



Equality of Aspiration: Are we nearly there yet?

by

Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP

Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP is the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. This pamphlet accompanies her speech at the ippr fringe event ‘Are We Nearly There Yet’ in Bournemouth 2003. The views expressed remain the responsibility of Tessa Jowell and do not necessarily represent the views of ippr.

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Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport

Labour stands for equality in its deepest sense. Our starting point is the equal worth of every individual: as a moral being; as a citizen before the law; as the bearer of various gifts and talents that each person should be free to develop to the full. Labour also recognises that individuals thrive best as ‘persons in community’, because we cannot alone provide all the opportunities we need.

RH Tawney, in his 1952 essay *British Socialism Today*, put it brilliantly:

‘A socialist society is a community of responsible men and women, working without fear, in comradeship, for common ends, all of whom can grow to their full stature, developing to the utmost the varying capacities with which nature has endowed them and, since virtue should not be too austere, have their fling when they like it’.

Since we came to power in 1997, New Labour has made progress towards making this vision a reality. While our focus has been on economic growth, full employment and public service reform we have also pursued a broader agenda. Labour values the whole

person – including physical expression and the creative heart and mind – and sport and culture are among the things that matter most to people in life, so this would not be a Labour Government if we did not take these things seriously. Jennie Lee, the first ever Minister for the Arts, wrote in the journal *Social Commentary* in January 1967 that she

‘could not give children, by Act of Parliament, loving parents or homes with good books. But we can give them an environment rich with theatre and libraries and an education enriched with music, drama and art. I am determined that all our children should be given the kind of education that was the monopoly of a privileged minority in the past.’

I passionately share that determination.

We are not instrumentalists, and we regard sport and culture as valuable in and of themselves. Radically widening access to high quality sporting and cultural experiences, especially for our young people, is as much part of New Labour’s fight against inequality as the minimum wage.

Precisely because sport and culture are so popular, they are also an important part of our economy. Taken together, the numerous creative enterprises – from film, fashion and football through to TV and tourism – amount to 15 per cent of Britain’s GDP and employ more people in London than financial services. Investment here brings significant returns.

Because of my job, I am more aware than most of the enormous capacity for creative achievement in Britain, and the potential for greater personal success and national wealth and prestige across the sporting and cultural spectrum. We have been ruthless in reforming bodies such as Sport England and the Arts Council to ensure they focus on increasing participation and our track record in extending opportunity is impressive: £850 million of lottery money in the UK for school and community sports facilities from the New Opportunities Fund, £224 million over the next 3 years to provide over 3000 School Sports Co-ordinators; using London's bid to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games to raise interest in sport around the country; changing the law to protect school playing fields; abolishing admission charges for national museums and galleries; £70 million dedicated funding for regional museums; 15 Creative Partnerships to strengthen links between schools and arts organisations in some of our most deprived neighbourhoods; 80 per cent business rate relief to the community sports clubs that together have 5 million members; a host of positive activities for young people after school and during the holidays.

But despite this progress towards equality of opportunity, a fundamental challenge remains: what Nye Bevan called 'poverty of aspiration'. What if people do not think these activities are for them? What if these new opportunities are seized only by some, most likely those for whom a rich cultural and sporting life is already a reality? Our aim must be more ambitious than equality of opportunity. Without equality of aspiration, equality of opportunity will simply magnify inequality and subsidise the

privileged. Take free museum entry, for instance. The visitor numbers have risen almost 100 per cent, but the increase is mainly among the better off. Among the less well off, the increase is just 30 per cent. So this is promising, but still not good enough.

Nevertheless, equality of aspiration in the sporting and cultural arenas is a good place to start. Young people, in particular, have a natural enthusiasm for them, and parents often encourage their children to make the most of opportunities that they never had. Sport and culture are the kind of activities that nurture self-esteem, inter-personal skills and teamwork. And the chance to express themselves and enjoy themselves, as well as achieve in new ways, should help young people to expect more of themselves at school, in employment and in physical health. Sport and culture are fun, and they have a serious purpose in giving expression to our values as well.

But we need to work harder at unlocking ambition and raising aspirations in every aspect of life. In some of our most marginalized communities, it is only an investment of care, respect and time that will break down the insidious, ingrained mental barriers that people have to imagining a better life for themselves and their children.

Loneliness, pessimism and lack of confidence are all serious obstacles to equality of aspiration. For people to overcome them, sustained enabling relationships that provide a more human and intense level of support are required. These relationships are necessary to compensate for the lack of networks that some

people suffer and to complement the work of other frontline professionals such as GPs. Teachers perhaps come closest to providing these relationships – the credit given on *Boy in da Corner* by Dizzee Rascal to his inspirational music teacher Tim Smith is testament to this – but this burden of responsibility should be shared.

As the Minister who launched Sure Start, I am particularly proud that this represents a qualitatively different kind of public service. It exemplifies New Labour's commitment to be inclusive and to make the most effort for the most disadvantaged. Sure Start, first and foremost, creates a space where mothers can support one another and give each other confidence, with assistance from professionals as backup. Sure Start is a framework for mutuality, nurturing the community of mothers in a neighbourhood and motivating them to be ambitious for their children. For instance, mothers are encouraged and equipped to be their child's first teacher, talking and reading and singing to their children. It is the 'alongsideness' of Sure Start – the knowledge that peers and professionals are looking out for them – that makes this service so valuable to mothers.

And those who sneer at this very personal level of public service do not understand the nature or scale of the challenge. New Labour does not 'nanny' but occupies a dynamic political space between the extremes of coercion and indifference. We want people to be able to make informed choices about their lives – on sex, smoking, sport, etc – precisely because we take a high view of human nature and because we respect their personal autonomy. Specifically, we are willing to intervene where children are

concerned. The opposite of what some condemn as ‘nannying’ is the unacceptable neglect of another generation.

I treasure a powerful quote from Saint Augustine: ‘Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.’ This hope is what gets me out of bed in the morning, and New Labour initiatives like Sure Start represent hope in action. This country needs a further injection of investment in the emerging generation if we are to break the vicious cycle of underachievement that afflicts so many families, but there can be no doubt, looking at our record to date, that this Government is absolutely committed to both equality of opportunity and equality of aspiration.

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