



Chuka Umunna

EDITORS' NOTE Chuka Umunna was elected as Member of Parliament for Streatham in May 2010. Umunna studied English Law and French Law at the University of Manchester and the University of Burgundy, followed by Nottingham Law School. An employment law solicitor by profession, prior to his election, Umunna worked at a law firm primarily acting for employees and small businesses. He also acted for employers, having trained as a solicitor at a City law firm working with multinationals. In June 2010, Umunna was elected by his parliamentary colleagues to serve on the House of Commons' Treasury Select Committee and, in October 2010, was appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to Ed Miliband, Leader of the Labour Party. In May 2011, he was appointed as Shadow Minister for Small Business and Enterprise in Labour's Shadow Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) team. In October 2011, Umunna was appointed to the Shadow Cabinet as Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

What needs to be done to rebuild private sector support for the Party?

Having worked hard to build trust from the mid-1990s under Prime Minister Blair and then Prime Minister Brown, we lost support at the 2010 general election. There was no real visible business support for the party.

What I have sought to do since taking my post is to continue the work of my immediate predecessor in rebuilding support and being clear on how growth primarily will and should be private-sector driven. Our job as policymakers is to work in partnership with British business to deliver better outcomes for our country. I make no apology for that. We are a resolutely pro-business, pro-enterprise party, because that is the only way that you can build a fairer society.

Unless you grow the size of the pie, you can have all the conversations you want to as to how you will chop it up, but if there is no more pie, there is nothing left to deliver fairer outcomes to people.

A Pro-Business, Pro-Enterprise Party

An Interview with Chuka Umunna,
Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, British Labour Party

When you lose that business support, how hard is it to make changes and is it difficult to be patient when trying to bring about progress?

The starting point is that I do not find that business people and businesses are partisan. They are not party-political. They will work with whoever can help them grow their businesses and their bottom line.

In business, it's not so much a question of partisanship or politics; it's a question of who one can work with to deliver shared value and, of course, from the point of view of policymakers, to ensure that we deliver value for society in general.

I don't think that's very difficult to get across because business people are pragmatic and not political in that sense. You have to be very clear about how government can work in partnership with business. From the point of view of policymakers, part of that is understanding where government can add value and where government can use its convening power to help strategically move a sector toward becoming a global leader. Ultimately, this has to be market driven. If you look at different players within a sector, like automotive in the U.K., there is competition and rivalry among the main players in that set so they won't necessarily work in a coordinated fashion to push forward the group's interests. As a result, the last Business Secretary in Government set up a group called the Automotive Council. This was a partnership among industry, government, and other players that worked to strategically grow U.K. automotive to become the incredibly successful story it is today.

So government can help by using its convening power, but it can also help by using what it spends to back industry, and procurement is important in that respect. We have seen in the U.S. how there is a small business administration that helps to ensure a federal level of support for small or medium-sized businesses that might also get them a chance to bid for federal contracts.

But it's as much about government knowing where it can add value as it is about government knowing when it needs to step aside. We're aiming to have a smart enterprising state – it's what we want to build if we are elected next year.

Is enough being done within Britain to keep pace with emerging markets?

I'm clear that we can't be complacent. One of the key parts of our long-term plan for growth, which I call Agenda 2030, is being at the forefront of developing solutions today for tomorrow's problems. Science and innovation is crucial to that.

The Chinese are increasing their science spend by 36 percent a year at the moment as they seek to move from being an IP copier to an IP creator.

So we need to ensure that we keep investing in new technological development. It's not just coming up with new innovations. We need to make sure we also commercialize our research and our scientific advances.

How important is the government's continued investment in education in order to produce a strong employee base?

The way advanced economies can compete with emerging market economies is not through a race to the bottom on wages and terms and conditions, but by a race to the top regarding quality. This means you want to make sure you have the most skilled workforce.

I think we have one of the preeminent higher education sectors in the world – it's one of our biggest exports. We have a sizable number of overseas students seeking to study at British universities. But we need to ensure that we also have equal focus on our nonacademic school system, which needs to develop the technical and engineering skills of our people. This is going to be a major focus for the next Labour government if we are elected.

Is there still strong opportunity for business growth within Britain or will much of it come from emerging markets?

At the moment, our growth is primarily domestically driven, but we need to reconfigure our economy to move from a model that saw growth primarily driven by private consumption, house price inflation, and finance to a more diversified growth model with a greater variety of sectors delivering output.

As part of that, we have to increase our exports. We are in the 30th year of a trade deficit and we need to change that.

If you look at the emerging market economies, we see the growth of a global middle class that is going to triple in size. This is a whole new load of demand. I am determined to ensure that British business is set up to meet that demand because, that way, not only can we create more jobs in the U.K., but we can also ensure

that we have good quality jobs that provide a certain standard of life.

Why is it so important that the U.K. remains part of the EU, and going forward, how critical will that be?

Another key pillar to our growth plan into 2030 is that we need an outward-looking approach to the world. I don't see how you can pursue the opportunities arising in the emerging market economies if you take another approach. Our continued membership in the European Union is absolutely integral to that.

Over 40 percent of our exports go to the European Union – it is our nearest and biggest market, and it's the key that unlocks the door to other markets through the trade agreements that come with our membership.

Are you optimistic that the Labour party is unified in a way to move this agenda forward?

We approach this coming election with humility. We know that we lost a tremendous amount of support and, in 2010, we went down to our second worst defeat in history.

We are winning back support and we have seen under the leadership of Ed Miliband my party put on over 2,000 councilors all over the U.K. Importantly, the swing battleground seats are needed to get the majority of the national election. We cannot presume what the result will be and we have to work really hard daily to continue to win back the support of the people who we're going to ask to give us the privilege to represent.

Have you seen enough advances toward building diversity within the party?

We have traditionally always performed far better in selecting candidates for elected office who look like modern Britain. I was the first black politician to be appointed to a British shadow cabinet, and that wasn't remarked upon that much, which is a good thing. It illustrates we've made progress.

There are 27 members of the House of Parliament drawn from an ethnic minority and it should be at least double that.

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It's not always about party politics for me. The Conservatives in particular deserve credit for sorting things out in their Parliamentary party somewhat. But we all have to do much better. I'm proud, however, that we continue to be at the forefront in having a Parliamentary party that looks like Britain.

With all that is going on, are you able to take time to reflect on the party's successes?

The world is always changing, but every time I walk into the House of Parliament, I pinch myself. It's a huge privilege. I'm just focused on trying to do as much good as I can.

What do you tell young people about the value of public service?

If we want to attract more people into politics, we need to drop the excessive partisanship and tribalism that people indulge in on both sides of the pond. In the U.K., people have become less tribal about their politics; party

allegiance has fallen, though interest in politics has not. I don't think it hurts occasionally to acknowledge that there are points the other side makes that are valid and right, and it's not a bad thing to aim to reach consensus.

In Washington, you need to look at what is happening on the Hill and see that it's not necessarily very effective. This may explain why the U.S. has the same struggles we do in talking about why politics matters.

In an increasingly globalized world, people are not apathetic about politics just because they don't like the way it's done. They also doubt our ability to really affect what is happening to them in the face of those global forces. They doubt our power to do anything to shape those forces to deliver a better life for them and their families.

Part of the solution is giving people more power where they feel powerless. This means we need to decentralize power more to communities so they can do things and be the masters of their own destinies, collectively and as individuals. In the U.K., I'd like to see a much more devolved, decentralized model. Governments of some areas like Michigan, New York, Maryland, and California, are doing interesting things in this regard. Their policymakers are doing great things because they're sensitive to what their businesses need locally.

In the U.K., a lot of young people are attracted to politics because of single issues. This presents a challenge for us because, in an increasingly individualized and atomized society, our politics is the art of the compromise because there are so many contradictory and competing interests. It's difficult because if you are campaigning for a single issue, you don't even have to think about the contradictory interests. However, as President of the U.S., you have to weigh all these competing interests.

We have a challenge in terms of the kind of society in which we're bringing up our young people. Politics tends to run counter to that very atomized notion of politics. So for progressive politicians, making the case for collective action is as urgent as it ever was. ●

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