

22<sup>nd</sup> January 09

Ref: 0103/09

## David Cameron: Making progressive conservatism a reality

In a speech today at the Progressive Conservatism Launch hosted by Demos, David Cameron will outline how a Conservative government would make progressive conservatism a reality in what looks like being one of the deepest and longest recessions in living memory.

David Cameron will say:

**(Check against delivery)**

“It’s great to be back here with you today. What we’re discussing at this event is a political philosophy – progressive conservatism. But strange as this may sound, I want to leave the philosophy to others. Not because I think it’s unimportant. On the contrary, I think that politics without a guiding philosophy is both empty and ineffective. And I know that progressive conservatism – the idea that today, conservative means are the best way to achieve progressive aims will be the underlying philosophy of any government I lead. But political leadership is not just about having a guiding philosophy.

It’s about putting that philosophy into practice. That means two things. First, making sure that your policies, plans, and commitments collectively advance the goals that flow from your underlying philosophy. And second, making sure that your underlying philosophy is applied not only to the things you plan to do but to the unplanned and unpredictable events that consume so much of your time in government.

So today I want to talk about progressive conservatism not mainly in the philosophical sense, but in this practical sense. How will a Conservative government make progressive conservatism a

reality? And in particular, how will we do that in what looks like being one of the deepest and longest recessions in living memory?

## **PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATISM**

But first, let me explain what progressive conservatism means to me. For me, progressive conservatism is two things. It's a vision – and it's an argument. It is about ends – but it is also about means. That's why I think it's such a powerful idea, and why I'm so delighted that Demos is investing time and intellectual effort in its exploration.

## **PROGRESSIVE ENDS**

The 'progressive' half of progressive conservatism represents the ends we are fighting for – our vision of the good society and the good life. This vision is not exclusive to the Conservative Party, or any other party. I've always thought it's silly to deny the truth – that in politics most of us are actually fighting for the same things.

So what are those things? For me, they can be summed up in four central aims – the four aims of progressive conservatism. First, a society that is fair, where we help people out of poverty and help them stay out of it – for life. Second, a society where opportunity is equal, where everyone can, in Michael Gove's brilliant phrase, "write their own life-story." Third, a society that is greener, where we pass on a planet that is environmentally sustainable, clean and beautiful to future generations. And fourth, a safer society, where people are protected from threat and fear.

That, for me, is the essence of our vision for the future – the ends we are fighting for. Yes they are ends that we share with people in the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrat Party and right across the mainstream political spectrum. But no, we do not agree about how best to achieve those ends – and that is where progressive conservatism gets really interesting. Because I believe that after a decade of a Labour government notionally committed to progressive aims but where the record shows that the poor have got poorer, social mobility has stalled, our carbon emissions have gone up, our quality of life has gone down and where people feel more at risk from the threat of crime as anti-social behaviour has soared and violent crime has almost doubled.

After a decade in which the left has been unable to bring about a fair society, an opportunity society, a greener society and a safer society I believe we are now starting to win the argument that conservative means are the best way to achieve those shared progressive aims. That's why the "conservative" half of progressive conservatism is so important and so relevant to the practical challenge of actually delivering this political philosophy in government.

## **CONSERVATIVE MEANS**

Just as there are four principal aims of progressive conservatism, I think we can sum up in four propositions the means that a modern Conservative government would deploy to achieve those aims. First, in the words of Alan Milburn, that the "the entrenched problems of social exclusion in so many communities and unfilled potential among so many of our citizens expose the limits of centralised state action."

So the first - perhaps the defining - characteristic of the modern Conservative approach is a belief that we achieve progressive aims through decentralising responsibility and power to individuals, communities and civic institutions. And that we should use the mechanisms of what we describe as the post-bureaucratic age creating frameworks rather than rules; influencing behaviour rather than issuing diktats; designing smart incentives rather than imposing blunt regulation.

The second characteristic of our approach is closely allied to the first: and that is for government to act wherever possible to strengthen the institutions of civic society and here I place greatest emphasis on what is, for me, the most important of those institutions: the family.

We can see already that while there may be broad political consensus around the aims of progressive conservatism, there is a sharp political divide around the means. For we have seen in this Labour government - and particularly in this Prime Minister - a political approach which actively set out to centralise power. In the process, it has undermined responsibility and weakened, rather than strengthened, social institutions - notably the family.

The third proposition we make in describing how conservatism will deliver progressive ends is that the foundation of social and environmental progress is economic growth. So progressive conservatism must contain a plan for economic recovery and growth. But it can't be a plan that just takes us back to the old economy we had before an economy which in some important ways actually set back the cause of a fair society, an opportunity society, a greener society and a safer society. It must be a plan for a new economy, which rethinks the way our economy works so we can unblock social mobility, unleash green growth and raise everyone's quality of life as well as everyone's standard of living.

But it's not just about a plan for a new economy. In the light of Labour's Debt Crisis and the catastrophic fiscal position this country now faces we must understand that uncontrolled public spending and rising government borrowing does not advance our progressive vision – it threatens it.

And that's why today we need the fourth example of conservative means applied to progressive ends. If we continue on Labour's path of fiscal irresponsibility, at some point – and it could be very soon – the money will run out. Then you will see the return of what happened under Labour in the 1970s, including emergency cuts to many of the public services on which a progressive society depends.

So to avoid a rerun of those dark days, and to ensure we continue to support the public services that are so vital in building a more progressive society progressive conservatism must also contain a plan for ensuring that government lives within its means and delivers real value for money. That, in a nutshell, is what progressive conservatism means to me, today. The progressive aims of a fair society, an opportunity society, a greener society and a safer society delivered through the conservative means of decentralising responsibility and power, strengthening families and society, building a new economy, and ensuring that government lives within its means.

## **POLICIES AND PLANS**

That simple idea - progressive ends delivered through conservative means - is what ties together our plans in almost every area of policy, adding up to a coherent and consistent overall plan for change. For example, our plans for radical school reform – ending the state monopoly on school provision and introducing a pupil premium for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds

will be vital in building a fair society and an opportunity society and they are a clear example of the bold steps we intend to take in decentralising responsibility and power.

Our plans for radical welfare reform – even more vital in our deteriorating economic circumstances - and a transformation in the NHS health visitor service show how we intend to promote responsibility and help strengthen families. Our plans for a low carbon economy show how we intend to build a new economy where Britain can be a world leader in green technology and innovation at the same time as reducing our emissions and becoming a greener society overall. And our plans for transferring responsibility for policing to local communities show how we intend to build a safer society, while removing the bureaucracy and top-down centralisation that has led to so much public spending being wasted.

### **UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE EVENTS**

But the real test of our political philosophy will come in how we apply the values of progressive conservatism to unplanned and unpredictable events. The practical challenge is this: in government, how do you ensure that the thousands of decisions that are made every day by ministers, by officials, by people working in government agencies how do you make sure that collectively, these decisions take forward your vision of how society should be changed for the better? How do you make sure that people in the government machine, at every level, address the issues and problems that arise using the values and philosophy of the democratically elected government in our case, should we win the election, using the values of progressive conservatism?

Now we know how not to do it: we just need to look at the last decade. Labour's approach was a whole new regime of targets, public service agreements and micro-management. I don't need to spell out in any detail the effects of all this top-down centralisation. The distortions, the unintended and perverse consequences, and the undermining of professional responsibility and morale are all well documented.

The question is, how would a new Conservative government assert the values it would have been elected to implement? The answer is not simple, or mechanical: but I believe it is profound and sustainable. It is cultural change. Our aim must be to bring about a culture change in government at every level so that the automatic response to any event is a response that represents the values of progressive conservatism. We will try to explain those values to everyone involved in

government, so there is a clear presumption about the kind of response we expect in most situations.

So to be specific about it, when a new problem arises and there is the need for a government response I want to make sure the system doesn't automatically reach for the levers of top-down central control – the initiative, the task force, the target.

Instead, the questions I will ask my ministers, and which I will always ask of them are these:

How can we solve this problem through individual and community initiative?

How can we avoid setting up an extra centralised government response?

How can we improve things by spending as little taxpayers' money as necessary?

And I want to make sure the system always considers the effect of any policy response on the position of the poorest in society, that it works to break down entrenched privilege and advantage, that it tries to make the country more family-friendly and that it tries wherever possible to move us towards a low carbon future.

Of course, it is profoundly un-Conservative, and therefore contradictory to the philosophy of progressive conservatism, for these presumptions to be turned into hard and fast rules. But it is vital for the success of progressive conservatism that we give it tangible definition, so it can be more easily translated into practical action. And that is the work we are now doing, with the Shadow Cabinet and with Francis Maude's team.

## **ECONOMIC DIFFICULTY**

It is now clear that the biggest challenge of all to our plans in government will come from the economic circumstances we face. And let's be honest about what people are saying. Some say that conservatism isn't relevant any more because markets have failed and the big state is back. Others say you can't be progressive any more because you can't afford to go green or mend our broken

society when unemployment is going through the roof, when our banking system is on the verge of collapse and when our currency is in freefall.

I think both these views are completely wrong. This recession doesn't vindicate big government; it hammers the final nail in its coffin. We know that we're in this mess is because of too much debt. Too much banking debt, too much personal debt and too much government debt.

The scale of Labour's Debt Crisis is what puts us in such a weak position compared to other countries. It's why Labour can't do much to help people right now - they've run out of money. And it's why our response cannot be to borrow more and make government even bigger.

The conservative approach: saving not splurging; decentralising power; sharing responsibility; being careful, not casual with public money is needed now, more than ever, to deliver our shared progressive aims. And those progressive aims are still important because we're partly in this economic mess because of Labour's social and environmental failure.

Labour's failure to stop young adults dropping out of work, training and education; to help children get the qualifications and skills they need; to halt the rise of family breakdown and its attendant, costly social problems, these social failures help explain why we're so badly placed as we enter this recession - both in terms of the real economy and the public finances.

Labour's failure to encourage new green technologies and high tech industries, to diversify our energy supply, to build the infrastructure of a low carbon economy these environmental failures help explain why our economy is so imbalanced and why we have so little to fall back on in these tough times.

So my argument is that the only long-term solution to the current economic crisis is to cut the bills of social failure and to rethink our economy to deliver green growth. In other words, I would argue that our progressive aims matter now more than ever.

## **CONCLUSION**

But there's one final point I want to make. I understand how tough it's going to be for us if we're elected. The fiscal situation we inherit is likely to be the worst since the war. We're going to have to make some incredibly difficult decisions, and I'm ready for that.

But I also know that you have a choice about how you make those decisions. There's one way of doing it which is brisk, businesslike and no doubt effective - but it can all too easily give rise to anger, hurt and social division. And there is another way to lead in difficult times. It takes a bit more patience, a bit more thought, and a lot of hard work.

But I believe it's the right thing to do. Just like the most successful and lasting business transformations where the bosses work hard to explain what they're doing and why, where they really care about taking the whole workforce with them and where, throughout all the difficulties and tough decisions they hold fast to the belief that we're all in this together so I want to make sure that we face the dark days ahead, and our deep economic problems, in a way that brings the country together, not drives it apart. That will be, perhaps, the most important way in which the next Conservative government will be a progressive conservative government."