

Duncan: Our policies must pass the Tyneside test

In his speech to the Conservative Party Conference, Shadow Trade and Industry Secretary, Alan Duncan said:

"Mr Chairman - This debate on our economy and how people balance their work with their life is one of the most important we will have at this conference.

If we are really to grasp the economic challenges Britain has to face, we need to understand the magnitude of the forces which are changing global markets.

Last time around our economic challenges were very different. They were high inflation, strikes, punitive taxation, and the humiliation of the Labour Government having to borrow from the IMF.

We solved those problems. We reformed the unions, tamed inflation and put the public finances on a firm footing. It is no exaggeration to say that we rescued Britain from economic oblivion.

Back then, we found the solutions. But now in a world of increasing competition, we cannot afford to stand still. There are new challenges to confront. In a world where others are forging ahead so fast, our future prosperity is not guaranteed.

China and India are growing at a staggering rate.

Just twenty years ago, China was an impoverished, communist failure. Today it is responsible for ten per cent of the world's exports, and last year China actually overtook us as the world's fourth largest economy.

Meeting this challenge is a social responsibility, not just a state responsibility.

But, just when we need to be improving our performance so as to keep up, Labour's approach is making the UK less competitive.

We used to be the fourth most competitive economy in the world. This year we have fallen once again and now we are the tenth.

Our corporation tax used to be one of the lowest in the developed world.

But now under Labour it is one of the highest.

Ever since Labour was elected Britain has steadily become less and less attractive to investors.

And just when we ought to be reducing regulation in order to release the productive energy of business...

...Gordon Brown is stifling enterprise with 15 new regulations every working day.

If this country wants to improve its competitive position in the world, we need a new direction.

We need to encourage enterprise in all its forms. That's my challenge as the Shadow Secretary of State. In opposing Alistair Darling and his ministers I have a fantastic team around me in Parliament who actually know something about business.

My House of Lords team, and Jonathan Djanogly in the Commons, have radically improved the Companies Bill. Mark Prisk is re-connecting the Party with small business. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown is holding the Government to account on international trade. And Charles Hendry, has worked tirelessly on science, technology and the energy review.

That energy review was a document which showed that as the world is changing, our Party is changing too.

Unlike the Government's review, which failed to lay out how guaranteed carbon reductions

could be achieved, our policies would slash carbon emissions, secure our energy supplies, and promote renewable forms of energy. Our policy is designed to spark a green revolution and ensure that green growth is at the heart of our country's future.

We kept Ministers on their toes, and they followed my every move very closely. So now you can understand why I am the only Shadow Secretary who can get away with calling his opposite number 'Darling'.

In order to achieve the goals we are talking about at this conference, we must have successful businesses. In essence the DTI is the only department that makes the money, or at least is the guardian of those who make the money, which other departments then spend.

We must have profitable businesses if we are to eliminate poverty and support the first class public services we believe in.

I want to be a voice for business in Whitehall and a voice for Britain in the world.

But we've got to tackle some really big issues if we're going to get our policies right. We've got to ask some really searching questions.

Can we save manufacturing jobs?
Are we now a post-industrial society?
Can we prosper as only a service economy?
Can we teach people the skills that suit a modern world?
Can we include all sections of society in fruitful employment?
Can we compete effectively when our taxes are so high?

These are fundamental questions. But they cannot be answered in isolation.

The world of business is changing. Investors and consumers are increasingly interested in the behaviour of companies. From free-range eggs to Fairtrade tea people are buying ethically.

Increasingly business is recognising that working in partnership with their communities and taking responsibility for their impact is both ethically right and good for profits.

And the world of work is changing too - as we will hear from Will Hutton and Jenny Watson in a moment.

If we want people to work well in the world, we have got to get things right in the world of work. Our challenge as policy makers is to harness people's willingness to work so as to fit all the other demands on their life.

Young people today will not have the certainty of a job that lasts a lifetime. They are increasingly choosing a portfolio career, with a series of interests, rather than just one job 9 to 5. We should welcome this, and work to make it easier for them.

Mothers are increasingly returning to work. These days more than half of mums with kids under five have got a job. They are working to make their lives better and it must be our ambition to make it easier for all mothers to balance their job with their family.

These mothers, working hard, often with the system against them, who have aspiration for their family and their future, should not be criticised. They are champions, fulfilling the highest decencies of conservatism in fending for themselves, providing for their family, and doing so as the result of their own efforts.

We need to promote choices in childcare, and we need to encourage flexible working. Updating the world of work is a social responsibility not just a state responsibility.

Asda, for instance, by linking their employment terms to school terms have built up a committed, and dedicated workforce of mothers and grandmothers.

My earliest motivation in politics was to try to stop Britain's economic decay. My main motivation now is to secure its future success. George Osborne and I have not come into

politics to manage decline. We are working together to establish the highest standards of corporate activity and public finance. Unlike me he doesn't need a box to stand on at the lectern, so perhaps it explains why in all our efforts we've been dubbed 'Osborne and Little'.

As part of our revival plans David Cameron has asked me to be Shadow Minister for Tyneside. Instead of sitting cosily in London, I and my DTI team will be up there, asking what our policies will do for the school leaver or the manufacturing business and using it to shape our policies.

I believe if we can get things right in Tyneside we can really do great things to stimulate business and opportunity all across Britain. And, I intend to test all our DTI policies through the experience of Tyneside. This is all part of our vision for national cohesion.

Mr Chairman, I believe that, just as before, we Conservatives have the ideas, we have the understanding and the determination to meet these challenges and to build a better Britain.

And with David Cameron in Number 10, that's exactly what we'll do."