

BEING PROUD OF BRITAIN – A MODERN PATRIOTISM

Speech by the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, at the 'Pride of Britain Awards', London 20 May 1999.

I am delighted to give my support to the Mirror's 'Pride of Britain' awards. We have a great deal to be proud of as a nation so it is right we have this chance to celebrate and thank those who make us proud to be British.

Britain is on the move. We are a nation that looks more confident, feels more confident and acts more confidently. In part that's thanks to many of the people in this room today.

I am a British patriot. Proud of my country and proud of the British people. In a world too full of cynicism and pessimism, we can and should be optimistic about our future.

It's not just that these islands have produced – and still produce – some of the world's finest scientists, authors, composers, artists, sports people, designers. It's not just our humour, our integrity or what people know as Basic British decency. Or that our music has blazed a trail for the last forty years, from the Beatles to the Spice Girls. Or that our film stars win the Oscars, our fashion designers run some of the biggest design houses in the World.

What marks us out as different is our character: hard working, tolerant, understated, creative, courageous, generous. The kind of generosity the men, women and children of Britain have shown in their phenomenal response to charity appeals for Kosovar Albanian refugees.

I saw the best of our character for myself very recently in the Balkans. When I met our armed forces. I saw our young men and women – part of a generation that is too often written off – showing professionalism, a sense of duty, but above all, a compassion that was truly inspiring.

That is why we are the first choice of any peace keeping mission around the world. Ours are not just highly trained fighting forces, they have the compassion and humanity to care for those who have lost their homes, their country and their future. They have jumped at the chance to build refugee camps and feed those who had been on the move without rest for many weeks.

They were supported by British volunteers – working all hours day and night – with no regard for their own comfort or financial gain, just so they could bring back some hope into the lives of these desperate refugees. These are the great British heroes. Unsung, but heroes.

But you don't have to travel outside Britain to see this quiet heroism. Every day in our classrooms, in our hospitals, on our housing estates, hard working people are doing extraordinary things to make Britain a better place to live. They are the pride of Britain.

When I meet a nurse who tells me she has given up her family Christmas to work in Casualty – I see the compassion and hard work deep in the British character. And later this afternoon I will be meeting with cancer experts at Downing Street to talk through our strategy for raising Britain's game in tackling a disease that kills one in four British people.

When I meet a teacher who likes nothing more than to see a child developing his mind, learning maths for the first time, or a new musical instrument or the basic rules of physics – I see the ability to inspire that is deep in the British character.

And when innocent minorities are bombed in London, and the majority respond in the way they did, I see one nation, Britain, coming together. I see tolerance and dignity. I see the great multi-racial tolerant

Britain we are trying to build. Of course, as Doreen and Neville Lawrence know, we are not there yet. But I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of people in this country share this vision.

Ours is a modern patriotism, not a narrow nationalism. It is about how we can build a great future, not just look back to past glories. We never forget the past: we salute it. But that does not mean we damn the present of bemoan today's young people.

We should be proud of what this country has achieved. Immensely proud. So much that is good in the world bears the stamp of Britain. But for me, the good times are today's times and tomorrow's times.

And my aim as Prime Minister is to galvanise this great nation into producing more successes, building a more modern and confident country. That confidence will come from schools that teach children how to read, write and add up, but also how to enjoy learning and how to fulfil their potential.

A modern NHS that offers faster treatment of higher quality at a patient's convenience will restore confidence in our most prized institution. And a modern welfare system that gets work for those who can and security for those who can't; that doesn't hand out money to those who don't need it, but gets more help to those who do.

Confident too in a stable economy, a knowledge economy, in which the brains, ideas and creativity of the British people – that are second to none – can be used for the benefit of us all.

And we call all be more confident when we know no one is being left behind or excluded from this new Britain. That child poverty is being tackled. That pensioners can live with dignity in old age. That the unemployed are helped back into work. That disabled people are given the support they need.

The winners we honour to day – some famous, some not – have one thing in common. They have risen above the cynicism, they have resisted defeatism and pessimism and done all they can to bring people together, develop talent, inspire the nation. Some have shown extraordinary courage to defeat illness and injury, extraordinary flair to entertain and delight us, extraordinary dedication to improve their communities.

They are just some of the people who are already striving to create that future. They are working hard, day in day out, to make Britain better and better.

I am delighted to be present at this first Mirror awards ceremony. It is a great idea. I hope it becomes a regular feature in the calendar. The qualities we celebrate today are the qualities that helped give us a great past. More importantly, they are qualities that guarantee our country a great future.

I am proud to help shape that future.