

## **Reclaiming Common Purpose : education for regeneration.**

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Thank you for inviting me to give this annual lecture here tonight, in this terrific building with its palpable significance and long association with the continuing struggles of ordinary people for economic security, civic freedoms, real democratic engagement and social justice: what one of your countrymen and my heroes - Raymond Williams - would have called the long, and as yet unfinished, revolution. A setting that also symbolises the significance of the continuing challenge to today's politicians, teachers and educational providers to be serious and committed allies - on the side of ordinary people - in this most important 'journey of hope'.

I do know, of course, something about the specific context which gives this part of Wales - and the people who live here - particular and serious social and economic concerns. But you are people whom I also observe as being resilient and undefeated. I have always been impressed by what I've heard and read about some of the imaginative community and educational initiatives that have been developed here - some of which I have seen for myself today in Perthcelyn and Bryncynon, and some of which are referred to in this - I think - excellent publication, *Chasing the Dragon* .

So thank you. I'm really pleased and honoured to be invited.

As the title of this lecture suggests, I want to talk with you about what I call - reclaiming common purpose. And this, in relation to education for regeneration.

There is, it seems to me, a fundamental lie at the very heart of current, mainstream political discourse and it goes like this: 'now we are all stakeholders in the best of all capitalist worlds. When we 'pull together' we all benefit - rich and poor alike'. In this version of reality 'the economy' becomes synonymous with 'the market' and with ensuring favourable conditions for business to operate in a competitive global marketplace: conditions such as de-regulation, low taxation, low wages, flexible labour, low public expenditure and, for many of course, low expectations. Policy - especially education policy - is harnessed to the task of resourcing the economy (ie the market), for as Tony Blair expresses it, 'education is the best economic policy we have'.

Of course, this view of things, cannot actually be sustained once you start to measure the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor in Britain, and between the rich world and the poor world in global terms. But its omnipotence as a discourse - in what gets said - to promote lifelong learning, welfare to work, widening participation, combating social exclusion, community regeneration etc is astounding. The stakeholding citizen is to be found everywhere in the manifestations of what is now called 'third way politics', and which in practice means liberal political values, conservative social values and libertarian economic values - in which the bottom line calculation gives priority to the latter.

One big consequence of putting the priority of the economy beyond question, means it is also put beyond politics. It means, in relation to education, for example, that because this economic view of reality has

become so taken-for granted, it is almost impossible to talk about the purpose and role of education in any terms other than its relationship to vocational concerns, learning for work, teaching the kinds of attitudes and skills employers require of their workers, becoming more economically competitive etc.

Now - in England - we have a single ministry for education and employment. In England we give the power over the funding and provision of post 16 education - except in universities - to learning and skills councils, chaired and led, for the most part, by business, training and managerial interests. (I know that in Wales the nomenclature is different but I would be surprised if the emphasis is not more or less the same). We have higher education defined by Blunkett as being 'at the heart of the productive capacity of the new economy - including the knowledge economy'. We want to widen participation in learning so that we can compete more effectively as part of the global economy. We define regeneration as being primarily about getting people off welfare and into work. And this, whether or not there is worthwhile work to be had ( for single parents, alienated young men, people over 45, those with serious health problems or disabilities etc), and whatever the terms and conditions of that work might be (casualised, badly paid, de-regulated). For those for whom no work is available - we proceed, none the less, as though preparation for the discipline of work is a good preparation for the future.

And all of this based on the assumption that business interests are somehow neutral and benign. As if business interests are properly concerned with the common good, and don't have any particular axes to grind. As if their main motivation has got nothing to do with the pursuit of efficiency and profit for their shareholders, or with shifting their enterprise somewhere else if they can get a better deal.

One of the main consequences, of course, of this racheting up of the work ethic as being the-be-all-and-end-all of education, is that two out three of the other main purposes of education increasingly go by the board. Purposes which are about (i) personal and cultural development - about interest and pleasure and passion , and (ii) social and political understanding - what the radical legacy of inspired teachers like Raymond Williams and R.H. Tawney would call 'critical thinking' and 'really useful knowledge' for social and active engagement. Both of them absolutely crucial and important purposes for education in a democratic society and ones which I shall return to later after I have made some comments about social class and the idea of community.

Meanwhile, this current, mainstream, political discourse is also one in which structural categories such as 'class' 'race' and 'gender' - like 'politics' itself - have become the casualty of a new kind of political language. To echo Margaret Thatcher's notorious aphorism about society, 'there is no such thing as class...just individuals and families who are socially excluded'. She thought the best thing to do about class was not to mention it - in case it put ideas in people's heads and kept old ideas and loyalties alive among the poor. The next best thing to do was to stigmatise and blame the socially excluded for being the cause of their own problems - to such an extent that nobody who had any kind of alternative would want to have anything to do with them.

One of the main legacies of the Thatcher years has been to disengage whole groups of ordinary people from any real sense of mutual solidarity, common humanity, collective purpose - in favour of personal enterprise and achievement - via the philosophy and practice of competitive individualism.

Those who can't make the grade - as a result of insufficient enterprise and lack of appropriate moral fibre, we presume - are viewed, of course, as 'their own worst enemies', and consigned to the badlands of what the Thatcher government called 'the underclass' and the Blair government calls 'the socially excluded'.

New Labour hasn't exactly been keen to disassociate itself from this preference for concentrating on individualism rather than collectivism and mutual solidarity among the poor. Speaking in 1996, Tony Blair said 'our task is to allow more people to become middle class'. More recently, using the language of the third way, talking about class has become deeply unpopular because it implies conflicting interests, barriers and different groups in competition with each other for limited resources and opportunities.

To keep talking about class makes it harder to sustain the notion of benign and neutral business interests. It makes it even harder to disguise the extent to which 'the economy' has become synonymous with 'the market'. To keep talking about class draws attention to the existence of continuing material and structural inequalities which have nothing to do with the character or competence of individuals: inequalities which require political judgements to be made about fairness, social justice and social worth. And, if we actually want to create a more equal society, about redistribution - of wealth, resources and opportunities.

Of course, few speak about socialism anymore either. Indeed, what I have just said will undoubtedly identify me as one of those 'forces of conservatism' - i.e. a socialist - that ought to be consigned, like my preoccupation with social class, to the dustbin of history.

And all of which increasingly puts the emphasis on either successful or dysfunctional, solitary individuals, 'sorting themselves out' - with more than a little coercion from the state - rather than on the common struggles of working class, minority ethnic or poor communities who must actually work together if they are to change anything.

It fails to take on board the truth that individuals cannot be expected to change the social conditions of their lives - or the lives of others like them - in their families and neighbourhoods and communities, without some additional, bigger, external, societal commitment to the redistribution of resources, opportunities and life chances in the name of equality, fairness and social justice. Or, that whatever can be done locally, will only make a difference to their lives, on a day-to-day basis, if it is achieved by acting collectively and in solidarity with others, and with some recognition of community and common purpose.

Of course, what has happened in areas like South Wales - over the last twenty or thirty years particularly - has made it difficult for people to retain their sense of community, solidarity and common purpose. Although flawed, as these concepts undoubtedly were in the past by both sexism

and racism, we know that there also existed a strong sense of 'roots' and 'history' and 'commitment' to the people and the place that has now taken a phenomenal battering by the many consequences of economic restructuring and market economics.

### **A battering but not a defeat.**

In this context words like 'community' retain their appeal. Community is a word which unlike company, neighbourhood, region or society has a tremendous 'feel good factor' associated with it. It is a word which does not simply have a meaning - it has a feel, and the feeling is invariably good. It is good 'to have a community', to be 'part of a community' - especially if you are poor.

Feeling 'part of a community' is less important if you have a large detached house in the suburbs, or if you send your kids to public school, but in these circumstances, you might want to assuage any conscience you might have about the living standards of the poor, or about hostility to minority ethnic groups, for example, by rejoicing in the belief that 'at least, they have their community'. Although the present government uses the term community a great deal in relation to seriously deprived and disadvantaged neighbourhoods (it is thought preferable, we presume, to spin a more positive and distracting image than the one associated with sink estates, ghettos, a means of warehousing the poor ) they are none-the-less caught up in the business of finding individualised 'solutions' to collective conditions, by promoting role models, champions, mentors, leaders, ladders, progression routes etc.

If community is a feeling word - redolent of security, stability, homeliness, continuity - it also stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, very often available to us, but which we would dearly like to inhabit and which - one day - we hope to re-possess. Raymond Williams once said that one of the most remarkable things about the idea of community is that it is always about what 'has been'. Or, we might add, is also often 'in the future'. Community, nowadays, is another name for 'paradise lost' - but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads - in terms of community regeneration for example - that might bring us there.

The tradition of common purpose in adult education is part of the radical tradition that links education to the unfulfilled desires of ordinary people to change the circumstances of their lives. According to this view, the main purpose of education is about improving and changing the terms and conditions of peoples lives, not simply on an individual basis - up the ladder and out - but together with all the others who share similarly unsatisfactory positions.

This ladder of opportunity metaphor is a very powerful and familiar one in education. When current policy makers and providers talk about 'first rung' provision, a 'ladder' is still the big idea that is in their minds. Some of us in this room have very likely benefited from its consequences ourselves - to change our original class position - but only on an individual basis. The thing about ladders is that you can only climb them one person at a time. They don't enable a whole group or community or class of people to go forward or upwards together at the same time. Those who use them to get

out, leave the rest behind - in social conditions that are not changed at all by the escape of individuals on an individual basis.

Systems based on inequality, and which rely heavily on privilege, now prefer to talk of meritocracy. Of course they always benefit from the occasional injection of intelligence and energy from 'the lower orders' or from 'minority groups' on an individual basis. Such individuals can become 'role models' 'champions' 'mentors' to the rest. Their apparent success becomes the proof that the system is fair and that all that is needed is for individuals to show initiative, work hard, get on their bikes - to get themselves out from under. But the balance of social and economic power would have to change considerably if whole groups or communities or classes of people were allowed to get out from under. You wouldn't need a ladder, you'd need (at the very least) a broad highway and a level playing field.

It is also the case that those who climb the ladder individually, don't always do so on behalf of those they leave behind. They don't necessarily become the leaders or champions of those communities and groups. They don't necessarily work tirelessly in the interests of those they left behind. It is just as likely - more likely in the present climate, perhaps - that having jumped ship, so-to-speak, they will end up playing for the other side.

So when I talk about common purpose in relation to education and social change, the model is not an individualistic one but a collective one. The common purpose tradition also draws on the belief that democracy is political and that education should resource the struggle of people to challenge democracy's limitations and to extend its possibilities.

Community regeneration in places like the South Wales valleys is not simply about the market it is also about issues of democracy - about active citizenship and people being more in control of their own lives. Education for regeneration has an important part to play in getting along side - to be on the side - of ordinary people; to help build self- confidence, knowledge and political and social skills. So that as actors and activists in this process of regeneration, they are at the heart of regeneration and renewal; actively and collectively shaping their own personal, social, and economic lives. This is why it is so important that common purpose is reclaimed and re-established - as a corrective to the virtual incorporation of the interests and aspirations of ordinary people in communities who seem to be the objects and not the subjects of current policies.

By becoming drawn into so many of the present government's initiatives - tackling social exclusion, educating for active citizenship and promoting lifelong learning - adult and community based education has in some ways been brought in from the cold, de-marginalised, and placed at the centre of government policy. Yet I feel worried about the extent to which social purposes have become so subordinated to economic objectives and about the ways in which the development and exercise of critical intelligence has become so subordinated to job-related training.

I am not, of course, arguing here that people don't need decent jobs or economic security in their lives. But not any jobs on any terms, in which people's structural insecurity in those jobs becomes the basis of their continuing powerlessness in the labour market - and in turn society. And

which, more than anything else, feeds their cynicism about and disenfranchisement from engaging in political responses.

Of course the picture is not all gloomy. It is also the case, especially in many of the reports I hear of community and educational developments here in South Wales, and about the recent achievement of World Heritage Status - that whilst many people have been made to feel powerless and excluded from any form of decision making in society, others are choosing - perhaps for the first time - to express their active citizenship, both in the political sphere and in arenas beyond formal politics - in community based groups of various kinds.

Since many of these groups - council tenants, women, young people, refugees, the unemployed - often define themselves in terms of their previous exclusion, they have much to offer to the imagining - and the making - of a much more inclusive democracy. In other words, the formal politics of the state will be enriched and invigorated by struggles which go on inside and outside of the state. And without this enrichment, whatever governments and business interests and educational professionals decide to concoct in the name of regeneration or lifelong learning, will not work, unless there are people on the ground wanting a say, wanting to own, wanting to create, wanting to work with others, to make a more open, socially just and inclusive society. Making these connections is now an urgent political and educational task.

The ideas of common purpose and of education for regeneration provides the opportunity to assess both the damage and the potential for progressive educational practice to help 'change the world' here in South Wales. Most importantly, it is a call for solidarity which is very different to stakeholding.

In educational terms such solidarity means the commitment to relate learning to a collective engagement with common struggles and concerns.

It means developing curriculum from concrete and lived experience by stimulating communal thinking and helping to make the connections. It means repairing dispirited and damaged alliances and building new ones.

And most important, it means working with people as subjects in politics, rather than simply as the objects of policy interventions of one kind or another. The space which this distinction - between subjects and objects - creates will be essential if the cutting edge of common purpose is to be reclaimed.

### **Some important questions remain.**

Given all the rhetoric about community regeneration and social inclusion, one important question is 'will the socially included ever be asked - and be ready - to pay the real price for a truly inclusive society?'

Another important question to be asked of national, regional and local governments, business interests and educational professionals is 'are they prepared to put the notions of partnership and sharing power back on the agenda, into their vocabularies, and actually into practice when it comes to partnership and power sharing with ordinary people?' Still so often, those

who are missing from the table where these discussions take place are the very people who are on the receiving end of what others think is good for them.

For those of us who are the ordinary people in this scenario, or who are prepared to be politically on the side of ordinary people, it is important to remember that, if we don't argue for and choose our own agendas, then we will simply be fitted in to someone else's.

Finally, common purpose has also to be continually re-made. It is a historical project, in some cases forged over generations of struggle - as the people of South Wales know only too well - but it is also a project which continually needs to be re-worked in the context of present circumstances and future possibilities. It cannot be set aside as being no longer relevant -and certainly, it cannot be taken for granted.

If we don't believe that we can make our own history, we shall become the tools of history makers and the objects of history making.