

Presentation by Rev Canon Bob Burston at CAN AGM November 2011

Your Grace, Mr chairman, ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to address you on the occasion when we gather to celebrate 60 years of being in the past, the Community Council of Northumberland and now Community Action Northumberland.

Our cherished goal remains as this years Annual Report makes clear – the promotion and support of communities, the voluntary sector and rural life in Northumberland.

When you are next in Eldon Square shopping centre, take a walk past Waitrose and out into Eldon Square. You will be facing the reverse side of the Newcastle City War memorial. Inscribed on the monument are the words 'Memory lingers here'.

November is a season of remembrance. Not just the remembrance of those who made a sacrifice in war. November in Christian traditions is a celebration of All Saints: the heroes of the faith who have gone before us, and All Souls: a remembrance of those whom we love but see no longer – that remembrance is also a thanksgiving for those who have nurtured and shaped us as a people.

As you look across Eldon Square and allow your eyes to fall on that inscription 'Memory lingers here', if you then raise your eyes a little to the left, you will see over the rooftop the figure of Earl Grey upon his column at the monument. Now might be a time to allow our memories at least a moment of lingering – to remember the heroes of our democracy and voluntary civil society who have gone before us and men and women who have nurtured and shaped our society today.

I ask the question, 'What are the great and radical civil changes in the past two centuries that have come to shape our civil society: changes in civil matters that we might choose to remember here in the far north eastern corner of England?' Allow me first to recall three matters and some of the figures from our own Northumbrian history. I have already indicated the first figure from our history – Grey of the Great Reform Act. Grey and his Great Reform Act of 1832 must stand as a moment in the movement to build universal adult suffrage – that movement spanned a century until 1928 and if the European Court of Human Rights has its way that movement is still unfolding in respect of prisoner rights to vote. Surely Grey's work in 1832, whatever his motive, set us on some structured pathway to the design of a modern democracy. We are still treading that pathway.

My second moment of lingering thought is what we might call the great gender shift from a patriarchal society to a society that still has much to achieve in gender equality. As Northumbrians we will find within ourselves a note of rejoicing in our hearts that Josephine Butler gave her life to restore dignity to some of the most despised women of her age. Butler's hands were driven to

this work as she struggled with the remembrance of her own daughter – lost at a very young age in a domestic accident. Butler’s grief was a driver in leading her to give her life to women robbed of dignity. Josephine Butler can be cited as a figure who fought for the inclusion of those otherwise excluded from civil society. The wellbeing of others is paramount in her practice – for her, health and wellbeing are closely related in seeking the emergence of full personhood.

On another front we will allow our hearts to beat a little faster as we remember Emily Davidson of Morpeth – a martyr to the cause of women’s suffrage and whose grave in Morpeth parish churchyard bears the simple epitaph ‘Deeds not words’.

Butler and Davidson are lights along a lengthy road of seeking gender equality and we will note these women engaged with suffering and they both knew the meaning of sacrifice.

And then we should linger at a third point in history and say a word about Sir William Beveridge. Seventy years ago Beveridge identified want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness as five giants to be defeated. Social insurance was the main thrust of his report: he defined an offer that the state should make: an offer of security in return for service and contribution.

One of Beveridge’s guiding principles refers to the encouragement of voluntary action by each individual: service, contribution, and voluntary action are key concepts in his writing. We remember Beveridge for his report. We remember a lot about the man and sometimes forget the reaction that Beveridge suffered for voicing his philosophy of social insurance.

Beveridge was defeated in the 1945 General Election. On the day the Berwick result was announced, the British Medical Association was holding its conference in London. Business was suspended to announce the Berwick result. The gathered assembly rose to their feet and applauded.

Another of Beveridge’s guiding principles was that any scheme of National Insurance adopted and any other related services such as health should not be restricted by consideration of sectional interests. Beveridge as a servant of the people of this county felt the weight of that sectional interest before most of his recommendations had reached the statute book.

Here then, are the three moments or aspects of our recent past:

- 1 The movement towards universal suffrage and the design of a modern democracy
- 2 The movement towards gender equality and the raising up of large groups in society previously ignored and disregarded
- 3 The colossal concept of defeating five giants – want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.

Our memory should linger here: there is here an indelible contribution made by men and women from or strongly connected to or associated with Northumberland.

Now, sixty years ago in 1951, CCN was formed in that era of post war renewal that the Beveridge Report looks forward to. I found some lines in Beveridge's guiding principles which I hope applies. He wrote in 1942, 'Now, when the war is abolishing landmarks of every kind, is the opportunity for using experience in a clear field. A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions not for patching.'

I hope, your Grace, the proud history of CCN and CAN over the past sixty years represents the using of 'experience in a clear field' and the achievement of revolutions rather than patching.

I have resisted delving into the history of CCN and CAN because most of it is told in volumes already published, so I ask –please permit me now to tell a story of how I became involved with our organisation. In 1977 I was suffering from the weight of one of Beveridge's dreadful giants – ignorance. I was born in Tiger Bay, Cardiff, and was thoroughly immersed in the urban culture of the North East: five years a student in Durham and seven years a curate in Newcastle. Then a Damascene moment in the life of another cleric with more humour than good sense saw me become the most unlikely rural priest in this Diocese. I became vicar of Alwinton and by dint of office Chair of Governors at Harbottle C of E Aided First School. The very first week I was at Alwinton the local County Councillor walked into my study with a pile of petition papers. The petition was seeking to retain Harbottle School. There was a closure order already pinned to the door of the school by the County Council. The County Councillor seemed to believe that the pending closure of Harbottle School planned for July 1978 was something the new vicar could and should deal with. It was only after he left my study that I read the petition. It wasn't a petition to the new vicar – it was a petition to the gentleman who had just left my study and to the members of the County Council.

The question needed to be asked – what could be done? If petitions could be shunted off into convenient political sidings, what could be achieved and by what means?

It was Christmas week. After the holidays I started ringing around for help. The list of agencies I rang where the answer was 'No' was considerable. Someone said to me, 'Ring CCN and speak to Rosemary Lumb, Rural Field Officer'. That was when my burden of ignorance began to be relieved. Rosemary offered help, encouragement and know-how. The history speaks for itself – Harbottle School remains 33 years later, because a Community Council officer became our enabler. Rosemary knew that our modern democracy had to be something more than putting a cross in a box every four or five years. The democracy needs processes by which community voices are heard. In essence Rosemary was running a school of democracy. It was Rosemary Lumb who convinced me that voices in marginal rural communities could be heard: those voices could be encouraged to place their own

arguments before those in structures of government. Rosemary knew the design of our democracy and knew that we all had a role in refining and improving that design.

The story gets better about Rosemary Lumb. In 1982 NIREX wanted to dump nuclear waste in the Cheviot Granite Core above Uswayford and at Three Stone Burn near Wooler. The training that Rosemary had given to a number of us associated with Harbottle School in 1978 facilitated a new group – this time led in the Upper Coquet by our local GP Dr Bernard Richardson. That group along with another small group from Wooler, joined forces to demand that the public enquiry concerning the dumping of nuclear waste would move from the new and smart surroundings of Gosforth Park Hotel to take evidence in the Jubilee Hall at Rothbury. In that more rural setting, elderly citizens of the upper Coquet were persuaded and encouraged to give their evidence. If I had to pick out one of the most moving days of my 40 years as a parish priest, it was to hear elderly souls of no academic training, display their enormous wisdom accumulated in a lifetime of stewardship of the land. They did so in front of eminent barristers, councillors and a Government inspector.

This was a piece of work which flowed from Rosemary Lumb and CCN. I see it as a piece of work which not only gave voice to others. In my mind it was predicated on the notion that was at the heart of Josephine Butler's work of raising up others from places where they might be ignored or disregarded, to a place where they enjoy the glorious liberty and freedom of voicing the things that they believed.

Today should not pass without a reflection on the leadership of CCN and CAN. I wonder, of the 38 members of the CA network, how many can boast that in the last 60 years, they have had only two chief Officers and how many in our network have enjoyed the talent of leadership offered here.

I do remember the time David, when I was Chairman in the mid 90s, when you were very successful in negotiating what was then an enormous grant of £100,000 from Barings Bank. We thought your timing to be impeccable. It was five days later that Barings went down the chute!

I mention this one piece of work in the many years of service given by David to our organisation because it represents a moment in our history when organisationally we were focussed on the structured enabling of many rural communities across our county. Our targets at the time were the old railway towns of Seahouses, Wooler, Rothbury, Bellingham and Haltwhistle. Development work in those places was started as a result of your diligence David, in securing the Baring grant. That grant generated indigenous development trusts in most of those places. Your work then, somehow reflected that exciting equation at the heart of Beveridge's thoughts, 'security in return for contribution and service'. Beveridge's equation applies to not just state benefits but to all communitarian projects. We seek to provide security for communities by promoting them and supporting them. We ask in return contribution and service.

So what is security for communities today? Beveridge published 70 years ago in the same time-frame as William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury published *Christianity and Social Order*. Temple offered a clear understanding of the cement that held us as individuals within communitarian structures. Temple understood clearly that a whole raft of structures interpreted Government to people and people to government. Temple saw both the citizen and the state working in harmony through intermediate institutions substantially afforded by the life of the voluntary sector to supply all with a sense of the common good.

Temple was radical. He took a line which reflected extreme and over-burdensome understandings of the state especially the totalitarian form. He also reflected on society driven by individualism leading to great inequalities: his criticism here suggested that social breakdown and mistrust would flourish in such circumstances.

Temple offers a model of the human economy unashamedly modified by moral and ethical content and he appeals for human relationships to be a consideration in the ordering of both political and economic life. His framework was of six middle axioms affording to all access to: education, healthcare, housing, right of free speech, right of proper representation at work, and time in life for individual and family pursuits.

Like Beveridge, Temple created an equation of security inviting the citizen to embrace a moral duty to improve their own material and non-material standards, and to undertake a politically engaged or responsible form of citizenship.

A recent volume entitled *Christianity and the new social order*, offers an update on Temple's thinking. The scale of social change over 70 years is acknowledged, and an address is made to the wellbeing of individuals and society. The authors note seven spheres of colossal change in a lifetime:

- in family relationships
- in income
- in work
- in community and friendships
- in health
- in personal freedom and
- in personal values.

This is not the place to critique this work but under their headings of personal freedom and personal values, we should note some of the comments made. On personal freedom, I quote: 'Participatory freedom linked to community life and especially to the strength of voluntary bodies and volunteers; involvement in these, fosters important skills and habits for greater involvement in decision-making. Indeed they are often referred to as schools of democracy. Temple regarded them as essential intermediate associations or bulwarks against, the undue influence of the state, and the inadequacies of the isolated individuals'.

Your Grace, Mr Chairman, our organisation and our network is as important as that. Our understanding of the 'voluntary' stands as protection against over burdensome government and as a cloak for the inadequacies of the individual.

In the same volume, on Personal values and philosophies of life, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of our internal and personal resources 'particularly developed in families, voluntary bodies, schools and churches'.

The authors see individuality as an inferior concept of human development because it relies on the idea that fulfilment comes only when we are separated from others. Preferred is the concept of personality or personhood which reaches its maximum potentials when immersed in social, civil and voluntary structures like our own.

I must draw things together.

I apologise if my address has been heavy with history. I might be an adopted and hefted Northumbrian but in my heart I am still a Welsh Rugby supporter and times have been difficult in recent weeks! That Saturday morning when we played both the referee and the French 15 with only 14 players, when the game was still in the balance at half time and the commentators (4 of them) were wondering why France hadn't put the match beyond doubt..... when one of them said 'What is their word for 'hope'?'... and he gestured towards his colleagues for an answer..... There was an awful embarrassed pause – no-one could remember the French word for hope – 'esperer'. Instead the pregnant pause expressed in all four faces was the French word 'desesperer' – despair. Their subject was hope. Their impact was despair.

The annual Report received here today acknowledges the challenging circumstances in which Community Action Northumberland and much of the voluntary sector is operating. Some organisations in our sector including several development trusts, have already felt the impact of being cut adrift. It is important today on our 60th birthday that we take time to reflect – that we allow our memory to linger here and there, and to see clearly the history that is ours. We can reflect on the experiences we all possess in being Community Action Northumberland, and we can note something of the present and pressing debate of our times, and rejoice that there are others who are today affirming the freedoms and the values that are at the heart of our work.

Memory lingers here... The design of our modern democracy is not yet complete. Acting as a school of democracy is our job. The raising up of others to their full dignity and personhood is still to be achieved. Engagement with suffering is our task. The cost is sometimes sacrifice.

There are still dreadful giants to be defeated and there is still legitimacy in our offering communities security, and asking in return service and contribution.

Can I ask if you have not just a word but a whole vocabulary for 'hope'

- expectation
- trust
- confidence
- faith
- assurance
- hopefulness
- enthusiasm
- cheer
- mainstay
- keep one's spirit up
- take heart and perhaps wellbeing, and much more.

Do not copy the TV presenters who enquired after hope and offered only despair. This county needs our voice concerning the unfinished business we note from our history. Our county needs to receive a clear message that we are here to write the next chapter of certain histories, and those who still suffer injustice or exclusion because our democracy is not yet complete and, those who still need to be raised up to enjoy their inclusion and freedom, and those who still struggle with giants who should be defeated. They need to hear our unequivocal vocabulary of hope, which is a hope of wellbeing for them.

There is an old African proverb – Corn can never hope for justice in a court composed solely of chickens. You still have work to do. I wish you well in the next 60 years. Memory lingers here only to afford a positive vision of the future.