

## Damian Green MP: Speech to TRG Conference: One Nation Day

October 30<sup>th</sup> 2010.

It's an honour to be asked to speak today on the occasion of the Tory Reform Group's 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It's also a sign of age. I was the first Chairman of the Oxford TRG, after the merger of several groups, including the one which has a good claim to be the worst political acronym ever—PEST. Those 35 years have seen both good and bad times both for the Conservative Party, and for the Tory Reform Group itself. And yet we are still here, and now we have a Conservative-led Coalition Government and a Tory Prime Minister for the first time in 13 years.

### Shape of today's Conservative Party

In 2005 I gave the TRG's Macmillan Lecture in which I argued that in order to gain electoral success the Conservative Party had to realign itself with One Nation values. I hoped that the Party would adopt the ideological principles that TRG embodies, and to realign itself as a Party of opportunity; community; and freedom.

And today's Conservative Party does now care about many of the issues the TRG has always cared about. The last five years have seen the Party transform under David Cameron. Both in tone and content it is clear, and welcome, that the Party under David Cameron is recognisably living in the 21st century and grappling with the problems of Britain today. It is modern and outward looking. It is determined to devolve power from the state to the individual. And to restore the civil liberties eroded by Labour's authoritarian state.

Some of these changes are rediscoveries of the best aspects of historic Conservatism, and one of the most important is our determination to help the poorest and most disadvantaged. You can call this One Nation Conservatism, or Tory Reform, but it represents the same decent instinct: that we have a duty to help those who need help, and that such help is the mark of a civilised society.

But the circumstances of the Coalition make it even more important than ever that our section of the Conservative tradition flourishes. It obviously too early to tell what will happen to the long-term relationship between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. We are still in the early tentative stages of this relationship.

What is absolutely clear to me is that the Conservative Party must retain its own capacity to be moderate and progressive. We must not sub-contract the need to keep the Government in the progressive space to the Liberal Democrats. It would not only be bad for the Government to think that progressive policies must come from the Liberal Democrats it would be flatly untrue. I am about to go through some of the key policy areas in which the Conservative progressive tradition is proudly upheld.

Thinking longer-term, as we should do at this type of celebratory conference, it would be a disaster for the Conservative Party to lose the habit of thinking progressively. Some Conservatives do not have this habit, and some indeed regard it as a very bad habit. So the role of the TRG is more important than ever under the Coalition. We need to maintain a strand of thought which is recognisably moderate and reforming, but also recognisably Tory. Because we are not Liberal Democrats. We do look first to the market, to the voluntary sector, to the individual. We glory in the history of our country.

We know that sometimes you have to be hard-headed as well as warm-hearted. But as Tory Reformers, we know that it is right to help the poor, both at home and around the world. We know that individuals flourish best in strong communities. We know that spreading opportunity throughout the economic spectrum is the best gift a Government can provide its people.

And on the purely political front, we know that a Government that aspires to One Nation politics is what the British people almost always want their Government to be. Generations of Conservative leaders knew that. David Cameron knows that. Sadly, for us as a Party, Tony Blair knew it as well. At the

same time, too many of our fellow Conservatives forgot it. It is another part of the TRG's role to keep reminding them.

### The challenge ahead

It will be a challenging next few years in government. We all know that over 13 years Labour spent huge sums of money and left us to deal with the biggest budget deficit in our peacetime history - £156 billion - which the IMF said would be worse than every EU country including Greece. Since taking office we have learnt just how wasteful they were with our money – letting unacceptable contracts, splurging on consultants, and commissioning unaffordable IT projects. So in his Comprehensive Spending Review earlier this month the Chancellor outlined how we are going to bring the deficit under control; and how we are going to ensure government gets out of the way so the market can get moving. He had to make tough decisions, as the row over housing benefit this week illustrated, but they are changes that Britain desperately needs.

At the same time that this Coalition Government is rebuilding our broken economy, we are also determined to transform our broken society.

That there needs to be an alternative to Labour's top-down approach in order to help the most disadvantaged in our society is clear. After years of more and more centralised control, ever more intrusive policing, and increased public spending, the result is an underclass dependent on the state yet distanced from their communities.

Despite their claims about promoting equality, opportunities to rise up the socio-economic scale lessened under Labour. The National Equality Panel concluded that while social background really matters, “rather than being fixed at birth, these differences widen through childhood”. As Milton Friedman put it, “A society that puts equality ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom”.

## Opportunity

And so the new Government is introducing reforms to improve opportunity for the most disadvantaged in society– in welfare; education; and health. We will allow people far much greater choice over their lives – their work; where they send their children to school; and how they use the NHS.

The first of these areas, Iain Duncan Smith’s welfare reform plans, demonstrate clearly the Conservative commitment to improving social mobility. When he arrived at DWP, Iain faced a huge challenge – an out of control welfare budget; a culture of dependency; and a country with one of the highest rates of workless households in Europe - where 1.9 million children live in homes where no-one has a job. His Team has already unveiled changes to Incapacity Benefit; plans for Universal Credit; and a comprehensive new Work Programme.

And Iain’s motivation is to help the poorest:

“the changes taken from the start of the budget process to the end of the spending review are not [...] regressive, but are instead progressive. What does that mean? We take a share of the burden so that it isn’t all falling on the shoulders of those who are in the lowest economic deciles”.

And in our schools system, Michael Gove’s education reforms are creating free schools to ensure excellent education will be available to as many as possible. The ability to exercise some control over your local school, or at the very least the chance to choose whether it is suitable for your child, is key. Even after thirteen years of enormous increases in public spending under Labour, educational inequality is increasing in this country. Michael has pointed out:

“Schools should be engines of social mobility – the places where accidents of birth and the unfairness of life’s lottery are overcome through the democratisation of access to knowledge. But in the schools system we inherited the gap between rich and poor just widens over time.”

The solution is to empower parents—to give real choice to those who can't afford it out of their own income. So we will give millions of parents their first chance to choose a school they really want for their children, and gain control over how their children learn. Parents and other groups now have the opportunity to create new types of schools.

And the Pupil Premium is also aimed at improving the educational opportunities of the most disadvantaged children. In Britain today, of the 80,000 pupils eligible for free school meals, just 45 make it to Oxbridge. It is only right that schools with a higher number of pupils from poorer families are given extra resources in order to try and end this segregation.

And Conservatives are now fully committed to the NHS. This doesn't mean there won't be changes - Andrew Lansley has set out some radical reforms in the recent Health White Paper. These are based on ensuring patients have all the information they need to decide their best treatment options:

- Giving family doctors control over their budgets
- Giving patients choice - and not just choice of a hospital.
- Unleashing an information revolution throughout the health and social care services.

This reformed system would give people from all backgrounds the opportunity and “right to choose where to be treated at any provider in what will become the largest social enterprise in the world”.

These are three big and hugely ambitious policy areas which illustrate what Tory Reform is actually about in practice. But there is much more happening.

## Community

Another area in which we are devolving power from the centre is local government. We are giving more power to local communities - to decide on the design priorities of their estate; to run their own projects; to have a much greater input into the local policing priorities.

Eric Pickle's localism policies are starting to do this by decentralising power from Whitehall. Since May we have already scrapped Regional Assemblies, Regional Strategies and the bureaucracy of RDAs. Local communities deserve to have real local power - including a larger degree of control over their own finances, lessening the grip of the Treasury over every penny spent by the public sector.

And at the Home Office we are working on plans for Elected Police Commissioners. Labour went down the route of more centralised policing, more intrusion, more databases, more surveillance, and more lecturing. It didn't work. We believe communities know best about their problems. And that the police should be held accountable to deliver what each neighbourhood needs.

These reforms will help reinstall a sense of community; a connection to where you live; a big society.

## Freedom

In my area, at the Home Office, we are taking immediate action to dismantle the database state, and start to make this a free country again. The Coalition Agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats states that "We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure...In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government".

As in the other policy areas I have outlined today, there is one reason why it is so vital that we start to rebalance the relationship between the citizen and the

state. As a Tory Reform Conservative, I believe we have a duty to help those who need help, and that such help is the mark of a civilised society. An essential part of the help we need to give the disadvantaged is the personal space and ability to control their own lives and freedom from the dictates of a nanny state that add up to what we call “civil liberties.”

This is counter-intuitive for those who believe that civil liberties are an effete middle-class obsession, but in fact the most likely victims of the surveillance state are the respectable poor, who will have been spied on throughout their daily lives, and who are not held fit to bring up their own children.

We are determined to reverse this patronising attitude:

- This autumn’s Freedom Bill will contain our proposals to reform the DNA database and the regulation of CCTV.
- The Home Secretary has already announced a review of all terrorism powers to ensure we focus them once again on the purpose they were intended for.
- And we have scrapped Identity Cards and the National Identity Register.

All of this set in train in less than six months. Everyone who ever trotted out the line that Coalition Governments would inevitably be slow and tentative should retire to a dark room to eat their words in private.

What is vital for the next five years and beyond is that a significant proportion of the Conservative Party continues to articulate the progressive Conservative message. Never again should we have to be warned about being out of touch and out of time.. A successful Coalition Government will make the real the argument that many of us have been making for the past 35 years, and will go on making for the next 35. That a combination of Tory realism and progressive idealism gives us the right kind of Government, the right kind of politics, and most importantly, a country we can be proud of.