

## **Introduction**

I am particularly pleased to be able to address the society in this, your landmark 25<sup>th</sup> year.

I'd like to congratulate you, Fatima [Prof. Vieira, Chair of USS], and Lorna [Davidson, Director, New Lanark Trust] for your efforts in bringing such an impressive gathering of international scholars back to New Lanark, which is undoubtedly your society's spiritual home.

For those of you who are visiting Scotland for the first time, I'd like, on behalf of the Scottish Government, to extend a warm welcome.

I hope that in New Lanark you are enjoying the very best Scottish hospitality.

This, of course, is a significant year for everyone involved in the study of Robert Owen and New Lanark – and, over the last two days or so, you have been paying a fitting tribute to the bicentenary of the publication of his *A New View of Society*.

I'm pleased to note that Robert Owen's direct descendants, Docey and Owen Lewis, have been able to join the conference from New Harmony, and to lead what I understand was a very successful session this afternoon.

## **New Lanark**

For most of you here this evening, New Lanark is the embodiment of an idea – and, as the thread of that idea is woven through your own diverse areas of research, you remain very firmly connected to the place.

I, too, have a very firm connection with New Lanark.

I first started to visit New Lanark when I lived nearby in Tillietudlem in the Clyde valley in the 1980s.

I have seen this village develop so much since then, that I feel that, over the years, I have come to know it very well.

In the 1987 general election, when I was the Scottish National Party candidate in Clydesdale, my party won the village of New Lanark. It was one of only two ballot boxes we won in that election. It was a very lean year for us.

I'm delighted to report that, in the intervening years, New Lanark seems to have remained faithful to many causes, including to that of my own party. The current MSP for Clydesdale is my ministerial colleague, Aileen Campbell, who represents this village.

In recent years, I have visited New Lanark as Culture Minister, when I took forward not just the Scottish 10 Project here but also got the village included on the subsidised trip scheme which, I hope, has brought inspiration and enjoyment to thousands of Scottish young people.

Just this March, I was delighted to be able to come here as Education Secretary to open the Document Search Room and launch a new 3D fly-through.

During that particular visit, I was able to thank the indefatigable Arthur Bell for his dedicated Chairmanship of the New Lanark Trust and his involvement with this project which has lasted for almost 40 years.

These have been the good times for New Lanark.

But, I have been here in more difficult times too.

On September 11 2001, I came here as part of a delegation from what was then the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee. That day, we enjoyed a wonderful afternoon, taking in a tour with Jim Arnold and Harry Smith.

Mobile phone reception has never been great in this tight little valley. Some of you might find that even now.

It was rudimentary in 2001. But, somehow, during that afternoon, one of my fellow parliamentarians received a call from her daughter telling her of extraordinary happenings in New York.

For the next few hours, as we huddled round our television sets in the hotel and unpicked and unpacked the ugliness and horror we saw, we knew that our world would be changed forever.

That was a day of very stark contrasts.

It was a day when we saw the most awful aspects of human nature in a place which – by its very existence - embodies the very best that human beings can do to one another.

In a sense, on that day in New Lanark, we were offered a simultaneous view on to a dystopia and a utopia.

New Lanark might not be a sacred place.

But, it is no less spiritual.

Here there is a vision of humanity interacting with kindness and generosity. In Owen's own words, there is a plan here for human betterment which does "not contain danger to any individual or any part of society." This was a place, after all, where dispossessed Gaelic speakers were welcomed and given jobs after being evicted from their Highland homes. A place, too, where the hand of kindness was extended to the urban poor of Glasgow and Edinburgh and from further afield.

September 11 is a day that is etched on all our memories.

For me it is a day where a vision of a better society shone in stark relief against a dreadful alternative.

And, as I have returned here over the intervening years, I have done so not just because I love this place – and I do love this place - but, also because that vision of a better society has become all the more luminous for me.

## **Owen and social change**

While I might be personally and very emotionally attached to New Lanark, I am in no doubt about its significance to Scotland and to the history of ideas.

Owen was right at the vanguard of social change.

For me, the dream of a new world order was not really born in the British Museum, where Marx toiled away in the 1850s – but, right here in New Lanark almost half a century earlier.

While Marx's scientific socialism provided the *theoretical* underpinning for an economic view of history – and, ultimately, the means of production for ending conflict between the classes - Owen demonstrated how a better society could operate *in practice*.

Owen, of course, could not have seen himself as a utopian socialist.

That term itself came from Marx and Engels who used it to disparage those whose ideas never made it beyond the drawing room or library.

But, Owen's did.

Owen might have been a prolific and repetitive author, who wrote many proposals for communities with detailed constitutions and rules – yet, he was a doer as much as he was a thinker.

He had thoroughly absorbed the Enlightenment idea of the perfectibility of man through improved social conditions, and sought to make this idea real.

In his Address to the Inhabitants of New Lanark that he delivered on New Year's Day 1816, he reflected on the "*practical system*" he was founding and how history had finally provided him with the moment and the means to make that happen.

For the first time in these islands, Owen showed that there *could* be a new type of industrial community where the efforts of men and women would be valued and respected. In New Lanark, child labour was ended; a sickness fund was established; a crèche for working mothers was developed; and a comprehensive system of education was provided.

Given the acceptability and normalcy of these ideas today, it is hard for us to grasp the opposition Owen received from what he ironically and bitterly referred to as the "factory owning brotherhood".

Owen was a radical – not least in relation to the thorny issue of child labour.

In fact, Owen was radical enough to suggest that factory work should perhaps be restricted to children over the age of 10 – and, to suggest that young people between 10 and 18 should work no more than 10 hours a day.

The issue so absorbed him that he sent detailed proposals to Parliament outlining reforms.

Before I came here today, I wanted to get a measure of the man once more. And, as a parliamentarian myself, I was drawn to the evidence Owen gave to Robert Peel and his House of Commons Committee in April 1816.

At the Committee, Owen was asked:

*“If you do not employ children under 10, what would you do with them?”*

To which he answered:

*“Instruct them, and give them exercise”.*

He was pressed again:

*“Would there not be a danger of their acquiring, by that time, vicious habits, for want of regular occupation?”*

But, Owen held firm:

*“My own experience leads me to say, that I found quite the reverse, that their habits have been good in proportion to the extent of their instruction.”*

Now, Owen was being ridiculed by the Committee.

They were toying with him.

But, still, his tenacity and strength of conviction shine through.

He was distraught when the 1819 Factory Act contained a highly diluted version of his original proposals – and, indeed, gave up trying to change the law.

Yet, ultimately, he would win through.

He had set out a vision for change that would eventually come decades later with the factory reform movement and the passing of laws to limit the hours that could be worked in factories and mills.

### **Education as a societal good**

Working conditions were important to Owen – but, these improvements went hand in hand with education.

He saw education as being essential to the human experience. A *societal* as well as an *individual* good.

Today, in Scotland, we continue to see education as a *societal* good as well as an individual one – and, it remains central to our values and to our very sense of ourselves.

Education is devolved to Scotland.

Our system is travelling in a different direction from other systems in the UK – and, it is performing very well.

By any measure, we are improving in the international league tables.

And good things are happening in our schools, universities and colleges.

But, we want to make this already good system really great again.

For children in the early years, we want to make Scotland the best place to grow up. We want our schools to provide the best possible education backed by an exceptional teaching workforce. In our colleges, we want opportunities for all – and, in our universities, we want excellence, ambition and world class research.

Owen would surely have approved of how we have made progress toward these aims by introducing free nursery education; by building and refurbishing more schools than ever before; and by providing modern apprenticeship places for record numbers of young Scots.

And, much as Owen did, we too understand that education should always – *a/ways* - be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

That is why Scotland's students still receive a free university education – while their equivalents in other parts of these islands are being saddled with a lifetime of debt.

At the heart of our approach – and, in common with the strongest and most successful international systems - we have a long-term plan for success.

That plan is Curriculum for Excellence.

Through Curriculum for Excellence, we are not only providing children with the knowledge itself – but, rather with the capacity to acquire knowledge and to learn and re-learn.

We are providing them with the tools to question, learn and develop not just in school but for all of their lives.

Curriculum for Excellence has been a tremendous innovation for our nation.

It is about how we *do* education in Scotland – and, as a result, our education system is getting better.

We are moving in the right direction.

But we still have challenges.

Attainment in our schools is up and exam results are improving year on year – yet, not all of our pupils and schools are sharing in that success.

In many of our poorer areas we are getting, at the present moment, poorer educational performance than we should have.

But, we are starting to understand that equation and we are working on it.

Owen knew instinctively – as we do too - that education should be for the many and not the few.

He argued that there was no way of making good citizens except by educating them from an early age and of saving them from what he called the “evil spirit of ignorance”.

There was a highly pragmatic aspect to this too.

Owen saw education as a means of keeping public order.

In this sense, we find echoes of Sir Thomas More whose own *Utopia* from three centuries earlier made much the same link between a lack of educational opportunity and crime. As More wrote:

*“if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them.”*

From our own historical vantage point, we know that there is no straight causal link between a lack of educational opportunity and a life of crime.

Vital though it is, education alone won’t put citizens on the right path.

However, More and Owen are both surely, and emphatically, right in their broader point.

We must condemn any kind of society which suffers its people to be ill-educated from their very earliest years.

And, if we don’t put education within reach of all, we will deny some of our citizens a basic human right.

It is for these very reasons that I am proud to announce this evening that the Scottish Government will be supporting a new award named in Owen's honour.

Fittingly, 200 years on from *A New View of Society*, the Robert Owen Award will recognise inspirational educators and reward outstanding commitment to Scottish education.

It will recognise creativity and exemplify why so many countries in Europe look on with interest on all that we have achieved in improving the prospects for our young people.

We will announce the first winner of the award later this year – and, I'm sure that many of you will look on with interest as we honour an outstanding individual by connecting them to Owen's legacy in this way.

### **Independence – a practical utopianism**

Ladies and gentlemen. I understand that one of our greatest modern day utopians had been due to participate in this year's conference.

Tragically, Iain Banks never lived long enough to honour that commitment.

Over the last few weeks, Iain's death has produced an outpouring of dismay and affection. I am not the only one to have been greatly moved by the humour, candour and enormous strength of character that he showed in his last days and his last interview. I think it is particularly telling of the man that he was able to write his illness in to the very pages of his last novel..

In recent decades, Scottish literature seems to have produced more dystopias than utopias – with Alasdair Gray's own *Lanark* being perhaps the most potently dystopian of all. Against this background, Iain Banks' Culture novels stand out for their unforgettable and dazzling utopianism.

Like Owen, Iain believed that we should not just accept the way things are as the best they can be.

As a nationalist politician – and an optimist - I share that outlook.

Because there is another way.

Scotland can be better.

Many of you here have come from nations that, in recent decades, have been transformed by constitutional and political change.

On 18 September next year, it will be Scotland's turn to choose.

Next year, the people of this nation will be asked to vote in a historic referendum on our constitutional future.

They will be asked whether they agree that we can use our vast resources and talent to build a better country – or whether we should stick with the UK, and a system of government which has not worked in the past and will not work in future for the people of Scotland.

In economic terms, Scotland can afford to be independent.

Our balance sheet is strong.

Over the last 30 years, we have generated more tax per head than has been generated across the UK as a whole.

Scotland is the now third most productive part of the UK and would be the eighth wealthiest nation of all 34 OECD countries.

Scotland has the potential to be a richer country even than that.

Even with our share of the UK debt, we could be using our extra wealth to invest in our people and our future.

It is to the immense shame of our society – and to the current political arrangement – that within a country like ours poverty remains such a scourge for so many of our children.

Robert Owen realised that a child in poverty is a child who cannot be at his or her best. A hungry child cannot learn. A preoccupied child – who is worried about the future of his or her family - will never be able to flourish in school or in life.

We are doing our best to cushion education and our other public services from the full impact of the UK government's austerity agenda.

I know that austerity will be biting hard in many of your countries too.

Yet, until Scotland gains full control of its own finances – until we develop our own system of welfare, benefits and taxation - we will continue to be at the mercy of decisions taken remotely, decisions which limit our ability to do the best we can, even in fully devolved areas like education.

For me, the independence debate is about the powers we need to tackle the deep-rooted challenges which face us – challenges like child poverty and gaps in educational attainment that, under the UK system, and under governments of all colours, have never been adequately tackled.

But, more than that, it is a debate which starts with the question about what *kind* of Scotland we want to live in.

And, that is a real utopian project.

In the spirit of Owen, it is a *practical* utopianism – one that is wide in its ambition and scope.



In this sense, every single Scot is a negotiator of independence.

The question that will be asked of every Scot in 14 months' time won't simply require a "yes" or "no" answer.

And, it won't merely ask them to side up with one or other political party.

Rather, it will require them to envision a better Scotland – a Scotland that *will* exist - and to think how, by working with their fellow citizens, they could work toward making that vision real.

In February this year, we published a document which set out our belief that an independent Scotland should have a written constitution.

The UK is highly unusual among modern democracies, and unique within the European Union, for not having a written constitution.

For centuries before the Treaty of Union in 1707, Scotland had a distinct constitutional tradition. And, within an independent Scotland, we could reconnect with that tradition by developing that written constitution to enshrine political and civil rights, as well as some important economic and social rights – like the right to a free education or the right for every young person to be offered a job or training.

The constitution would therefore be developed by a popular sovereignty that is the hallmark of our democracy.

And, there would be many other areas too where we would look to the people of Scotland to shape the kind of country they want to live in.

Last month, the Culture Secretary set out a vision for a flourishing culture within an independent Scotland.

Again, the vision was inclusive.

And, there will be more of these visions, published over the weeks and months ahead.

To me, this is precisely where the debate about independence should be.

It should not be about getting caught up in every single element of detail or process.

And, neither should it be a never-ending ping pong process from either side about what we will or won't be able to do with independence.

Crucially, those who have opposed independence so far have failed to provide an inspiring alternative.

Even creating a dystopian vision of an independent Scotland has been beyond them.

There is just a gap where nothing will be.

At best, they say that this is as good as it gets, and that we should be thankful for it.

Where they can, of course, they try to sabotage the idea of independence.

In this respect, the work of the academic and business guru, John Kotter, is perhaps instructive.

In a 2010 work with Lorne Whitehead, Kotter tells us that, typically, there are four ways to kill a good idea:

- **By fear mongering** – scaring others into believing that the good idea is too risky to pursue;
- **By delaying** – with never-ending questions so that the idea eventually peters out;
- **By confusing** – the idea with a stream of irrelevant facts and questions; and, finally,
- **By ridicule** – by character assassination of those proposing the good idea

Far be it from me to suggest that the current naysayers to independence are taking instruction from Kotter and Whitehead.

But, they are following this pattern – and, it is unremittingly negative.

They are trying to kill off the possibility of having a balanced and realistic debate about Scotland's future.

I believe that a vision of utopia will beat that negative view.

So, without having to look at business management manuals, I know that my own job as a nationalist politician is to keep reaching for the unreachable.

To show what we must do to become a better nation.

To remind others of what our history and our instincts teach us.

That, together, we must continue in our toil for the common weal of Scotland.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen.

When, at the height of the industrial revolution, Robert Owen wanted to change the unjust and inhumane rules governing child labour, he too met with naysayers, delayers and doubters.

Self-interests prevailed. The status quo was preserved. And, the UK government showed that it could be as intractable then as it continues to be now.

But, it didn't last.

Owen's vision eventually won through.

And, so too will ours.

When the people of Scotland go to the polls on 18 September next year, I hope that we will have won the argument.

I hope that the people of Scotland will be joined in a citizenship which dares to imagine a better future rather than fearing what it will bring.

I think that the opportunity will be seized by this generation and not lost.

All the signs are that Scotland's time is coming.

Our journey for self-determination that has been three centuries in the making is now finally coming to a conclusion.

And, together, I trust that – when faced with the choice – the people of this great nation will say yes to a better future and yes to independence, and yes to their vision of the utopia in which they want to live.