

## Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, gives the 9th George Lansbury Memorial Lecture

Queen Mary, University of London, 18 November 2021.

Thank you, Professor Bailey for that introduction and to Queen Mary University for hosting us this evening. It is a pleasure to be in the People's Republic of Queen Mary's, thank you also to Pippa Catterall, the George Lansbury Memorial Trust and to my old friend and former colleague Stephen Timms MP who as you heard is the chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee and is doing a brilliant job, thank you for inviting me here this evening. Also as I came in I saw my good friend Unmesh Desai who is a local, rather the local assembly member, also a former councillor and has been an anti-racist campaigner for decades. I first got to know Unmesh in the 1970s and 1980s as he was marching against the National Front – lovely Umesh to have you here this evening as well. It is a privilege to have this chance to speak to you and to remember the big Labour figure that was George Lansbury.

I want to start with a brief history of the man. I think that George was almost as proud of being the son of a roller man as I am of being the son of a bus driver. The majority of the historical accounts of George Lansbury seem to focus on his integrity and moral character. His biographer said, 'what made him remarkable was the stubbornness with which he clung to his principles', and I think this characteristic is what garnered Lansbury the most respect amongst his colleagues, Labour activists and working-class people at that time, and one of the main reasons he is still admired today. I remember it was the former Labour parliamentarian, Tony Benn, who placed politicians into two categories, the signposts and the

weathercocks. Tony Benn put Lansbury, who he greatly admired, firmly in the category of signpost, a conviction politician who stood firm, always staying true to his values whatever the political consequences. Compared to a weathercock whose opinion swings in the wind depending on what's most politically convenient. This notion that Lansbury was guided by his principles above all else is evident in how his short time as Labour leader came to an abrupt end. Outside Labour circles Lansbury is probably best known from the mention he gets in the early chapters of the Second World War history books, when they highlight his unstinting pacifism and resignation as Labour leader in 1935 owing to his opposition to rearmament, but this is not the period of Lansbury's career that I am personally most interested in or what inspires me as a politician today. Indeed, like many in the Labour Party now as well as in Lansbury's day, his views on national defence, foreign and economic policy don't align with my own. The period of his political career I admire the most is his time in local government in London.

Like me he served as a mayor, not as Mayor of London, and to be fair to him a position that was not established until many decades later, but as Mayor of Poplar. He was first elected in 1919 as one of a new generation of local Labour leaders in London, which included the likes of Herbert Morrison in Hackney and Clement Attlee in Stepney. Poplar's Labour administration under George Lansbury led the way in terms of tackling unemployment, hunger and the grinding poverty that was rife at the time. He implemented a comprehensive programme of social reform and grabbed the opportunity to put Labour values into practice. This resulted in infant mortality being reduced, programmes to help the poor and unemployed, better libraries, a new council house building programme and

council workers getting paid a minimum wage of four pounds a week, an increase from one pound and fifty pence, and you know, there was also equal pay for women who saw a wage rise of 70%. The aim was to make Poplar Council a model employer for others to follow. The very same approach we are taking at City Hall today.

Lansbury was one of the most well-known male politicians to be a true advocate for gender equality and I'm pleased that his name and picture was one of only four men out on the plinth of the statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square, and by the way, there were eleven statues in Parliament Square, all men. Millicent Fawcett's is the very first statue of a woman there, which I commissioned in 2016 and unveiled in 2018, the centenary of women getting the right to vote.

As Professor Bailey said at the outset, this year also marks another important centenary; a hundred years since the Poplar rates rebellion, a moment in London's history that changed local government in our country forever. After the First World War, unemployment in Poplar was increasing rapidly with no central government support for mass unemployment. Help had to be funded by the council with local people having to pay much higher tax rates than wealthier areas. In addition, Poplar was expected to collect a precept to fund local services in much better-off areas of the city. The system was fundamentally unfair. Lansbury and his fellow Labour councillors decided to stop paying the money to other richer boroughs so that the limited resources they had could be spent on the most vulnerable in their local community. For making this bold stand in favour of social justice, insisting that local councils should be funded based on need, they were willing to go to prison and they did. This sacrifice drew attention to the unfairness with

which Poplar and other poor areas were being treated and it eventually led to major reforms that improved the lives of many poor Londoners.

Lansbury's time leading Poplar is an example of the transformative power local government can have for local people and the direct benefits it can deliver to local communities. He saw first-hand the benefits of what was called 'municipal socialism' and this is something I'm passionate about too. We shouldn't forget that the Labour Party, for a long time in its history, was the party of decentralisation, of redistributing powers as well as resources and I see pushing for greater devolution now as taking Labour back to our old roots of local democracies and civic accountability. Indeed, it was one of the key messages George Lansbury, Keir Hardie and others in the Independent Labour Party had at the time.

The famous historian R. H. Tawney, who was a Christian socialist like Lansbury, argued that a socialist society was feasible only if it was based on local decision-making, and I want to leave this idea with you as I take this opportunity to talk more about the positive power of local government today and why I think further devolution is so important now, not only to the future of the Labour Party but to our society as a whole. Decentralisation over recent decades has been a clear success in our country. Take London, since the establishment of the mayoralty and the Greater London Authority we have not looked back as a city. We've proved that devolution can work and that it can work well. There's no question that without the mayoralty or the GLA countless achievements just wouldn't have happened and in many respects our city has been able to become what it is today, thanks to the bold experiment that was started over twenty years ago. Just think about it, using the

Olympic Games to transform a deprived part of London into a new cultural powerhouse for our city. The introduction of the world's first congestion charge: an enormous success. Ken Livingstone's cycle hire scheme, and yes it was Ken's! And, of course, the creation of Transport For London, one of the world's finest transport authorities and the envy of many cities.

Over the past five years I've been using the limited resources and power as Mayor to improve the lives of Londoners. Following the example of Lansbury's Poplar after 1919, I've been putting Labour values of fairness, opportunity and equality at the heart of what we do. From building a record number of council homes to quadrupling the number of organisations paying the London minimum wage. From offering free training to unemployed and low-paid Londoners to re-skill, to implementing the boldest plans to tackle air pollution of any global city with the expanded Ultra Low Emission Zone, now double the size of Paris covering nearly four million Londoners. In many areas we're leading the way, and this isn't just the case in London. We see it across the country and around the world, with local governments and cities coming up with innovative solutions to the big challenges we face today. This dynamism stands in stark contrast to the increasingly dysfunctional character of national governments which too often seem gripped by paralysis. In many cases national governments have proved ill-equipped to deal with the major challenges of our time. They appear powerless, powerless in the face of globalisation and powerless to respond to the needs of local citizens, too often distant to those they seek to represent. The truth is, whether it's the economy, housing or energy, few need a one-size-fits-all national solution. That's what I believe; that it's our local government, our cities and our

regions that are the future. We're the ones who can lead the change when it comes to solving the problems of our time.

One of the best examples of this is tackling climate change, a point I made at COP26 in Glasgow recently. When you compare national governments to cities over recent years, the difference when it comes to taking bold climate action is striking. It's night versus day and it's the difference between delayers and doers. We're the ones taking immediate climate action, not making promises for twenty or thirty years' time. And the same is true for a host of other areas, we're the ones creating the environment and conditions for strong and inclusive growth, linking up new housing with transport, business hubs and green spaces to create thriving communities. We're the ones who understand the needs of local businesses and it can help to skill-up young people for the green jobs of tomorrow, ensuring that no one is left behind and we're the ones who can do most to heal the divisions within our societies by creating opportunities to bring people from different backgrounds, faiths and races together.

This last point, I believe, is another extremely powerful argument for proper devolution. The politics of blame and hatred has seeped far too deep into our national debates over recent years, with extremists prepared to exploit the lack of opportunity and the sense of insecurity in some communities. Our cities can act as an antidote to this regressive trend of political extremism and nativism. In our local authorities and cities, and indeed in universities, we can do more to bring people together in cohesive social integration. And by showing that we can get things done locally, we can restore some civic pride, letting people realise once again that they too have a stake in their community, because ultimately there will be

localism and devolution rather than nationalism and greater centralisation, that will mitigate us from the negative consequences of globalisation.

Let me just finish with this. As I've set out this evening, local and regional government is already leading the way in many areas and is already achieving so much. But just imagine, just imagine what we could do with more funding and more powers. There is so much potential just waiting to be unleashed. We can't do it without being unshackled. The idea of placing more power and decision making closer to the people we serve is one that goes back over a hundred years in the Labour Party and I believe we should make it a powerful part of Labour's future too with a strong offer of devolution at the next general election. It's telling that Labour did really well in the last local elections in areas like London where we already had local leaders showing the difference that Labour can make to people's lives, and indeed in the mayoral elections too. With further devolution we can build on this success and work to rebuild the connection that's been lost with many communities across the country.

George Lansbury has been described as a true pioneer of localism. Over one hundred years on it's something that is needed now more than ever. It was a past president of the US Conference of Mayors who said, 'the nineteenth century was a century of empires, the twentieth century a century of nation states, the twenty-first century will be a century of cities'. It's time to truly embrace the pivotal role that cities and localism can play in creating fairer, greener, and more prosperous societies in the twenty-first century.

Thank you.