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Inaugural Peel Lecture

Launch of the Commission on Life Chances

Bury College, 21 September 2016

1. Two Bury Life Stories

I want to start with two Bury life stories.

The first one starts in Chamber Hall, Bury in 1788. A boy is born to the mill-owner. He is one of the lucky ones, born to a good fortune made in calico-printing. He was not a popular boy.

His cousin later wrote that he would walk a mile round the block rather than encounter the rude jests of the Bury lads. As a former Bury Grammar School pupil, I know what that's like.

He went to school at Harrow and university at Oxford before entering the House of Commons in 1809. This young boy went on to give his name "Bobby" to the office of policeman that he created. Then, as Prime Minister, he split the Conservative party over free trade in 1846.

This Bury boy never really liked it down London. He never lost his Bury accent and his manners were laughed at because he liked to cut his jelly with a knife.

Here, though, in this town he is commemorated in its streets and institutions. I always locate where I am in relation to Bury by looking for the Tower which bears his name. As if Robert Peel required any greater honour he now lends his name to this lecture.

The second story is a man born in 1912 in Bury, a man who lived all his life here. Despite being bright he left school at 15 and went to work in the mill, part of the prosperity brought by a century before by the Peels.

From 15 to 65 he rose from floor-boy to foreman to become the confidante of the mill owner, a member of the Conservative party and friend of the Member of Parliament.

After 50 years of employment in the same mill he retired. I still have his picture, holding his gold clock, published in *The Bury Times*. His name was Thomas Taylor and he was my grandfather.

It is to his example and his labour that I owe the lucky circumstances of my own life. My grandfather bought his own home and tended a beautiful garden. Never happier than in his shed, alone.

I have often thought that gardening and writing are similar. Solitary pursuits, creating something wondrous from the blank sheet, the barren ground.

Those two worlds – the world of Robert Peel, the world of Thomas Taylor – have gone now. The Industrial Revolution gave Bury its purpose as a textile and paper town. Peel lived through the era of transition from the stage-coach to the railway.

My grandfather lived in the age of mechanisation and heavy industry, through the shift from the railway to the private car, not that he ever owned one or learnt to drive.

His was an age in which the school gates opened to let the pupils out and the factory doors opened on the same day to let them in. There was plentiful work for the unskilled, as long as they were prepared to graft, which most of them were.

Peel and my grandfather had a mixture of good fortune, talent and effort. Peel was a cold and austere man. He had few friends and wasn't, by all accounts, much fun.

My grandfather wasn't at all like that. He was steadfast, loyal, reliable and dependable. A church warden and a school governor. Deeply ambitious, but for his children and grandchildren, not for himself.

In different ways, at different times, Peel and my grandfather embodied the desire to make the most of your life. But their worlds have passed and so it falls to us now to work out what it means to have the best possible chance in life today.

2. Life Chances

Think of that last term for a moment. *Chance* has a dual meaning. It is the prize to be pursued and the role that luck plays in securing it. How do we reduce the role of brute luck so that every son and daughter of Bury today is fortunate enough to be given a chance?

This project we launch today, and which I am privileged to chair, is called the Bury Commission on Life Chances. I want to describe to you the programme of work we have in mind and how you can help us.

Before I start, I want to emphasise that last word. Us. I have been reading John F Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Speech as President of the USA. It ends with the famous line "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country".

During the drafting Kennedy asked his speech-writer to take out all the reference to "I" and replace them with "we" or "us". He wanted the tone to include everyone, to ask for their help.

This may not be quite the Presidential Inaugural and Bury College may not be the steps of the Lincoln Memorial but I want to make the same plea.

Bury is a fine place to live. It's a place that has made great progress and we start from the assumption that those people who have produced the progress are those best placed to carry it on.

I shall be calling on many of you, begging for your time and expertise to ask what you can do for Bury.

Life chances is a deliberately wide term. It's not just about the young, although of course a child with a whole life to live is very much part of our concern. But we are concerned too for the life chances of teenagers, young people in work, young people out of work, parents and grandparents, people in work who would like to progress, carers and people in varied difficult circumstances.

In a word, everyone.

It's not for me to tell you what the good life is, either. A generous idea of life chances allows people to draw their own plans.

For my grandfather it was the garden. For my grandmother the good life was being the verger at church, cutting the flowers for the Sunday communion.

But there are some things we all need. Health and well-being, physical and mental. Education. Income. Occupation. Housing. Safety. Friends and family, mum and dad, brother and sister, grandma and grandad.

There is a lot of data, which I shan't bore you with today to show that one deprivation tends to lead to another. Low income tends, obviously, to be associated with poor housing, poor health and so on, ending up in the life chances of that person being impaired.

There is an essay by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called *The Enemies Of Freedom* in which he names the thinkers who stood in the way of human flourishing.

What are the enemies of fair life chances? Poor health, poverty, low aspiration, poor services for the least well off, a lack of employment opportunity.

These are the five giants standing in the way of good life chances for young people in Bury. The Commission will be a contribution to slaying them.

3. Life Chances in Bury

Let's look at Bury for a moment and let's do so with a little perspective. Peel's father got rich at least in part on the back of child labour. Ill-health and malnutrition among the workforce was endemic.

Peel senior was so ashamed by how the workers lived that, as an MP, he carried through the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act which limited hours of labour and forbade night-work.

In 1841, Robert Peel oversaw the 1842 Mines Act which forbade the employment of women and children underground and the 1844 Factory Act which limited working hours for children and women in factories.

Peel's great rival Disraeli famously wrote that Britain was two nations, the rich and the poor. The purpose of Peel's political life was to mitigate the distress in the industrial North.

In 1846, in the last great Corn Laws debate in the House of Commons Peel described his mission with tears in his eyes: “the real issue at question is the improvement of the social and moral condition of the masses of the population.”

We live in another world now, after the age of progress and Bury has a good story to tell. To cite just one example, in 2014/2015, 68.2% of students attained 5+ GCSEs A* to C, the third highest proportion in Greater Manchester.

Before we dwell on what is going wrong it is important to note that we are not discussing a basket case. The ambition of this Commission is to take Bury from near the top of the rankings in the region to the top. And then to keep going.

It is, however, in the nature of policy Commissions like this that it concentrates on problems it sets out to fix. So if I ever sound miserable, as if all the cares of the world have landed on my shoulder, don't believe it. It's just the job I've been given.

And we all know there are some pressing issues. The attainment gap between children on free school meals and those not eligible is lower than the national average but it's still 22.6%. Asian children in Bury suffers from an attainment gap and there are some problems with poor white British children.

Bury does have pockets of deprivation, notably in parts of Radcliffe and East Bury, which were both heavily reliant on the old textile and paper industries.

We see some generational unemployment. In-work poverty is growing and lots of employees find progressing at work can be hard. We'll need to take a look at Bury's most significant sectors: health and social care, retail and wholesale distribution, hospitality, tourism and sport.

We want to look at what needs to be done to encourage entrepreneurs in Bury. We want to investigate how employees can improve their skills while in work.

We want to explore provision for children in their earliest years, opportunities for children who are not academic, the role of mentoring and aspiration. A university in the town is a great opportunity.

There is a lot to do but it is very exciting.

4. The Town Of Bury

Some of these questions are about individual and family circumstances. But this is also about Bury as a town. During the Industrial Revolution Bury's purpose was clear. I used to visit Bury's past in the museum which housed all the early machines that made Bury, Manchester and then the world prosperous.

In the 1860s *The Times* regularly ran letters by correspondents complaining about the North-South divide. But in those days it was the North which had all the money and the Southern letter-writers didn't like it one bit.

Those days will return. Part of the remit of the Commission is to think about what a town can do for itself and what a local authority can do for a town.

I am keenly aware that there are sensitivities here. Peel was once involved in settling the border between the United States and Canada.

That must have been a doddle next to the boundary between Bury and Bolton, not to mention the various political units involved in Bury today. Our job is to work within the structure, not to fall out with everyone. That's because we know the components of successful change.

You need a powerful and engaged local authority keen to engage all the relevant people. We have that.

You need a friend in the political leadership one tier up, in the city mayor's office. We have that, electorate willing, and thank you Andy for joining us.

You need good transport links. We have that.

You need a culture of enterprise that can be the platform for improvement. We have that.

You need to spark the culture of a place, to generate a sense of excitement. We have that.

Above all you need to create the sense that the town is not a place of need but a place of opportunity.

5. The Work Of The Commission

That is what the Bury Commission on Life Chances is designed to do.

We will diagnose the state of life chances in Bury now and make concrete recommendations for change. We are not interested in vague aspirations or lofty sentiments. We want to be practical. To recognise the good that is being done and supplement it. To make a difference. If this Commission produces a report which gathers dust on a shelf and changes nothing then it will have failed.

This is the spirit of Robert Peel, in the following verdict about reducing the cost of corn, from Douglas Hurd's biography.

"He (Peel) was not alone; many others concerned themselves with poverty. The Chartists looked for an answer in radical political change. Lord Shaftesbury pressed for social legislation to improve working conditions. Marx and Engels out of their research hatched the theories of Communism. But Peel was the man who acted. He worked out a clear analysis and remedy".

We will be gathering as much evidence as possible, from as many of you as we can reach. The details of the sessions we have planned are in your information packs. I will be calling personally on many of you, to pick your brains.

I am not going to ask what I can do for you but what you can do for me.

By February 2017 we will hope to have our recommendations. But in a sense it is then that our work will begin. It was said of Peel that "he preferred facts to phrases". That will be our spirit too.

6. Conclusion

Nine miles from here, in central Manchester, you can visit the statues, in Albert Square, of the heroes of the Anti-Corn Law League. The Free Trade Hall was the only building ever dedicated to an idea.

St Peter's Fields was the site, 27 years before repeal, of the massacre of Peterloo when the government sent in the cavalry against protestors. It was also here, on this spot, that Michael Young set his book *The Rise Of The Meritocracy*.

Young defined merit as talent plus effort. That formula makes me think of the image of my grandfather in *The Bury Times*. There is a lot of talent in this town and a lot of it gets torn off unused.

I have the testimony of my mother for this claim. My mother was a primary school teacher in Radcliffe and Bury who taught generations of kids to read. In the later years of her career she taught a predominantly Asian intake at St Thomas's primary school.

I will never forget her description of the moment a child recognises the patterns of script on a page for the first time. A light goes on.

There is a light and it never goes out. The ability to read an English sentence is the foundation of a democratic culture. It is the start of the journey of a life.

If, through this Commission, I can do one fraction of what my grandfather and my mother did for this town, then it will have been a privilege.

Ask not what Bury can do for me but what I can do for Bury.

Thank you for listening. It has been a pleasure to speak to you.