

# **Anthony Crosland Memorial Lecture 2018**

## **'The Battle Against Inequality'** with The Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman QC MP

**11th October 2018**

**Arts Centre Theatre  
Grimsby Institute Nuns Corner  
Grimsby, DN34 5BQ**



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**\*\*Check against delivery\*\***

Thank you very much for inviting me to deliver the Crosland Lecture. It is a great honour.

And it's a real pleasure to be here with Mel Onn, my colleague and your MP. And to accept her invitation on your behalf to deliver this lecture.

I remember when I met Mel as your candidate, in the General Election campaign in 2015.

Austin Mitchel, who won the seat for Labour after the untimely death of Anthony Crosland in 1977, had been a huge figure all my decades in the PLP and was so identified as Grimsby MP. As a young woman, and a lone parent, Mel, born and raised in Grimsby, seemed such a contrast to Austin. Grimsby had changed massively in the decades since Austin became your MP. And now there was to be a big change in the MP. And it was a tough campaign. We'd hoped to get into government...but it turned out our backs were against the wall. And we were far from confident of winning here in Grimsby.

But as we went out and about chatting to people in Grimsby it was evident how completely confident she was of her Labour values and how direct she was with the people we met. She had a natural air of authority.

Since then, in parliament, Mel has become one of our bright hopes for the future - now being shadow minister in the Housing team an issue which is going up the agenda of concern here in Grimsby and something for which she has a deep personal understanding, having been brought up on housing estates and experienced homelessness as a teenager.

Our Labour Party, and our democracy is all the better for the arrival in parliament of Mel and alongside her, the new cohort of young women. They are forthright, admirably resilient. They expect to be on an equal footing irrespective of their gender. They do not expect to defer to anyone or anyone. They don't expect to apologise for being young, for being a woman, for being a mother. Nor should they.

We just need to be in government so that Mel can speak from a position of power not from opposition. And one of the driving reasons why we need to be in government is the scourge of inequality. When you mention inequality everyone agrees that it's a bad thing. For most of us the main reason we are in the Labour Party is because we detest inequality and see Labour

as the way to fight it. But though we all agree that it is a scourge - it's worth spelling out why, why progress to tackle it has been uneven and what we still need to do about it.

### **Inequality is a breach of human rights**

Every young person is entitled to fulfil their potential, to follow their chosen path as best they can, to have a decent life. The fact that it is harder for that to be the case for a young person from a low income background and easier for a young person from a wealthy family is anathema to the Labour Party. It makes us fume with indignation and burn with resentment against the injustice to any and every child who suffers from inequality. The opportunities for a young person should not be greater for someone from a wealthy family and fewer for a young person from a low income family. Being born in London should not be a social or economic advantage compared to being born in the North. Inequality is a breach of an individual's human rights

### **The individual needs the state to create a level playing field**

It baffles me that the Tories are regarded as standing up for the individual *against* the state when in fact it is the state that needs to act to ensure inequality does not blight the lives of individuals. The state does not hold back individuals, state action is necessary to hold back the inequality which blights the lives of so many.

So it should go without saying that inequality is bad for the individual if you, as that individual are restricted in your life chances because of the family or region you are born into. And you need more of the state, not less.

### **Inequality can take many forms: no hierarchy of inequality**

Inequality can take many forms. It can be because you are black or Asian, or because you are a woman, or because you are gay, or disabled or old. Inequality is bad whatever it is rooted in. No-one should be discriminated against because of their gender, or subjected to homophobia or racism or written off because they are past 60. That is poisonous stigma based on prejudice that sees only the category and not the individual for what they are. And there should be no hierarchy of inequalities. It is not worse to be discriminated against if you are black than if you are a woman. It's not better to be stigmatised because you are disabled than if you are gay. Whether what is the basis for your being oppressed its wrong. And anyone who fights against any inequality is doing something important. So I firmly resist the "what about" tendency that says well, you might be fighting against gender inequality but "what about class". Or you

might be fighting against class inequality "but what about racism". Whatever discrimination the struggle is against it is combatting discrimination and inequality and I applaud it. All those who are fighting for equality should respect and support each other, working on the different front-lines of inequality. The solutions to different strands of inequality are different. The policy that will liberate a white lone parent - like childcare - will not help in the fight against racism. But it's worth striving for. Fighting against racism will not of itself liberate women - of any ethnicity - but it's still worth doing. There are plenty of oppressors so we need to turn our fire on them - not on each other. It is pointless and a distraction to compete about which sort of inequality is the worst - when it's all bad and there's plenty of it.

### **Inequality is bad for the economy**

Inequality is bad for the economy. Structural inequality is the opposite of meritocracy. Where there is opportunity for enterprising people with initiative to set up their own businesses, the economy thrives. When companies have a talent pool to draw on their business grows and so does the economy. Inequality holds back and economy. The economy loses out if business overlook people because of their ethnic background. Half the talent of the country is wasted by discrimination against women. Think of all the scientists, artists, engineers, entrepreneurs whose contribution has been lost to this country because they are women. Now, this is widely recognised in international development - that discrimination against women holds back the economy. But somehow it seems to be easier for some people to recognise the truth of this abroad than to act on it at home.

### **Inequality is bad for society**

Societies which are more equal are more harmonious, less conflicted, more at ease with themselves. That seems obvious. We instinctively draw back with unease when we see gated communities - people having to lock themselves away for fear of those who live beside them. But greater equality also means better health for all - and not just for those on lower incomes. The figures show clearly that more equal societies are healthier. So tackling inequality ought to be seen as part of any public health strategy.

### **Equality is the foundation of our democracy**

Strangely, for a society which remains so unequal, equality is the principle on which our democracy is founded. That each person has just one vote - that the vote of a millionaire is no more important than the vote of someone who's unemployed. And we want the government

to be based on the will of the people, not on the influence of money so we have laws (often put under considerable strain) to regulate election spending to try and prevent money trumping our democracy. And we look across to the USA with horror about the extent of the influence on politics of big business and wealthy lobbies - such as the National Rifle Association.

### **The struggle for equality**

But though it seems to us self-evident that equality is a good thing and inequality is a bad thing, making society more equal is a struggle. No-one says "oh thank you for pointing out about sex discrimination. We'll stop it right now and put women on an equal footing". Far from it. Racial inequality has been documented for years. But it is still prevalent. Charting and exposing inequality is necessary but it doesn't, of itself, stop it. Winning the arguments for equality doesn't mean it happens. Entrenched privilege is hard to shift. Those who have a vested interest in the status quo are not quick to give up their privilege. It's not called the struggle for nothing. And if we want change, that's what we have to do. Not only did we have to struggle to get into government - and that took us 18 long years from 1979 to 1997, but I had to struggle to implement policies to tackle inequality even when we were in government.

### **The pattern of inequality in the UK**

When we got into government in 1997 we embarked on programmes to tackle deprivation and poverty. We tackled pensioner poverty - which was the biggest group of those in poverty. We set targets for tackling child poverty and put it into law. We put resources into tackling in-work poverty through the tax credit system. We introduced a National Minimum Wage. We began the work which would start to halt the growing gap between rich and poor as well as programmes to tackle discrimination against women, minority ethnic communities, the disabled, the elderly and on the grounds of sexual orientation.

To take things further our 2005 manifesto promised to bring in a new Equality Act. When I was elected Deputy Labour Leader in 2007 Gordon Brown appointed me Minister for Women and Equality. I thought it was essential to include inequality on the basis of social class in the new Act - and to that I had to press on past those who said it was not in my remit and that I should stick to gender, race, disability etc.

To lay the basis for action on class in the Equality Act, I pressed for a Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth - like the Royal Commission which was set up in 1974 under the Labour government of Harold Wilson. It produced 5 reports between 1974 and 1979 but - unsurprisingly - one of the first things the Tories did when they got into government was to abolish it!

Despite my best efforts, I didn't succeed in getting agreement to a Royal Commission. Some of my colleagues in government feared that as we had been in power for 10 years a Commission might show us in a bad light, might show that inequality was still prevalent - which of course it was. My argument that we had made progress but we needed to show the extent to which further progress needed to be made, and embark on it, did not win out. But I fought on and did ultimately in 2008 get agreement to establish a more modest version - a National Equality Panel - chaired by the highly respected academic, John Hills of the LSE. The panel's findings were striking:

- \* That before Labour got into government in 1997 the gap between the top and the bottom was growing
- \* That when we got in we succeeded in halting that gap growing
- \* But more needed to be done if we were to begin to narrow the gap
- \* That - and this is obvious if you think about it - the bigger the gap between the top and the bottom, the wider the gap between the rungs of the ladder, the harder it is to climb up that ladder. So a more equal society is more meritocratic and allows for upward social mobility in a way that a very unequal society doesn't.
- \* That class trumps ability and by the age of 7 the bright working class child is overtaken by the less able middle class child.

### **Clause 1 Equality Act**

So, armed with the findings of the National Equality Panel that more needed to be done and by government, we drafted, as the first clause of the Equality Act a new law to propel action against socio economic inequality - inequality rooted in class background.

What Clause One says is that every public authority must, in every decision they make, consider whether it would widen or narrow the gap and take action to narrow the gap. It was to apply to every government department, every council, every university, and all our health and education services. What it would have done is put at the heart of all the actions of every part of the public sector the drive to end class inequality. It would have made the Treasury be

clear about how each budget was contributing to narrowing the gap. It would make the Transport Department ensure that transport infrastructure narrowed the equality gap. It would stop the Department of Communities and Local Government cutting funds to councils in deprived areas while sparing councils in wealthy parts. It would have made all decisions by every Council, whether on housing, planning, or children's services, part of a huge drive to make the public sector an engine to tackle class inequality. It would narrow that egregious gap between rich and poor and between richer and poorer regions.

But we lost the election in 2010 and again, predictably, one of the first things David Cameron did was to say that he would not bring Clause One into force. So it's there, on the statute book, but not implemented.

### **Implement Clause 1 - My challenge to the Prime Minister**

Theresa May, in her first speech as Prime Minister on the steps of Downing Street, spoke of how she was determined to tackle what she called the burning injustice

"that if you're born poor you will die, on average, nine years earlier than others.....If you're a white, working class boy, you're less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university. "If you're at a state school, you're less likely to reach the top professions than if you're educated privately."

She's right on that. The fact that by the age of 7, children with a higher social class background but low assessed ability overtake those from a lower social class background who were initially assessed as having high ability is nothing if not a burning injustice!

But under her government it's getting worse. And, as has always happened with a Tory government, the possibility of those born at the bottom to rise up the ladder is becomes more remote. The chance of the bright working class 7 year old to achieve their potential diminishes, while the not so bright middle class child forges ahead. That is downright unfairness and the very opposite of a meritocracy.

So my challenge to the Prime Minister is, if you mean what you say about tackling those burning injustices, if you are genuine in wanting to tackle lack of social mobility then implement Clause One. It's no good saying that you want to tackle inequality and while leaving Clause One lying dormant. The Scottish government have implemented it. It came into force there in April this year. In Wales, they've already done something similar, placing a

legal duty on public bodies to set out annually how they are progressing in terms of achieving equality and are considering whether they need to go further and fully implement Clause One.

Class inequality cuts deep scars across England. Clause One has been consulted on and legislated. Model guidance of how to implement it has been drafted and consulted on. David Cameron chose not to implement it - but now Theresa May is prime minister and unless she implements it, it will be evident that her concern for those "burning injustices" are just crocodile tears.

### **The next Labour government**

To make any real progress in tackling burning injustices rather than seeing them grow worse, we need a Labour government which will once again embark on the quest for equality. The agenda for tackling inequality is the essence of our Labour values across the piece, whether it's

- strengthening and supporting trade unions to empower people in their workplaces
- tackling the exploitation of zero hours contracts and the gig economy
- universal free childcare to liberate parents from the expense and worry of juggling home and work
- a muscular regional strategy. Resentment in regions which felt left out of a London-centric economy and politics lay behind the views of many who told me they were going to vote Leave
- requiring Universities to take bright children from state school and end the imbalance highlighted by MP David Lammy
- ensuring the Equality and Human Rights Commission have the money and powers they need to be rigorous enforcers of the equality agenda.
- playing, though our international development agenda, a major part in the fight against global inequality.

These are policies driven by a moral purpose but they also take us forward in the direction of a modern dynamic economy and harmonious communities. And whether up here in Grimsby or down south in my constituency of Camberwell and Peckham, they are at the very heart of Labour's DNA.