

Rt Hon Clare Short at the Gladstone Club

Tuesday 4th January 2005



The Gladstone Club
1 Whitehall Place London SW1A 2HD

Throughout her twenty-one years in the House of Commons Clare Short has made the abolition of poverty her special concern. So for the seventy members and guests attending the Gladstone Club on Tuesday night it was a privilege to hear her speak and both a delight and a surprise that such a serious subject could be explored with such optimism and such charm.

She has a directness and an ease in speaking of ideals, uncharacteristic of the pronouncements of politicians as we hear them in the media. Is it that the press have become so harsh and unremitting that politicians will utter nothing outside of the party line? Or is it that the party mechanism with its press machine and system of whips ensures that those who go 'off-message' are 'finished'? Or again is it that the medium itself is over-stretched by the demands of 24-hour reporting? Even in the House of Commons the cameras never sleep. So perhaps it is only in the modest confines of an environment such as the Gladstone Club that such open political discussion thrives.

Indeed it was surprising to hear the words Justice and Equity in the opening remarks of a politician. The theme was international development and Ms. Short saw room for optimism in the scale and speed of the public response to the Asian Tsunami crisis. She estimated the UK annual contribution to development charities at £200m while in weeks £80m has been raised in response to this disaster. She saw in this immediate awareness of conditions in distant places the seeds of a changing world order of transparency in which Justice and Equity had to be recognised as the only practical solution both for the world's poor and, if they want sustained security, for the rich too.

In Clare Short's analysis, the problems of the world are simple - Justice must be done. On the Palestinian question, she said, the majority on both sides support a two-state solution, Jerusalem would be divided, an equitable policy must be implemented on right of return and all settlements must be withdrawn. On ethnic cleansing - from Yugoslavia to Rwanda to Sudan - if early UN reports were heeded and a sufficiently resourced UN force interposed, such events are preventable. On poverty and disease, the knowledge of causes and solutions has long existed it just needs to be implemented. That the 20th century has sustained unprecedented world population

growth from 1.2bn in 1900 to 6.2bn today in fact attests to our ability to meet such challenges.

But there was pessimism too, with little spared for Mr. Blair and his government. She noted that the government's pledges on the Tsunami crisis promised no 'new' money but simply draw upon the annual fund allocation in the budget of DFID (the government Department for International Development). She was sceptical of Gordon Brown's calls for debt relief as the solution to the immediate crisis. It is the poor who will suffer in the long term from the tsunami but she said the economies will not be significantly effected. What was the virtue in debt relief as a populist gesture divorced from scrutiny of the regime to which it would be extended? Developing countries need to be helped to develop well-functioning systems, not to be declared bankrupt.

In a broad but thought-provoking historical sweep she painted the end of the cold war in which all international issues were framed in terms of manoeuvrings between enemy blocks. Then, she said, governments' and civil services' responses had been ponderous; with some merit as obfuscation was the one factor which prevented the cold war turning hot. But in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the release of Nelson Mandela, when civil society was fired with optimism, these same organisations had emerged blinking into the light of the brave new world order unreformed. Now where rapid response was required it failed to emerge. Clare Short fears that the adversarial habits have resolved themselves into the creation of a new enemy in 'the war on terror'. The implication was that the moment for moving rapidly on Justice and Equity may have been lost.

She was sceptical for instance of the hope that UK presidency of the G8 and of Europe in 2005 would somehow see solutions to Africa, the Environment and the Middle East. While America had been instrumental in setting up the United Nations, agreeing the Kyoto Protocol and the Oslo accord, its present unwillingness to support or ratify these institutions and agreements leaves them critically weakened. If the UK had really been America's friend it would have done what real friends do and counselled against rash error in what she termed 'the rush to war'.

While acknowledging that the United Nations was not blameless in the failure to respond, she praised its successes, notably for instance action on Ozone depletion. Whatever its failings, in her view they are eminently reformable, and Kofi Annan has been a reformer. Its ultimate weakness is that it is comprised of national governments which themselves vary in their probity but the alternative, a return to competing power blocks, cannot be a preferable system.

Several oblique allusions were made on systems of government. She twice alluded to Thomas Hobbes' divinely anointed monarch with, it seemed, a momentary wistfulness as if perhaps the immediacy of absolute decree appealed as an antidote to the vacillation of deliberative assemblies and the anodyne platitudes of their elected representatives. Elsewhere she doubted the wisdom of implanting democracy in lawless conditions. Was there a Platonic sensibility of Democracy as an unsatisfactory system of government? When pressed, she decried its idealisation by Americans but fell back on Churchill's famous phrase 'the least worst form of government'. Time prevented that thread from expanding to a consideration of the significance of non-democratic elements within mixed systems of government - judiciaries, constitutional monarchies, civil services, the professions, NGOs etc. Or for that matter, to a consideration of whether the purer democracy of Proportional Representation in Israel might not be the efficient impediment to just resolution of the conflict.

However she did spare some praise for independent state-funded media. She claimed that the absence of anything like the BBC in America has allowed 70% of American voters to believe that Al Qaeda launched '9/11' from Iraq. Her faith in 'the people' and her optimism in civil societies leading governments was therefore tempered by the degree to which the people are well-informed and well-judged in their opinions. "What we need" she said "is more gatherings like this", more people getting together to question, discuss and debate.