

COMMUNITY HOUSING CYMRU

Governance – the Spirit as well as the Letter of the law

I'm half Welsh and half Scots which means by the Law of Resultant Forces I was bound to end up in Liverpool! I am delighted to be your Key note Speaker. My grandfather Theophilus Jones was Landlord of the Prince of Wales Pub in Newport; I spent much of my childhood in Sully near Penarth and my great Aunt, Mary Wise, was a poet who lived in Brecon and according to Family tradition was a prize winner at the National Eisteddfod.

Earlier this month I was asked by Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for DLUHC, to chair an important meeting he was having with the Grenfell Tower Community. I'm sad to tell you that many of the complaints made by residents were directed at the Housing Associations in the area. I say this not to be critical but in a spirit of learning.

Today in your conference on Governance I've been asked to cover four areas to which I have given the over-arching title 'The Spirit as well as the Letter of the Law of Governance'.

I will speak about Regeneration with reference to my work in Liverpool in particular Partnership and Empowerment; about Leadership and the importance of leaders learning and listening; about Hillsborough and engaging with tragedy and trauma; and about the Charter for those bereaved through Public Tragedy and how that impacts on Governance.

REGENERATION

Many of the areas in which your 34 Housing Associations work will be areas of what I call 'consolidated poverty'. Trying to address this is like playing pick-a-sticks. As you seek to lift one stick you dislodge another because poor education, generational unemployment, health, lack of infrastructure and housing all impact on one another.

Action demands partnership and empowerment. But the problem with much regeneration is that it reinforces what I call 'urban diabetes'. This is where the blood pumps around prestigious projects in the heart of an area but fails to reach neighbourhoods on the edges and leaves them to atrophy and die. And this is where Housing Associations are often left high and dry to pick up many of the social consequences.

As Chair of one of the first New Deal for Communities programmes I listened closely to the language used which exemplifies a major division and problem. Those who control the purse strings often use mechanical language: buttons, triggers, levers and outputs; those who live in communities often use organic language like seeds, planting and branching out. What we have to understand is that you cannot use mechanical methods to solve organic problems. You have to understand how and why communities die before you can breathe new life into them.

Often too I hear regeneration consultants talk too loosely about empowerment without acknowledging that those with power if they truly empower others will then have a little less power themselves!

It seems to me that Housing Associations should be at the forefront in offering this understanding and taking the initiative in creating true partnerships that work organically to empower communities.

LEADERSHIP

We built one of the first City Academies in Liverpool. It was a partnership of the Catholic and Anglican Churches with the local New Deal for Communities in Kensington. In the job description for the founding Principal we put at the top of the list that they should be 'The Lead Learner'.

The worst possible leader that any organisation can be cursed with is one who thinks that they have arrived and have nothing more to learn! The leader who models learning creates space for others in the team to contribute to and ultimately own the vision of the team.

And by the way, if you want to know how to identify an insecure leader just listen! There's no laughter! The team is walking on eggshells for fear of upsetting the leader. In truth such a person may hold the position of leader but is not in effect the leader. I once asked a leading management consultant for her definition of leadership. 'One word,' she said, 'Followership'. Unless you have a following you are not a leader. It seems to me that the leadership of a Housing Association has to strive to achieve a genuine following amongst their tenants.

HILLSBOROUGH

Shortly after I became Bishop of Liverpool in 1998 I was asked by the leadership of the Hillsborough Family Support Group to preside at the 10th Anniversary of the Hillsborough Disaster held each year at the Kop at Anfield. I listened and could hear how the wound of the tragedy could not heal until it was anointed with the balm of truth and justice. Tragedy is often a single event; trauma is a never-ending process. Indeed, when tragedy involves the death of loved ones then what I have learned is that grief is a journey without destination and that there is no such thing as closure. How can there be closure to the love that you have for someone you have loved and lost? That's the trauma.

I was asked also to preside over the 20th Anniversary. The service fell into two parts. The first was a memorial with the lighting of candles and singing and prayers; the second was a rally to rouse support for the campaign for truth and justice. Andy Burnham, at the time the Secretary of State for DCMS, was asked to give a speech.

He had barely started when a lone voice in the stands shouted out, 'Justice for the 96!'.

With that the crowd of over 30,000 stood and chanted 'Justice for the 96'. If you had got them into the stadium half an hour before to rehearse them they could not have been more in unison or more pitch perfect. It was that that made Andy persuade the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to set up the Hillsborough Independent Panel which I was asked to chair.

My involvement convinced me that there is a moral instinct for fairness in human beings. And this is relevant for Housing Associations. I'm not here to idealise or idolise tenants who I suspect can sometimes be troublesome, but when they complain genuinely about not being treated fairly they need to be taken seriously. If it is an issue of injustice it simply will not go away.

Recently I was asked to give a speech at a school prizegiving. Nervously I said at the outset that I was not going to tell them to follow their dreams; nor would I encourage them to be the best possible person they could become. I confessed that what I would tell them would not make them rich or famous. I simply said that whatever they did in life 'Be fair and so make the world a fairer place'. To my surprise they burst into spontaneous and loud applause.

It was that same moral instinct that fuelled the Hillsborough Families. You may have seen the ITV Drama 'Anne' that told the story of Anne Williams who lost her teenage son, Kevin, at Hillsborough. She fought for the rest of life for a fresh inquest and was turned down 3 times. By the time our Panel showed that she was right all along she knew that she was dying of cancer. Shortly before she died I was asked to visit her. I took her a gift of a marble Pieta, Mary holding the body of Jesus taken down from the Cross, which my mother had given me 20 years previously after visiting Rome. Death held no fear for Anne.

She believed it would be the door through which she would be reunited with Kevin. I asked her if she would like me to say a prayer with her. She readily agreed. I then offered her my gift. As she unwrapped it she looked at me, 'How did you know?'. 'How did I know what?'. 'How did you know that the last gift that Kevin gave me was a miniature Pieta when he came back from a school trip to Rome?'. Anne and the families of all the 97 were not just motivated but they were sustained by that moral instinct for justice.

THE CHARTER

The Hillsborough Independent Panel led to the quashing of the original inquests and to the longest inquests in British legal history. The jury returned a determination of 'unlawful killing'. Theresa May then asked me to write a second report so that the perspective of the families would not be lost, so that lessons would be learned and embedded across Government, and so that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough Families would never be repeated.

The title of that Report was 'The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power' which is what it seemed to me that the Families had had to endure over the decades. We published on 1st November 2017 shortly after the Grenfell Tower Tragedy in June of that year. One of the first organisations to contact me was Grenfell United. They wanted to meet me. They had read the Report. They were now going through what the Hillsborough Families had endured. Over the last 7 years I have been asked to meet with Grenfell United, the RBKC Council, the Leader of the Council, the head of the Public Inquiry Team, Grenfell Next of Kin, the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission, the London fire Brigade. They all wanted to learn from the Hillsborough Tragedy. But not until now have I been approached by any Housing Association even though, as that meeting with the Community and Michael Gove showed, Housing Associations are deeply implicated in the aftermath of the tragedy.

The 25 Points of Learning from my Report called not just for a change in our laws but most importantly for a change in Culture in our Public Bodies. Key to this change is the 'Charter for those Bereaved Through Public Tragedy'. Adopting this Charter leads to a re-setting of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. It would be absolutely wonderful if the 34 Housing Associations of Wales could give a lead to all the Housing Associations of the United Kingdom by adopting and signing this Charter. It would mark a significant development in the relationship between Housing Associations and their Tenants. Allow me to set out the six clauses.

1. In the event of a public tragedy, (we will) activate (our) emergency plan and deploy (our) resources to rescue victims, to support the bereaved and to protect the vulnerable.
2. Place the Public Interest above (protecting) our own reputation.
3. Approach forms of public scrutiny – including public inquiries and inquests – with candour, in an open, honest and transparent way, making full disclosure of relevant documents, material and facts. Our objective is to assist the search for the truth. We accept that we should learn from the findings of external scrutiny and from past mistakes.
4. Avoid seeking to defend the indefensible or to dismiss or disparage those who may have suffered where we have fallen short.
5. Ensure all members of staff treat members of the public and each other with mutual respect and courtesy., Where we fall short, we should apologise straightforwardly and genuinely.
6. Recognise that we are accountable and open to challenge. We will ensure that processes are in place to allow the public to hold us to account for the work we do and for the way in which we do it. We do not knowingly mislead the public or the media.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea have signed the Charter. I asked Elizabeth Campbell, their Leader, to give me a statement that I could read to you:

“Staff and politicians have lived and breathed the Charter and now have six years of experience, both in terms of their approach to the ongoing public inquiry, but also in (our) own communications with residents, and have found it powerful ... in changing the culture within (our) own workforce ... The Charter has guided the Council’s approach to the inquiry itself, with legal teams and legal representatives adopting a duty of candour that we have not seen before in other inquiries, and it is clear that the approach the Council has taken differentiates it from other participants in the Grenfell Tower inquiry itself ... (we) have pinpointed (our) own errors ... (we) did not seek to defend the indefensible. ... Organisations do not need to wait for a disaster or a crisis ... (The Charter) can guide your daily work ...and your relationship with residents and communities.”

If Community Housing Cymru could do the same it would send out important signals. I know that you are all under huge pressure to fulfil your purpose in alleviating poverty and providing safe havens for many vulnerable people. The spirit and the letter of this Charter would strengthen your Governance. Indeed the test of your Governance is the extent that it serves you best in times of stress.

Diolch yn fawr iawn

Thank you very much.

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE

20th March 2024