

SPEECH TO CHARACTER CONFERENCE

Tristram Hunt MP
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AN ANCIENT IDEAL

Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here at the Institute of Directors – an outpost of a very different John Nash empire.

And an organisation that, shall we say, has not always seen eye to eye with the Labour Party's every impulse.

Something which could never be said for Demos.

Especially in those heady pre-1997 'third way' glory years...

...where a younger version of myself briefly worked as an intern.

However, the topic I have come to address today is one which labour market pragmatists and civic virtue idealists both agree is fundamental to the true purpose of schooling;

an issue which can align the interests of big business with my party's broader ambitions for our children's future.

And something which for over two millennia served as education's historic pursuit.

From the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle...

to Milton, Samuel Smiles and the Arnolds...

...the cultivation of character has always been the defining aspiration of a classical, western education.

Yet I would suggest that, with a few notable exceptions, it is an ethos we have largely and carelessly mislaid.

Ladies and Gentleman, my argument today is very simple:

We need to get it back.

Because from neuroscience to behavioural economics... child development to cognitive psychology...

cutting edge research suggests that this ancient ideal has a big future in contemporary education;

that something about it speaks directly to the complex pressures of the 21st century condition.

Resilience; curiosity; discipline; self-control; and grit;

whether at school, home or work, the evidence seems to suggest that possessing these skills in abundance is a crucial determinant of life-long success.

Even more so, in fact, than pure academic attainment.

Now, given we have spent the last few decades of education reform straining every sinew in the pursuit of raising attainment this could be a staggeringly important discovery.

With very real implications for how we educate and parent our children.

Because though nobody could possibly argue that striving for attainment is anything other than a noble aspiration, the evidence in support of character education throws up an even more arresting contention.

And this is the crucial question education reformers must now answer.

What if we've been getting it wrong?

What if our efforts have led to some to pretty harmful unintended consequences?

That in our determination to floor the attainment accelerator we have unwittingly overheated the engine?

Wasting the most precious resource this country has - the talent of our young people - in the process.

Industry has its answer.

As CBI Director-General John Cridland told The Times in August:

“At the moment we have a system almost exclusively focused on exam results and a floor standard which allows up to 40 per cent of a school’s pupils to fail. The next government should require schools and colleges to work towards a broader set of outcomes, which prioritise academic progress and the development of ‘character.’”

Yet perhaps even more pertinent - given our national concern about global competitiveness - the world’s leading education systems in the Far East have formed a very clear answer too.

Let me tell you: we can forget about those lazy and complacent ‘knowledge-cramming’ stereotypes.

So seriously does Singapore take character education they have re-labelled all ‘extra-curricular’ activities as ‘co-curricular’.

Their next chapter of education reform will see all schools - primary and secondary - dedicate half their timetable specifically to character forming activities.

They want more sports clubs, more music, more drama, more debating, more community action, more volunteering, more young leadership opportunities and more activities where their young people receive the dedicated attention of a positive adult role model.

And - just so we are clear - they want this not because they think they can ease up on standards in maths, science and engineering.

They want it because they know that nurturing the right character skills will also raise standards of achievement.

Ladies and Gentleman, the same conversation is happening in Japan. In South Korea. The US. Australia. And as this conference shows - it is beginning in earnest here as well.

And in light of this burgeoning movement the Labour Party too has formed its answer.

We believe that character education is far more than a wish-list of wonderful qualities we should aspire to inculcate in all children so they fulfil their potential. We all want that.

We believe it is far more than bolting cadets and cold showers onto end of the school day. We all know that.

Indeed, for us character education represents a rigorous, evidence-based philosophy with the power to take us decisively beyond from the top-down, target-driven, exam-obsessed culture which in recent years seems to have become our system's damaging default setting.

And into a new era of enrichment, happiness and high achievement for all our children.

NO SURRENDER ON STANDARDS

So I am here today to set out how the next Labour government will support the two crucial institutions - school and family - to nurture our young people's character.

But before I go any further first let me reject - out of hand - the idea that this implies that the pursuit of attainment is not the most basic function of schooling.

It is.

At the moment Westminster is fond of hand-wringing about how global competition robs communities' right across the country of their pride, prosperity and purpose;

...about how spreading fairness and opportunity to our coastal cities, coalfield communities and rural market towns represents the biggest challenge in contemporary British politics.

And right we are too - it is.

Yet the correlation between where this economic ill-wind blows hardest and areas of entrenched educational underperformance is, to say the least, profound.

As the Fair Education Alliance have argued today... and as Sir Michael Wilshaw will underscore tomorrow...

what disadvantaged communities need most of all is an education system that neither writes them off nor wastes their potential.

Particularly in the white working class areas which, as the Education Select Committee has highlighted, remain our biggest challenge.

Now a proper, rigorous approach to character education can play a part in that.

But so too must basic standards and world class teaching.

It depresses me to say it - but all too often I have seen first-hand evidence of the spirit-crushing exclusion that comes with poor literacy and numeracy.

So make absolutely no mistake: anyone who expects the next Labour government to let-up on the quest for higher attainment has completely misunderstood our analysis.

We are zealots for minimum standards, rigorous assessment and intelligent accountability.

Unyielding in our support for a dynamic schools inspectorate...

uncompromising in our intolerance of failure and low expectations.

However, my experience as a former University lecturer has also given me an insight into the equally remarkable power of character.

Because what my students taught me is that where you come from need not determine where you going;

that poverty need not cap aspiration;

and that hard work and talent can overcome the highest of hurdles.

Now, clearly these achievements were partly grounded in their knowledge and academic ability.

But think of all the other skills they required to complete the long journey from cradle to career.

the curiosity to enquire and explore;

the grit to persevere when times are tough;

the resilience to accept failure;

and the determination to bounce-back from it;

self-control to delay gratification and prioritise the long-term;

emotional intelligence to work together and learn from friends;

and - perhaps most important of all - the confidence to aspire towards success because it feels like success belongs to them;

Given the demand of work and life in the 21st century, young people will need of all of this and more.

Raw ability and knowledge will only take you so far.

Yet surely the bigger point here is that there is need for a competition.

Not every school behaves - as the CBI have put it - like an league-table obsessed 'exam factory'.

In fact schools like Kings Langley School, Hertfordshire;

Topcliffe Primary School in Birmingham;

or School 21 in Newham are making a mockery of the idea that nurturing these virtues is anything other than complementary to raising standards.

So let us dismiss once and for all the false choice between raising elevating the nurture of character and attending to the academic and vocational basics.

And concentrate upon building a world-class schools system which will simultaneously achieve both.

CLOSING THE EXAM FACTORY

Now... the trickier section of the speech.

How do we encourage the two crucial institutions – school and family – to nurture character?

Tricky because this is where the old dogma begins to exert its dominance.

The ‘cognitive hypothesis’ as Paul Tough calls it his book *How Children Succeed*.

Yet as he quite rightly points out:

“The world this describes is so neat, so reassuringly linear, such a clear case of inputs here leading to outputs there. Fewer books in the home means less reading ability; fewer words spoken by parents means a smaller vocabulary for kids; more math worksheets means better math scores.”

The insight here is not that this cognitive hypothesis is incorrect - far from it.

Children whose parents read to them regularly at an early age do tend to develop a wider vocabulary and higher standard of literacy.

In fact: startlingly so.

Rather the point here is that perfect academic test conditions are often a poor fit for the complex realities of a household, classroom, or school.

Take George - a secondary school pupil at one of Demos's 'pupil power' pilots.

George was described by his teachers as a 'disruptive student'.

Undeniably bright - yet bored, disengaged and underachieving.

What is more George comes from an extremely challenging family background.

A situation not entirely helped by spending more time there due to his talent for getting kicked out of school.

Now as one of the key character education principles behind the pilot – George was encouraged to set himself a long-term goal based around a new leadership opportunity.

So he decided he wanted to set up a sports club.

He persuaded the head-teacher to let him do it.

Recruited fellow pupils to help run it.

And controlled his impulses when faced with various knock-backs.

Like an incident when a bunch of jealous older pupils tried seize control of the project and kick George and his friends out.

Yet as the project and the school year progressed – George's teachers started to notice a change in his behaviour.

One has even suggested George now has prefect potential.

"I've learnt how you get your message across to other people. That helps you with your confidence and teamwork and that sort of thing. It's also helped my behaviour".

...as George himself put it.

This is the crucial insight about character or, to borrow a Professor James Heckman phrase, the 'non-cognitive' hypothesis.

It is not that a free school meal child does not need around forty-one hours of language therapy a week to close the vocabulary gap with their better off peers - they might.

It is that there is something that must come first - skills that need to be developed in order to switch our children on to the wonderful possibilities of learning in the first place.

Skills that we know certain pedagogies, extra-curricular activities and a school-wide ethos of excellence can help nurture.

In short: good character skills make our children learning ready.

Particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

So the next Labour Government will not go down the route of reducing character education to a mechanistic and instrumental measurement.

We are not interested in a tick-box approach.

If, as people say, our schools only respond to accountability and league tables then that is problem with the system not with character education.

Yes, there is a role for Ofsted to assess the breadth of a schools entire curriculum.

And an incoming Labour government is looking forward to a broader conversation about how we ensure Ofsted inspects schools on 'a broad and balanced curriculum' which begins the long journey of putting some distance between curriculum and qualifications.

But lets not turn that wider judgement into a set of 'game-able' data points.

That, after all, is how the exam-factory model went into production.

Labour will also guarantee wrap-around childcare access at primary schools from 8am to 6pm.

And we expect schools to bring to bear their extra-curricular resources so that this time is spent cultivating character.

In terms of teaching - we will make knowledge of character boosting pedagogies compulsory across all initial teacher training.

And will spread that knowledge across the existing workforce through our teacher re-licensing policy.

Yet perhaps most important of all we will extend the freedoms currently enjoyed by academies to all schools.

We know that many new converter academy heads now feel betrayed by the chimera of conversion...

...that in the words of Melvyn Roffe, the disgruntled former principal of Wydenham College in Norfolk, conversion “reduces autonomy” leading to “more control by a micro-managing Department of Education driven by pettiness”.

But let me assure you: that is not how it will conduct itself with me.

The Academies programme is a Labour policy. We will not allow its principles of freedom and autonomy to be perverted in this manner.

Rather, we will extend them to all schools.

Our message to heads is this:

Use your freedoms over the curriculum and the school day to nurture character.

Carve out the space.

Cast off the shackles.

If you truly go for this a Labour government will have your back.

PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

However, we will also need to unlock the potential of the most important institutions that shape character.

Not private schools - though clearly this is one area where a bigger contribution from them could have a really powerful impact.

No, the critical space where character skills develop is of course the family.

Now this is seriously fraught territory.

Education Secretaries always have to wrestle with the knowledge that the most important area for improving children's lives - parenting - is also the most politically controversial.

And with good reason too.

After all, the history of state encroachment into the behaviour of individuals is not one that should inspire enthusiasm.

Equally, we in the Labour Party have to contend with the history of our own impulses when it comes to the family.

First, a trepidation to confront family breakdown for fear of offending parents excluded by a socially conservative family identity.

And, second, the idea that all the concerns of social justice can be solved through material redistribution.

Domestic abuse. Crime. Alcoholism. Child neglect. Depression. And of course crushing poverty...

All of these are social justice issues.

All of them need to be tackled.

And all of them crush the formation of character in the early years...

...which as the evidence shows can have disastrous consequences for behaviour, attainment and happiness later in life.

So the next Labour Government will take strong action to put families first.

The family is the crucial institution for spreading opportunity, tackling child poverty and building character.

But we will also reject the right wing view that the state and family are necessarily antagonistic;

...that the former must always encroach upon on the latter.

It is not just that in some cases the state simply has to step in to support families and children.

It is also that the right massively understate the pressure our broken economic model has placed upon family life since the global financial crash.

Stagnant wages. Falling living standards. Low-paid, long hour and insecure employment.

All of this takes a toll.

Not just in terms of fathers and mothers spending less time with their children.

But also the strain this extra stress places upon those all important character-forming relationships.

So Labour's public policy agenda at the next election will focused on practical steps which can improve the quality of family life.

Most of all, on childcare.

Because for those working parents wrestling with this pressure, the crippling cost of childcare represents the biggest barrier to getting on and providing for your children.

So we will increase free childcare from 15 hours per week to 25 hours per week for the 3 and 4 year olds of working parents in addition to the Government's existing tax free offer.

And this support will continue into primary years with our primary school wrap-around guarantee.

For we know how crucial these breakfast clubs and after-school clubs can be both for flexibility and cultivating character.

On equal support for dads we will continue the introduction of shared parental leave, which builds upon sound Labour principles of gender and relationship equality.

On parenting we will continue to support the 'CANParent scheme - its troubles are about access not aspiration or quality.

And on early years we will seek to rebuild Sure Start around its original core mission: early intervention and parenting help for any family that faces an uphill task to make sure their child is school-ready.

But we will also resist the trap of thinking all parental support must come in the early years.

Each phase of childhood brings its own parenting challenges, especially the whole new ball game that is adolescence.

So when we are looking for early years innovation then it seems to me that the Greater Manchester model would be an interesting place to start.

Because a vision of universal early years intervention through health visitors, with better data for highly targeted extra prevention, and a widening of children's centres remit so that they look at whole family support - working hand in glove with Louise Casey's remarkable Troubled Families programme - seems to provide the most rewarding approach.

We have to make sure that public money being used to support childcare is making appropriate demands on the quality of those involved in the delivery of childcare.

And we also have to break down the institutional barriers which exist between so many agencies with responsibility for early years.

I find it extraordinary that Children's Centres in my constituency can't get the data from the NHS on live births; from the local authority on nursery ages; and don't know how to reach out to challenged families.

Because if we could overcome the bureaucratic nonsense of impasses like these, then I have no doubt we can deliver better services and financial savings.

A task which - as last week's Autumn Statement shows - will define the next Labour government.

THE GREAT BRITISH SPIRIT

Now, when I was looking into the recent history of character education, I came across the characteristically pithy views of Winston Churchill.

Because we talk a lot about British values in our education system; I think it is equally worthwhile to think about the British spirit.

And that spirit – Churchill would have argued – comes from our ability to overcome adversity and setbacks.

Indeed Churchill was 'bang on' when he said "failure is not fatal and it is the courage to continue that counts".

Because he knew more than most that our failures prepare us for the future.

That we achieve more when we learn from the knock-backs we suffer;

And use them to bounce-back and overcome new challenges.

Ladies and gentleman, if a generation ever needed to rediscover that age-old great British spirit - it is this one.

Incidents of mental illness appear to be rising, technology and social media can increase exposure to potentially harmful influences and as our young people face growing competition for the best jobs, high-status apprenticeships and university places, it becomes more and more important for schools to coach pupils about character.

Their global rivals increasingly understand its importance.

And evidence increasingly shows how those tools and insights can help achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

But we now know that the character is not best learnt through adversity - its nurture belongs in the challenging, supportive and aspirational communities the best schools provide.

that children who grow up surrounded by love, stability and care have a far better shot at grasping life's many opportunities with a healthy sense of enquiry and self-esteem.

And that stronger character equals higher standard.

Closing the exam factory;

Putting Family First;

Rediscovering the Great British Spirit;

Ladies and Gentleman, the next Labour Government will reboot some ancient educational ideals for the 21st century.

Our ambition in office is to build an education system and family policy that spreads opportunity to all our young people by nurturing their educational and personal growth in this most demanding of centuries.

Thank you.

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