



E3G

Speech by John Ashton

Sun on the Tyne

Climate, Industry and the Just Struggle

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In the garden of a well-appointed residence on the outskirts of Liverpool, this conversation took place.

“Times are hard,” said the lady of the house, the Depression being then at its height. “From now on, there will be no more sowing of seeds for the staff”. “Does that mean, Ma’am” her gardener enquired, shoulders tensing, “the staff will not have their vegetables?”

“You and I understand each other perfectly well” replied Her Ladyship briskly. “No, Ma’am, we do not,” said her gardener, “and I would be grateful if you would do me the proud honour of never telling anyone I once worked for you”. The “proud honour”, mark you.

“I’ll take that as your notice” snapped Her Ladyship, “I’ll take it as your notice, and I’ll black you for it”.

And so she did. Since that day until he died of a weak heart ten years later, Edward Ashton, my granddad, was never again on a payroll. Through the thirties and into the War, he raised five children, jobbing in the public parks and private gardens of Merseyside, my dad for a while sharing a bed with his two brothers; my grandma, Agnes May, never quite forgiving her husband for putting principle before bread on the table.

What was really going on in that clash of tempers eighty years ago, now embedded in the oral history of one family?

Blacked. That is, blacklisted. No worse fate could befall a working person, especially with a family to support.

Employers wanted a compliant workforce. If you rocked the boat, your name would be put on a secret list of troublemakers, nobody ever again would give you a job. In life's snakes and ladders, no snake you could land on was more deadly than getting blacked.

And my granddad *was* rocking the boat, by standing up for those he worked with against the arbitrary withdrawal of a payment in kind that could in those days make the difference between a healthy family and a hungry one.

Blacklisting has no place in any society. It beggars belief that it persists today in Britain, and shames us all. I'm sure everyone here will support Frances and the TUC in their campaign to stamp it out for good.

But back to my grandad. The story of what took place that day is powerful because it was not only a clash of wills between two people, but a clash also between two very different ideas of Britain at a key moment in the making of our country.

Britain, it is true, was by then becoming a fairer place.

The right of labour representation through trade unions had long been secured; an early system of social insurance established; votes for women finally won.

But our harsher past still haunted us. Though no longer enshrined in law, master and servant psychology, the psychology of casual exploitation and deference taken for granted, lingered in many workplaces, especially those out of reach of trade unions, including evidently my granddad's.

And yet it was Her Ladyship not my granddad who was the truly tragic figure.

Edward Ashton yes paid a heavy personal price for his proud honour. And he would not live to see the return on his investment. But the Britain he represented was soon to come into its own.

Her Ladyship's Britain was doomed.

They stood, that day among the flowerbeds, on the threshold of a reordering as dramatic as any our society has ever experienced.

By 1941, Arthur Greenwood, Labour Minister without Portfolio in Churchill's War Cabinet, was appointing William Beveridge to write the blueprint for the welfare state. Then in 1945 came Clement Attlee's great government, acting on Beveridge's proposals, winning the peace at home, building a fairer Britain.

A Britain, where a safety net would catch anyone who was falling before they hit the bottom.

A Britain where, whatever your circumstances or origins, there would be a believable promise of freedom from Squalor, Ignorance, Want, Idleness, and Disease, a promise of universality celebrated in new institutions like the NHS.

A just Britain, where you could look anyone in the eye without fear or favour, and with pride in what we were building together.

A Britain where for the first time we were learning to define ourselves not by what made us different from those with whom we shared our country but by what bound us together. At last, at the mid-point of the twentieth century, we really were committing ourselves to building a *United* Kingdom.

Try not to look back through the distorting prism of what we know now. For many people including my parents it really did feel like that at the time.

We British are a complicated and contrary people, are we not?

A fusion in our island crucible of Celts, Romans, Saxons, Vikings, Normans and all who came before and after, for conquest, commerce, refuge, or a better life. A unique alloy that carries within it every human temperament and yet is something more than any of them.

Our history is a never-ending contest between the best in ourselves and less appealing aspects of our character. Generous yet by turns mean-spirited; tolerant yet capable of the most callous acts of tyranny and oppression; liberal and authoritarian; welcoming at times to strangers and at other times inhospitable. We dissent only to defer. We retreat behind our castle walls only to build bridges to our neighbours.

We hate the invader, except when it is we who are doing the invading - and we have done a fair bit of it. We have yet to come fully to terms with the way our imperial past affects how we are seen in many places.

But through it all there are virtues that keep reappearing.

We stand for justice. Sometimes, it is true, more honoured in the breach, but from the Magna Carta onwards many of our greatest moments have been shaped by a desire to live in a just society, where the strong don't trample on the weak; where all are equal before the law, and the power of the state is not for sale.

We have a genius for combining collaboration with solidarity. Trade unions, of course; but also friendly and mutual societies, cooperatives, companies, political parties, committees of every kind. Rules and procedures codified and informal, from the United Nations to your local cricket club and the checkout queue in your supermarket.

That's how we live our lives and, for better or worse, it's something we have shared enthusiastically around the world, inspired by the idea that human beings can accomplish

more together, *be better* together, than we ever could acting as individuals on impulse alone.

And we know in our bones that struggle is sometimes necessary. We may defer it until the eleventh hour but once we have screwed our courage to the sticking place, we are quite good at it.

Arthur Greenwood's first big moment came the year before his instruction to Beveridge.

In May 1940, just after Churchill became Prime Minister, as Dunkirk was getting under way, tense discussions were taking place in the War Cabinet. The issue was whether to stand and fight, or whether, as Halifax preferred, to offer Hitler a deal: leave us and our Empire alone, and we'll give you a free hand in Europe. Hitler is too strong, Halifax and his supporters argued, it's already too late, and if we stand against him we're bound to be defeated.

At the beginning Churchill was almost a lone voice. But Greenwood came in alongside him. That held the line and bought time. Over the next three days Churchill and Greenwood won their colleagues round and, against all the odds, prevailed.

It is often said that it was the War, the experience of shared sacrifice, that gave us the unity of purpose to build the new Britain.

That obviously had something to do with it. But it seems to me the War was no more than a lens, bringing into focus an image of ourselves that had already formed. The image that Her Ladyship, to her consternation, saw looking back at her that day in 1930.

The best in our history has been a story of progress achieved together, through struggle, through just struggle, and a willingness to risk defeat in order to make victory possible.

And no single force has contributed more to that just struggle, drawing more on those quintessential British virtues, than the movement that gave voice to those who work, that first came together almost 150 years ago at the Mechanics Institute in Manchester under the brand new banner of the Trades Union Congress.

Thanks to your movement the workplace became during my lifetime fairer than it had ever been, Britain became fairer than it had ever been.

But then we faltered. We could not carry ourselves all the way over the threshold. Having laid the foundation for a fairer society, we could not agree about the kind of country, the kind of economy, we wanted to build on that foundation. We could not agree on the role that your movement should play in our national settlement.

And so we retreated into strife and tribal camps. Old divisions reopened inside our society and new ones appeared. In particular, a chasm opened between a dominant, complacent southeast and our former industrial heartlands, as cultural and social foundations

established over centuries in communities up and down the land were ripped up with apparent disregard for the human consequences.

If Scotland leaves our Union it will be a tragedy - but also the legacy of an avoidable failure of empathy and political imagination on the part of our ruling elites, a failure to stay focused on what binds us together.

And in the absence of a single vision forged together, one idea slithered across from the right until it had coiled itself around our politics, our machinery of government, our business and media elites. I'm sure you can guess what I'm building up to.

But first, consider this.

In Java, and widely across the tropics, grows a tree called *antiaris toxicaria*, a kind of fig, more commonly known as the upas tree. There is probably no more unfairly maligned species in the entire plant kingdom.

A Dutch botanist, having encountered a specimen in 1783, described how its leaves gave off a rank vapour that poisoned the surrounding soil, killing anything that might compete with it for water, nutrients, and light. Darwin picked this up, calling the upas a "hydra tree of death", and before long Pushkin, knowing a good metaphor when he saw one, had written a poem about it. That was all complete nonsense, but by then the damage was done.

The idea that held our elites in thrall was the intellectual equivalent of a upas tree. It was a upas idea.

The contours of the upas idea are defined in politics by the doctrine of radical individualism; in economics by neoliberalism.

Nothing matters more than "efficiency".

Only the market can allocate resources efficiently.

Government interference in the operation of the market makes it less efficient, cuts growth and curtails liberty.

Government shall get out of the way and let the market do its work, conjuring for the good of all the most efficient and productive of all possible economies.

Business, because it is thought to understand the market better than anyone else, came in this new order to be treated with particular reverence. Trade unions did not, and were subjected to a relentless campaign of vilification that goes on to this day as enemies of efficiency.

This upas idea exterminates all competing ideas about the kind of economy we actually want to live in. The only economy we can have is the one that emerges from the myriad of allegedly rational choices that make up the market. By definition, this is the best of all worlds. All that remains is to give thanks, like Voltaire's optimist even in the midst of disaster, for our good fortune in living there.

But the upas idea doesn't just kill other ideas; it kills society. That's why for those in its grip there really is no such thing as society – and so society can't be allowed to exist because if it did it might point out that in reality all markets are bounded by our own collective choices and full of market failures, that efficiency is no good if it can't secure essential public goods, and that as soon as markets become master not servant they surrender any claim to a moral foundation.

And we drift like the Marie Celeste blown hither and thither by the market winds, having given up of our own accord the will to grasp the rudder.

And what a storm those winds blew us into.

That storm didn't just blow down the banks and sow chaos in the financial system. It was the upas idea itself that the winds blew to smithereens. The upas idea is now dead.

Some people do not seem to have noticed that yet. But our country has. The proposition that politics should not have a view about the structure of the economy, that it should not use policy to deliver public goods and protect against shocks....well that proposition is no longer credible.

And so, in some disarray, our elites clinging to the wreckage of a model that has collapsed, a model that came to dominate because of our failure to clamber all the way across a threshold of opportunity we had ourselves constructed, we stand now facing another threshold, no less momentous than the last.

Be in no doubt. Britain 20 years from now will again be a new Britain. By the time your children are your age, they will have inherited a country that is as different from Britain today as were the 1950s from the 1930s.

And the question before us is the most ancient of questions and at once the most contemporary of questions.

To grasp our destiny or submit to it? "To be or not to be?", as Shakespeare put it.

Do we at this new threshold reassert our capacity to choose, to build together the Britain we want? Or have we been so incapacitated by the upas poison that we can only resign ourselves to whatever future might befall us, shaped by forces we no longer dare even to try and control?

If it takes injustice to stir us there is surely enough of it.

Old wounds reopening. Holes appearing in the safety net, the poor, the weak, the elderly (that is, our parents and grandparents), the sick and disabled, the vulnerable again falling through even as they are demonized in a cynical attempt to dull the conscience of those who are still doing OK.

Zero hours contracts. People who already can't cope being broken, up and down the country, on the wheel of a benefits purge cruel both in intent and in administration. The Red Cross, unbelievably, here in Britain, to our national shame, about to hand out food relief as if our country were a war zone.

Meanwhile, the gap between the southeast and the heartlands has become a gulf. Since 2007, 267,000 new jobs in London. This is once again a great time to be an estate agent in London. Meanwhile, 284,000 jobs lost in the rest of Britain.

And on top of all this, a new breach in our social fabric, the biggest breach of all.

Britain's young people today are the first generation for more than a century who face prospects that are worse not better than those that were available to their parents.

We baby boomers got a pretty good deal. Free or affordable education, health care, mortgages, energy. On each of those fronts we shall be passing on a diminished legacy.

And when they look towards us, our young people see no desire for a real conversation with them about how to rescue that legacy. What they see, what they feel, is a complacent establishment stuck in its comfort zone, clinging to the familiar, clinging to business as usual.

And so in droves they have turned their backs. Never in modern times have so many young people had so little confidence in our establishment, our institutions, our politics, across all the parties. They don't knock on doors for political parties, don't join them, don't vote, don't trust politicians.

Our new just struggle as we stand at this threshold will be the struggle to restore the contract between generations.

And that's where - you may be wondering - that's where climate change comes in. A contract that does not include fixing the climate will not be a contract worth having.

And forging the contract that's needed really will be a struggle.

Fixing the climate demands a reengineering of the energy system, and therefore of the high carbon growth model that since the industrial revolution we have built around it. If you reengineer the growth model, you reengineer the power relations that underpin it. And as

Marx might have observed, power relations don't like being reengineered. Incumbents fight to keep rules rigged in their favour.

The trade union movement knows all about that. It's been the story of your life.

If the old growth model - if casino finance, house prices that go up more than they go down, consumption fuelled by debt - can no longer give us economic security - what kind of economy do we want in the new Britain?

An economy no longer so dependent on the City and its hinterland, an economy whose focus is shifting back to the creation of real not speculative value.

An economy for the whole of Britain, where north and south are coming back together, where successive generations are rallying behind the same vision of our future.

An economy drawing inspiration from a reawakening of industry, decades of decline halted and reversed, with a renewal of infrastructure and manufacturing, and a surge of investment in skills and innovation.

An economy, whose buildings are no longer among the least energy efficient in our continent but the most energy efficient in the world.

An economy resilient against shocks, off the oil and gas hooks at last, no longer at the mercy of spikes in international prices for those or other commodities.

An economy, above all, with a completely overhauled energy system. Carbon neutral electricity, generated increasingly with renewables, much of it by communities. A modern power grid managing demand and carrying power to and from the rest of Europe to smooth out fluctuations. The electrification of transport and heating gathering pace.

And that is where climate change again comes in.

Because that's a blueprint for a low carbon economy. The kind of economy we need to be building anyway if we want to deal with climate change. An accelerator in the global response to climate change, with British climate diplomacy based increasingly on our walk as well as our talk, Britain driving growth around the world in low carbon trade and investment.

That's also the kind of economy by the way that the world's most dynamic nations and regions - China, Germany, California - are already pulling ever further ahead of us in building.

I grew up on Tyneside. In the 60's and 70's it felt as if the best days in the northeast were long gone. In some towns more than 50% of the adult population had no job. The river was black and toxic. The future held no promise.

If you go down to the Quayside in Newcastle today, you can get a boat to Tynemouth and back again. It's an inspiring journey.

What you see is one of Europe's great industrial rivers, a river that had died, stirring back into life. Siemens, with its new base for servicing wind turbines in the North Sea. One of Britain's biggest facilities, still growing, for the processing and transshipment of biomass fuel, including for Drax power station. Nissan exporting from its South Shields terminal fuel-efficient and electric cars to distant markets. And all those installations creating jobs, investment and growth along their supply chains.

A great river coming back into life because of a low carbon economy in our country that kept growing at close to 4% all the time the economy as a whole was hardly moving.

It's not surprising that the enemies of the low carbon economy, those clinging to business as usual, want to nip all this in the bud before it's too late.

They want to water down the carbon budgets and squeeze the supply of finance for green investment. They reject the targets for decarbonised electricity and renewables that would reassure investors deterred by the current bickering. They want to frack their way back to an energy future that will simply be a more expensive replay of the past, trashing our precious countryside as they go.

The last thing we should do now is choke off investment in energy efficiency, especially for those struggling to heat and power their homes, as is reportedly being considered.

So yes, if we want to win we will have to struggle. The forces on our side are formidable but they are not yet organized. We have yet to build the winning coalition.

It's time to build that coalition. Not a new coalition between our political parties. A coalition that will force the parties to look at our country in a new way.

At all the greatest moments in your movement, justice for your members and justice for the country came together. And now they have come together again.

Justice for our young people. Justice for those who work. A new coalition built around your common cause. A new just struggle for Britain's renewal.

The TUC is already in the vanguard. There has been no stronger voice for that renewal in recent years, no individual champion more committed and persuasive than Frances. You have the high ground. But now, please, reach out from there and build the coalition we need.

We can't write the manifesto today, but here's a foretaste of what might be in it. A manifesto to put Britain and to keep Britain in the front rank of the inevitable global shift to a low carbon economy.

Let's now get some real scale into energy upgrades for our buildings. Let's break once and for all the link between energy prices and energy bills.

I'm delighted the TUC supports the Energy Bill Revolution, to recycle carbon revenues to fund such upgrades, with priority for those in fuel poverty.

Britain is already the world's largest market for offshore wind. But nobody wants to make turbines here because of the mixed signals about whether we really want a low carbon economy. Siemens could be making turbines on Tyneside not just servicing them.

Let's end the uncertainty; get decarbonisation and renewables targets in place in Britain and the EU; give investors the confidence to keep Britain at the top of the global league table for offshore wind; and make sure more of the resulting jobs are jobs in Britain.

And while we are about it, let's do the same for carbon capture and storage.

If gas or coal are to play any part in our energy mix they will need to be burned with CCS. If we want to keep steel, petrochemicals, cement and other carbon intensive industries in this country it will need to be with CCS.

We have industry clusters in Humberside and elsewhere ready for CCS infrastructure. We have in the North Sea some of the best carbon storage prospects in the world, enough not only for our needs but for a large part of northern Europe's. In our universities and companies we have world class expertise and technology spanning the entire value chain.

We have wasted a decade. In government CCS has been a poor relation, starved of resources and imagination by the desperate effort, in the news today, to attract new nuclear investment. Those priorities have been the wrong way round.

We cannot fix the climate without a rapid acceleration in the deployment of CCS worldwide. Let's make Britain the world leader.

We will also need a surge of new investment in decentralized power and heating. That's what's transforming energy markets in Germany, driving costs down for renewables and disrupting the old centralized business model for electricity.

Community energy gives control back to the consumer. Let's put Britain in the forefront of that movement too.

Building a low carbon economy is not, chiefly, about the price of carbon. It's about the cost of capital for low carbon investment. Let's drive down the cost of capital, and while we are at it kick the Green Deal back into life, by liberating the Green Investment Bank so it can borrow. Let's lift the Treasury's pointless borrowing ban now.

We need to support all this by making sure that enough people come into the labour market with the skills and training to keep the transition moving forward.

So let's get a programme in place to transform our skills base in order to transform the economy. A programme designed and run by trade unions, government, industry and institutions of higher education working side by side.

And let's not wait for that as we green our workplaces up and down the country. Union representatives have been at the forefront of this, cutting bills and carbon for their employers, and strengthening team working. They should now be given full union rights develop their workplace campaigns.

We mustn't forget Europe. We can't do any of this in Britain unless we are at the leading edge of a transformation taking place across the EU.

We must all struggle to break out of the suspicious, scared, parochialism that is poisoning our approach to every aspect of our dealings with the rest of our continent. The TUC with its proud internationalist tradition has an historic role to play in this.

Let's make sure that a new British industrial policy is at the heart of a low carbon industrial policy for Europe, a policy that offers a prospect worth having to all, including countries like Poland that currently feel locked into the high carbon economy. And let's make our power grid part of a proper European grid designed and built for renewables and efficiency. The North Seas project is a good start but we now need to get it to scale.

None of this, none of this will be enough unless we can restore confidence in our politics. It's not just young people who no longer believe our political parties offer a better future. Never in my lifetime has public trust in our politics, our institutions, and our elites been at such a low ebb.

Now more than ever we should be fostering the emergence of new voices, from outside the mainstream as well as within it. And yet our government is seeking to stifle all noises off with a Lobbying Bill born of the worst, most authoritarian traditions in our history.

The labour movement has rightly focused on the provisions relating to trade unions. But Part 2 of the Bill contains the greatest danger to our democracy. It is a crude and cynical attempt to quell those voices that right now most need to be heard.

This Bill is being smuggled through without proper debate. It is, as Tom Burke has pointed out, a modern version of the Combination Acts passed in the 18th and 19th centuries, to stop working people coming together to press exploitative employers for better conditions. You know all about that.

This Bill should be scrapped now and if it gets enacted any manifesto for a coalition of young and working people would promise to repeal it.

I used to play cricket - it wasn't *that* long ago mind - I used to play cricket with an opening bowler from Wallsend. Diminutive, wiry, tenacious. Metronomically accurate on his day, probing down the corridor of uncertainty, ball after ball.

If you're a cricketer, you'll understand. If not, please bear with me just for a moment.

Sometimes when the sun beat down and the track was flat enough to break a bowler's heart, the batsmen would get in, would start punching the ball into gaps.

When that happened we would shout, "Hey Geordie, remember where you're from!"

That would rile him up. And as often as not he'd find an extra yard of pace, find a hint of movement that wasn't there before; find the edge. And the ball would fly off the edge, into the slips, into waiting hands, into grateful hands.

It's game on now, lads.

We've got to fix the climate. We've got to build the new economy. We've got to look our young people in the eye and say to them: we get it now.

We've got to embark on the new just struggle. We've got to win the new just struggle: we've got to feel the sun really shining over the Tyne.

Can you hear that voice? It's getting louder. It's calling, to you and you and you and you, to every one of us.

"Hey Geordie, remember where you're from!"

Hey Geordie, remember where you're from.

John Ashton

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John Ashton is an independent commentator and adviser on the politics of climate change. From 2006-12 he served as Special Representative for Climate Change to three successive UK Foreign Secretaries, spanning the current Coalition and the previous Labour Government. He was a cofounder and, from 2004-6, the first Chief Executive of the think tank E3G. From 1978-2002, after a brief period as a research astronomer, he was a career diplomat, with a particular focus on China.

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