

## **Oliver Letwin Speech, Fourth National Relationship Conference 2007**

### **Introduction**

First let me apologise for not being David Cameron. I want to pass on his apologies for not being here in person, and to say that he looks forward to addressing the Relationships Foundation at a future date.

I believe that the topic of this conference is an important topic for political thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The insight of the Relationships Foundation is that there is far more to effective policy than money and law and regulation. Society is an organic, not a mechanical thing – and the most perfect structure on a drawing board can lead to terrible mistakes in real life.

What matters most in human life is relationships. That is why, for instance, we care about relative poverty as well as absolute poverty – because it's not how well off you are that matters, but how well off you are compared to others. The worst thing about relative poverty is that it separates you from your fellow men – it inhibits the relationships you should be able to have with the rest of the community.

### **Marriage**

Relational thinking also informs a subject that is being debated this week. This is National Marriage Week, and marriage is one of the most important relationships in society. All the evidence shows that a formal contract, whether sanctified before God or before the community, is the best way of increasing the chance that couples will stay together and provide their children with stable homes.

The manner in which individual men and women relate to each other has an impact far beyond the individuals themselves. It has an impact on society as a whole. That is why I think it is right for society as whole, represented by the government, to support both marriage and stable family life. My party is committed to breaking down the fiscal barriers to marriage.

Of course, marriage and stable family life is about far more than money. I believe that Government also has a role to play in helping people form strong and lasting relationships by encouraging the counselling that this Foundation is campaigning for. I look forward to working with you as we develop our proposals in this area.

### **Institutions**

The interventions which government is able to make in family life are rightly and inevitably limited. Thank God for this – the day that the state takes direct responsibility for families is the day we cease to be a free country.

I think the state should have a more active role in another sort of relationship. Not the intimate question of how men and women form families, but the more public and concrete question of how they form institutions.

Human relationships outside the family are incarnated in institutions. Napoleon said that Britain is a nation of shopkeepers. And that's true – we are a commercial people, driven by enterprise and industry. But commerce should not be confused with purely individual striving. The innovation which drove Britain's commercial revolution was a communal institution which formalised the relationships between individual entrepreneurs. The joint stock company enables a collection of people, often unknown to each other, to co-operate in a commercial venture by pooling resources and pooling risk. In disaster, they share the liability, and in triumph, they share the profits. That is the basis of our country's wealth.

But institutions go beyond commerce. Before we were a nation of shopkeepers, we were – and still are – a nation of institution builders. Recently the taskforce which the Conservative Party set up to look at the teaching of history in schools, published a list of the great men and women who built the institutions which have defined our nation. From Isaac Newton and the Royal Society to Robert Peel and the police, from Simon de Montfort and Parliament to Nye Bevan and the NHS, the British genius has been the creation and maintenance of institutions.

In each of these cases the state has a role to play. But – crucially – the role of the state is to assist in the creation of institutions which are independent of government interference.

### **Pro-active relationships**

Why is it so important for institutions to be free of outside control? Here relational thinking supplies the answer. Institutional independence is valuable because of its effect on the relationships within the institution, on the relationships between one institution and another, and on the relationships between the institution and the individuals who make use of it.

In the early eighteenth century the essayist Richard Steele estimated that a third of the population of Britain was locked into patron-client relationships. This survival from the age of feudalism had its virtues – most obviously, it ensured a community of interest between the classes. But patron-client relationships are essentially vertical – they represent a hierarchy of power and status which is ultimately demeaning to the people at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Today, too many social relationships are still vertical. In place of feudalism, we have millions of people working in institutions which are directed, controlled, structured and endlessly restructured by the vast bureaucracies that sit above them.

The effect of this arrangement on the relationships between institution and individual is, as the economists put it, sub-optimal. Which is to say, the full potential of both institution and individual is thwarted by the demands of the power which controls them.

So rather than vertical relationships, we need more horizontal ones. We need both citizens and the institutions which serve them to be free and self-determining. In a word, we need pro-active rather than dependent relationships.

And here government can play a vital role. For the job of government is not merely to find the money and make the laws. It is to set the framework in which relationships can flourish naturally and properly.

### **The police**

Take an important example – the police. When the first modern police forces were set up in the nineteenth century they were local institutions, accountable to the communities that they served. But over time they became more and more dependent on central government for their priorities and their orders. We have seen recently a major extension of this trend with the vast expansion of the Home Office's control of local policing and with the attempt to merge the county police forces into regional forces, even more remote from the public they are supposed to protect.

I believe we need to restore local control over local policing. That means establishing the right relationship between the force and the community.

Currently the public look up to the police as an agency of the central state, because the police themselves look upwards to Whitehall for all their orders. Instead we want the police to look not upwards, but outwards – to the community they are drawn from and which they serve. That is why my Party wants to see locally elected individuals taking over the powers over local policing that are currently being exercised by the Home Office.

### **Education**

Let me take another example: education. It is the relationship between teachers and pupils that governs the success of the education each child receives. But these relationships have been badly disrupted by the intrusions of government.

The natural authority of teachers has been undermined by government policy on how and what children should learn, and on how the school should be run. A head teacher, faced with literally thousands of pages of guidance from the Secretary of State each year, is no longer trusted to take professional responsibility for the relationships within his or her school.

We want parents to have greater control over where and how their children are educated. And we want teachers to have greater responsibility for the life of their schools, restoring the sense of vocation and professional pride which brings people into the profession in the first place.

## **Health**

Take another example: health. One of the great things about the NHS is the sense that thousands of medical professionals inhabit a common institution – and that everyone in the country has access to this institution. But there is so much that could be better in the NHS.

I want to pay tribute here to the book *Relationships in the NHS* by John Ashcroft and Geoff Meads, published by the Relationships Foundation in 1999. This was a prescient piece of work which anticipated that the additional funding which Labour was pouring in to the NHS would not achieve the improvements that were needed, unless equal attention was paid to the way the NHS works relationally.

Where are the relational problems in the health service today?

Problems exist in the relationships between clinicians and managers – both are crucial to the way the system works, but between them there is often distrust. Problems exist between clinicians and their patients, who often feel they are walking through a maze of processes they do not understand, without sufficient guidance or control.

And problems exist between the NHS as a whole and the government. The NHS inhabits a sort of no-mans-land between independence from and dependence on the state. Who's in charge?, as Florence Nightingale famously asked when she entered the hospital at Scutari. The absence of clear responsibility at local level has a direct impact on the quality of relationships within the NHS.

Our vision of the NHS is designed to overcome these relational problems. We want clinicians and managers, not politicians, to be in charge of the day-to-day running of the health service. The role of the state should be confined to funding the system and setting the parameters within which it works. So we are bringing forward an NHS Independence Bill to make this happen.

Our aim is to strengthen and clarify the relationships between patients and the local NHS bodies they use – surgeries, clinics and hospitals. We want GPs and other professionals involved in commissioning to take responsibility for obtaining the desired outcomes for their patients.

## **Communities**

Finally, I want to talk about the relationships that exist within communities. We form institutions of our own – local associations dedicated to some specific local issue, or to issues which occur everywhere but which only local flexibility can solve.

Iain Duncan Smith is currently leading a policy group looking at all the hooks that drag people into multiple deprivation – family breakdown, poverty, addiction, indebtedness and homelessness. As you hardly need reminding, the fundamental issues are largely relational: the breakdown of relationships in a community.

Iain's work focuses on how to nurture positive relationships through independent organisations – local charities and social enterprises which provide the only possible answer to some of the social problems that have proved so intractable for the great agencies of the government.

No matter how well meaning or how well funded, central agencies cannot usually address the deep emotional needs and the complicated circumstances of a drug addict, or a lone parent, or an ex-soldier who finds himself living rough on the streets. They are not sufficiently flexible; and they are not sufficiently on a human scale. They are forced to operate on the basis of systems and rules and work-schedules. We need to foster committed and long-term relationships with someone who cares and understands, and who has access to a supporting and flexible institution.

### **Social responsibility**

The essence of the Conservative Party's philosophy today is social responsibility. It is society, not the state, which inculcates the values that influence the way we live.

The state has a role. But it is wrong for the state to try to engineer society, to realise some artificial notion of how people should behave. It is right for the state to create the circumstances in which people can construct positive and enduring relationships of their own.

From vertical and coercive relationships, to horizontal and pro-active relationships – that is the transition that our country needs. I am enormously encouraged that an institution, the Relationships Foundation, exists which is dedicated to finding ways to do this. And I look forward to working with you as we develop our proposals for government.