

John Cruddas talk at J&P Conference

It's very good to be with you this morning, that's my first ever spiritual exercise by the way. It is lovely to be here, not least because I'm so impressed with the subject matter – the discussion around labour and the dignity of labour because it's such a deeply unfashionable thing to discuss nowadays, so I really do respect the agenda that's been proposed here.

I'm always concerned about why is it that this issue of labour is so deeply unfashionable to discuss, the dignity of labour. The prayers that Martin read out this morning I found personally inspiring because they take me back to how I was brought up. To put it simply, we were Irish Catholic working class and we were Labour, literally Labour that was the thing that got a lot of my family involved in church issues, in community to a degree and in politics actually, to the degree that I joined the labour party and my middle brother joined the Carmelites and it was a similar thing. But there was a sort of coherence around some of the issues that we shared, the common life politically that we enjoyed, that it was rational that you involved yourself in the church and politics and trade union world etc. And that wasn't that long ago. It seems to have disappeared. It's brought back to life this week with me, we were doing a thing – you know it's common to talk about the 'Big Society' nowadays, and we're trying to build a notion of a 'good society' locally, in our local community, I was talking to John Mackie about this last night, and as cuts kick in, in terms of the local state, lack of provision, the voluntary sector faces quite enormous shortcomings in terms of the finances, how do you rebuild the good society by engaging different institutions, faith communities, to try and provide new safety nets as safety nets are under a threat. And we had this meeting with a whole series of churches in our local community and we were building the idea of massive food banks to make sure that people don't fall below a level of destitution, so we build a safety net in our own community, and we tap in to our congregations so that you have legal advice as the CAB faces cuts. And also that we help especially unrecognised migrants, who have levels of pay below the minimum wage – how we can help them in terms of a level of subsistence through a living income – so we supplement their amount of money and how we can join the dots and create a genuinely good local society. And it was truly inspiring the work and commitment that people are showing to this and it brings us back to some fundamental issues of destitution, the help to the poor, and modern safety nets which no one should fall beneath. And that's why I think the issue of the dignity of labour is the absolute cornerstone to that in terms of my own political background – a lot of the Catholic Social Teaching that was ingrained in to me from when I was very young. And it's good to see that if you stay where you are long enough you get back to some of the debates that started off. And fashions blow in and out, but some of those fundamental issues always re-present themselves and reappear. So that's why I think it's very important that we are discussing the questions of labour.

Why is it unfashionable? I think it's a really interesting question. I worked in the last government, and in many respects the Labour government did a very good things, because we introduced a national minimum wage, millions of jobs we created, we signed the European Social Charter, we regularised working time in terms of regular working week, we had trade union recognition procedure which we introduced, we introduced more family-friendly support for workers in terms of paternity parental leave, childcare and the like. But it was always, truth be told, a fundamental struggle within the labour party about putting the question of the dignity of work and rights for people at work in to the public policy domain. I worked in Downing Street – John was involved in the government and he knows there was a fundamental tussle always to get these issues in to the mix. Now why is that? I'll give you an example which is fairly contemporary today: when we published a piece of legislation called the Public Relations Act in 1999 we had a Cabinet meeting at 2pm, and I got in to work – this was the piece of work I was working on – and I got in to work early that morning to discover that Rupert Murdoch had beaten me in to the back door, and within that tells a tale about who actually was the member of the real Cabinet of the country and who wasn't – not an insignificant issue given what's happened in the last couple of weeks, but it does tell a story about where power lies, and how the terms of political debate shift, and who conditions those terms of debate, so issues of human labour drop off the edge. I would tentatively suggest that's not necessarily unlinked to the fights that Mr Murdoch had at Wapping a few years before and his hostility to trade union rights, employment security, dignity of work. And that is a Labour

government. That, I think, demonstrates where power lies and the challenge that is faced to put this agenda back centre stage and within all political parties. I remember when I worked in Downing Street there was a sense that we were entering a new knowledge economy, so the world did not belong to the old labour notions of solidarity, work place regulation, trade union movement – it was about new technology and empowering people to become portfolio workers who could have a number of different jobs, riding these new information technologies. And anyone who believed in justice at work, trade union rights, solidarity belonged to a diminishing old epoch, and the future belonged to those who embraced this new modern individualised world of work. The other reason why it was deeply unfashionable is because we were dominated by a form of economic liberalism which focussed on individual transactions, that your place in the labour market was the product of your own choices between work and leisure. There was no notion of coercion or power in that work place relationship that needed confronting – it was always a rational choice that you embarked on in terms of the amount of money you received, the amount of work you enjoyed, and your rewards. So everyone's position in the hierarchy in the country was the product of their own choices, rather than a product of social and economic forces beyond those individual choices. And the third element was we were enjoying extraordinary economic growth – for 15 years we had economic growth in this country, for 60 quarters we had continuous economic growth. Gordon Brown, Alan Greenspan, they all thought they'd solved the problems of boom and bust in economic cycles and that we'd locked in economic growth for good. So there was no need to re-visit issues of security in employment, protection at work, because the cake was getting bigger- it was a positive sum environment so there was no need to return to what was seen as old fashioned issues around employment security and justice at work. The question is, what happens when the music stops? When that growth stops? When those fundamental issues of distribution tension reappear? To give an example, one of the most interesting industrial disputes I've seen: Do you remember the Lindsey oil refinery a few years ago when there was a big strike, and in the civil engineering sector there had always been excess demand for labour, so what big employers had done, they'd posted migrant workers from different countries, to undermine the terms and conditions of different sectors, to pull down the level of employment security and they'd pitched one group of workers against another, and in the European court, they'd had a number of enactments that had diminished the protection afforded to all workers across Europe. And the Lindsey Oil workers stood there and said "look, we haven't got any work, we can't look after our families, this is not right" and they were deemed as anti-European, protectionist and xenophobic, when in actual fact they were standing up for their families against a system that had made them the casualties of this as growth had stopped and the music had stopped.

So the question is, how do we reintroduce labour as a significant issues? Well I think we have to go back to fundamental issue of capitalism actually, because I don't think there's any way around it. Put simply, I've always thought there's a double movement around capitalism – it is destructive, but simultaneously it creates new alliances and coalitions to fight against the dispossession that occurs. And the history of capitalism actually is a history of fights against that dispossession, in 3 forms:

- one a dispossession from the land through the enclosure movement where people are moved off of the land,
- second the dispossession from your own labour as your labour become a commodity that you are forced to sell you own ability to work, your capacity to work, your labour power as a commodity with employers.
- And third the fight against dispossession is a fight to give people a voice, through successive battles for political reform, to give voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless,

and it was those 3 forms of dispossession, the resistance to that dispossession which I was always taught is socialism – that is socialism, the struggle of people to share and maintain a common life against those processes of dispossession and commodification. That's how I was taught, that's what I still believe actually, even more acute than ever I would tentatively suggest, given what's happening since the banks collapsed, we peered over the brink of an economic rupture, and we're dealing with the first skirmishes around the subsequent battles politically and

economically. But in terms of socialism there's always been 2 different strands; the first has been around science and progress, rationality, fabianism, centralisation. The other, a more romantic tradition, you can trace back to John Ruskin, William Morris, it's a resistance to the commodification of art, culture, our labour, our relationships, our families. The trouble for me is one tradition within socialism; the rationalities, science, the centralism has dominated, whereas the more romantic tradition is built around the dignity of human labour itself and what we should cherish in our relationships and our families has lost out. That question, to stop the alienation of ourselves from our own capacity to work. And if you look at the history of socialism, and the history of labour, it's the history of fighting against that dispossession, and also the struggle to maintain human labour, becomes the central issue.

Unfortunately for me, within and around labour, it's always the scientists, the rationalist, the fabianists that have always won, and apart from certain battles at the beginning of the last century around the beginning of the Labour party, the tradition based around fellowship, dignity and respect, localism, has always lost out, and the question for me is, in my own party, whether we can re-present a fellowship model of human labour, it's respect, obligations, duties that go along with that. New Labour was always about progress, modernisation, commodification, it was never about deeper issues of fellowship and solidarity. So we have a lost Labour tradition built around the dignity of work, resistance to commodification, centralisation, bureaucracy, science – it is romantic, not dystopian, it is utopian. Built around hope. My favourite political philosopher, Raymond Williams, once said “to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing” and I think that's quite a good approach to analysing politics – how do you make hope possible rather than despair convincing, when all around you in the era of Murdoch you see the commodification of our lives, our families, our relationships. Everything is about how much you can earn and own, rather than the substance of the common life we share, our obligations and duties to each other. And that seems to me to be the fundamental question around this conference actually – how do you re-present labour as a proxy for a broader series of obligations to each others, to rebuild a sense of that common life in terms of the things that we cherish and nurture rather than how wide is our flat screen television – that seems to me to be the fundamental issue.

Blair once said in The Sun, at the 1997 general election “even when you introduce the national human wage, we will still have the most restrictive laws in the Western world”, referring to labour laws. I would suggest that's not a virtue, but we celebrated that as a virtue in 1997, and that says so much about my own party, but also about the political culture of the country – who has power. So the question for me is how you rebuild a modern covenant around housing, around security, around protection, about good public services for everyone, about modern safety nets, at a time when those safety nets are under threat, the poor will pay for the crisis, that's how I see it becoming in a few years, and the question is will they or will they not. We've just had a battle around a welfare reform bill, which takes £18 billion off the poor; compare and contrast that to the £2 billion levy that's been put on the banks. 9 to 1 the poor pick up the bill for the economic crisis. I would suggest tentatively they're not culpable for the crisis, but they will pay the price – and that goes back to who has the political power, the leverage. The Murdoch question is an allegory for all those questions that I think we have to put back in the mix, that's why this discussion around labour is so important because it's a proxy for a broader series of question. It's also a question for Labour – Dylan Thomas once said that the Labour movement at its best is parochial and magical, and I think that's a really interesting couple of words – it's parochial, it's local, embedded in the everyday concerns of the common people – because of that it's magic. That's slightly against the common terrain of our culture around celebrity, and the red top newspapers, but that's where we need to return to – re-embedding ourselves in the everyday, common concerns, the parochial ordinariness of our world, which seeks to raise the question or human dignity at work.

What does that mean? I'll give you an example; in East London, many of you will know, there's over the last 10 years, through the pioneering work of organisations such as London Citizens, the issue of a living wage, rather than a minimum wage is now centre stage. Now where does that come from? And it's interesting, it didn't come from a focus group or a very clever policy analyst or a think tank, it came from a series of discussions that went something like this: “what do we

need to keep our families together?” It’s a really interesting question. “What policies do we need to keep our families together?” Out of that came “we need enough to live, a living wage” and so the policy emerged out of discussions about family life, our common life, what do we need in terms of politics to make sure that we can support and nurture the things that we cherish most, namely our families. And I think that that is a very interesting way of building policies here – it is parochial but magical at the same time because of this way it emerges out of the life experiences of normal people. These were the poorest, most marginalised, vulnerable people in London. The living wage is now a policy commitment of one of the national political parties, we’re putting pressure on the government to try and introduce one in public contracts, and it’s interesting the way that those forms of discussion are gaining political traction in a different political era to the one we’ve lived through before, where the focus group or the pollster was the king. Now, hopefully, those discussions can have attraction in terms of how we make policy.

How do we therefore create and nurture just institutions that allow people to realise their potentials, the notion of human virtues to become more passionate, compassionate, wise human beings, is the discussion that I think needs to be centre stage. I was at a meeting recently, the Bishops Conference, and one of our great theologians said “the future debates will be between a neo-liberal and a neo-Aristotelian view of the good society.” And I thought I don’t quite understand that, but I think I need to. And basically what it meant was that we’ve lived through a period of economic liberalism that’s all about individual transactional relationships, now we need to contest that with an alternative one based around virtue and a good life through building just institutions to allow people to flourish and develop over and above that simple economic transactions, to become good people, so wise, more compassionate, and to do that we need to nurture and build those just institutions and it’s that debate, eclipsed around this notion of the good society, that will be the future political centre ground, and I think that’s great, because it goes back to the conversation I had this week about food banking or creating council, advice, building new safety nets through the agencies that we work with in our local communities, especially the faith communities. Which is always built around forms of social teaching that were at odds with that economic liberalism, that destructive consumer-orientated method of how we view each other and our relationships with each other. So I’m very optimistic actually, because the terms of debate seem to be shifting, that period of economic growth conditioned a form of discussion that was at odds with the way I was brought up, the way I think many of us live and learn in terms of our relations and obligations to each other. I think that creates immense possibilities in terms of creating a different tenure to the political discourse, built around a greater respect for the common life that we all share. And that will be quite a battle as we’ve witnessed over the last couple of weeks, but over the last few years everything is changing, globally everything is changing. The assumptions that we’ve lived with for many years are collapsing all around us and that creates huge opportunities to shift the terms of debate in a more generous compassionate form and a return to human labour as the corner stone to different forms of teaching, which have always resisted and confronted the commodification of our lives and our relationships, our families is central to that, and that’s why it’s so vital I think that we begin that, especially here today by confronting some of the issues of human labour, dignity of work and justice in terms of our own physical endeavours, because it gets back to the history of something that has always thought of human labour as essentially creative. That richness, that texture, creative possibilities of our own physical work and labour with each other, which is always threatened by the commodification of that labour itself, so that’s why I think it’s truly pioneering to have this debate around labour now and thank you very much indeed for inviting me this morning.