lag between when we act and when we see the consequences of those actions.

The carbon emitted at any point has effects for decades to come; hence we have seen global warming of 0.8 degrees so far but the scientists tell us that we are destined for 1.4 degrees warming on the basis of emissions already in the atmosphere.

The decisions we take at Copenhagen will not be felt in terms of their impact on the planet's warming for around 20-30 years.

This time lag creates another sort of temporal distance: between the generation that needs to act and the generation the feels the greatest benefit. It is for good reason that some young people in the climate change movement wear t-shirts saying "how old will you be in 2050?"

Secondly, there is geographical distance. The people who are most vulnerable to climate change, the people who will suffer first – indeed are already suffering today – are not in our neighbourhoods, our country, or even our continent.

This emphasises the sort of moral case and politics we saw in the government's advocacy of international debt relief, distinct from a direct politics of self-interest.

Thirdly, there is causal distance. The nature of the threat seems very large and is the sort of thing you see in Hollywood movies. And it is hard to link the specific actions that we take as individuals with this monumental problem and to believe we can really have an effect.

And if the impacts of the problem are distant, the costs of tackling it are immediate.

While, as Lord Stern showed, in the long run it is less costly to tackle climate change than to fail to do so, there are significant upfront costs.

Even after we do all we can to make it easy to lead a low carbon lifestyle, there remain some hard choices that cannot be tackled by a politics of 'now'.

There are hard choices about our environment, for example over the issue of wind farms.

There are hard choices about how we manage the transition to low carbon, because while some new industries will emerge, some old industries will lose out.

Getting past the politics of now

So we need to move beyond the politics of 'now' to a politics of the common good, a politics that treats people not simply as consumers but as citizens.

What does that require? First, it needs a willingness to take the argument to people about the tough choices involved in tackling climate change.

This is the starting point: a willingness to engage with people on, for example, the fact that to deal with the problem of climate change, energy bills are likely to rise.

Or that if we are to move away from high carbon energy to low carbon energy, we need new energy infrastructure.

But we can only convince people of these hard choices if they have a sense that there is fairness---of outcome and of procedure.

The test of whether we can persuade people about the low carbon transition despite higher energy bills is whether they think there is fairness in the way energy is provided and in who pays.

That is why the state has to play a strategic role in guiding change. Without strong state action it would be too easy for the costs of tackling climate change to fall disproportionately on the poorest.

That is why we are acting to provide additional support for less well off households and toughening regulation.

It is also why we need to keep the costs of the transition as low possible.

As for fairness of procedure, it is at least in part about whether people feel they have a chance to have their say and their views properly taken account of.

For example, when we have to build 10,000 wind turbines over the next decade, and a number of nuclear power stations, a test of the new Infrastructure Planning Commission will be whether when they consult people, they are seen to do so in a fair-minded way.

Intergenerational

The second aspect of a politics of the common good is a focus on intergenerational justice.

For most policy areas it is sufficient to have a conception of justice that is intra-generational: it focuses only on the people alive today.

When it comes to healthcare or education or policing, we need to keep an eye on the sort of world we are setting ourselves on a path towards in several decades time, but it rarely needs to be a deciding factor.

For climate change, the intergenerational character of the problem is perhaps its defining feature.

If we only live for today we will let climate change get out of control.

We have to recognise that the society of today is a custodian of our resources for the society of tomorrow.

As a start, we need to think about the role of economics when it comes to valuing future generations.

At the moment, as Lord Stern took into account, the discount rate used in even the most environmentally sensitive economic models still give virtually no value to policy effects that are more than a couple of hundred years away.

That is a long time away. It is perfectly acceptable for most areas of policy. But when it comes to carbon impacts, and the risk that the effect of policy in a few hundred years is a catastrophe for life on earth, it may be that we should be more cautious about relying on such models.

But we are going to need some more profound changes than that.

We need to institutionalise long-term change that protects future generations.

That is why we have legislated for an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, with specific markers along the way.

And to ensure there are appropriate independent checks on progress we introduced the Climate Change Committee to take a robust external view on progress.

But the nature of climate change means that action in the UK alone will not be enough to protect future generations of Britain. Climate change is an intrinsically global problem – one of the hard truths is that UK action is necessary but not sufficient.

So we need to have a global trajectory for carbon, consistent with the science. And in turn, that requires greater international co-operation.

It is worth saying at this point that despite the frustration of the UN negotiating process, it seems to me that a framework involving the 192 countries and this is the only way we can embed the commitment I am talking about.

There is little room for free riders when it comes to climate change and hence we need a global approach.

Self interest

The third element of a politics of the common good may seem paradoxical given what I have said about the politics of now: self-interest.

When it comes to climate change we should not hold that there is only tension between self-interest and the common good.

There are areas where an appeal to individual self interest can support the social need to tackle climate change.

There are lots of hard choices, but not everything is a hard choice.

That means we have to highlight where the benefit of tackling climate change goes beyond avoiding catastrophe, and instead offers us a positive benefit.

As someone pointed out to me, part of the problem of our current politics of climate change is that we only talk about the costs, never the benefits of tackling it.

'If Martin Luther King had said I have a nightmare, nobody would have followed him' he said.

Take the issue of jobs. If the world sends a clear signal at Copenhagen on climate change, we can unlock a new green industrial revolution. Already low carbon technologies are multi-billion pound industries. If the world can make the change needed on a global scale, they will become even larger.

In the UK, with the right industrial policy, that could create many thousands of jobs throughout the country. These can be high quality high skilled jobs, manufacturing jobs building electric cars and wind turbines; construction jobs insulating homes and building power stations; science and technology jobs developing the technology of carbon capture and storage or recyclable packaging.

In my view, we don't hear this positive case enough. The call of candour means we have to be clear about the risks of inaction. But we also need to speak to people's self-interest when talking about the benefits of action.

In fact, it is only by doing this that we can have the credibility to ask people to change their lifestyles when that is necessary.

Social justice

The fourth and perhaps most important aspect of a climate politics of the common good is about idealism.

Even after we have done all we can to build public support through candour and fairness, institutionalised intergenerational equity and spoken to people's self-interest, there will still be work to do.

It is in that space, after the work of self-interest is done, that we cannot live without ideals.

We need a politics of climate change that speaks to people's idealism as well as their wallets. It must chime with the ideal of the good society.

For me, the most important ideal is social justice.

We do not just need to preserve our world for future generations, we need to hand over a fairer world.

So we need to show people how action on climate change can reduce inequality and help build a stronger more cohesive society.

That includes the elements I talked about before: on energy bills, on keeping costs down, on ensuring fair access to the new jobs and opportunities.

But it is also something bigger. I said we are a transition economy. We are. And it is at moments of transition that we have the greatest ability to shape society for the better.

The central challenge is to incorporate climate change into everything we do: so it is an intrinsic part of our economic policy, our energy policy, our approach to social justice.

Conclusion

I began by talking about the need to build and maintain public support for action on climate change.

I am not pessimistic. I believe that the politics of the common good that I have sketched out is very much a politics we can advance.

I believe that there is a public desire for facing up to these issues.

I believe that people are concerned not just about their children, but their children's children and so we can have the support we need for mechanisms to protect future generations.

I believe that self-interest can be a powerful and socially useful motivator.

And I believe that with social justice at its heart, we can have a low carbon transition that maintains public support.

And more than that, I think the value this sort of politics is not limited to climate change. On issues like social care and pensions, issues of poverty and social mobility, I believe this politics of the common good has the power to motivate people to act.

Politicians have an essential role to play in building this sort of politics. But it is people demanding change that has, throughout history, changed the world.

Nowhere is this more true than in relation to climate change, where the green movement has already moved opinion in so many countries.

That movement will face big challenges in the years ahead as it reaches out to a wider constituency but it is a vital part of winning the battle to create a wider consensus on climate change.

And in that context, I want to leave the last words for my father, in a passage from the end of his last book.

"In all countries, there are people, in numbers large and small, who are moved by the vision of a new social order... It is in the growth in their numbers and in the success of their struggles that lies the best hope for humankind."

Source http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/news/mili_lecture/mili_lecture.aspx