

Annual Attlee Lecture at the Army and Navy Club, 21st April 2005
Trevor Phillips, OBE

Introduction

Thank you for your kind introduction....

Good evening.

It is a privilege to be asked to give this year's Attlee Lecture. I am grateful to the Foundation for the kind invitation, and I am delighted to be speaking in the presence of so many old friends and of course *members of the Attlee Family*

Election 2005

As a public official, this period shortly before an election requires me to leave the political arena to parties and other campaign organisations.

However, everyone here knows of my political background, and more importantly, my long-held commitment to campaigning for greater equality, culminating in my stint as chair of the Commission for Racial Equality.

As you can imagine, standing here on the sidelines isn't where I would choose to be when the discussion of immigration and diversity gets going.

If you believe all that you see and hear in the media, you'd be forgiven for believing that patterns of recent migration which have made our society more diverse and more prosperous, are at odds with our long tradition of equality, and notions of common welfare.

But my parents were part of the Windrush generation, arriving here in the 1950s. What we're hearing now about the threat posed by migrants is not new.

The recent debate has reminded me of the political storm that preceded the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury docks in Summer 1948. Some of you here may even remember the outrage when news leaked out that 430 West Indians were making a 38 day journey across the Atlantic to find work in Britain. Heated debate in the House of Commons led many to claim that immigration was out of control.

These included some Government ministers, who were no less hostile to the Windrush migrants than the opposition. As reported by the Daily Express (June 8 1948) Employment Minister George Isaacs confessed his worry to MPs saying, 'All I know is that they are in a ship and are coming here...I hope no encouragement will be given to others to follow them.'

Unsurprisingly his anxiety was matched by parliamentary colleagues. The Government was so nervous, the Windrush voyagers found themselves being shadowed by a Royal navy warship.

A few comforted themselves with the thought that the inflow would only be temporary and the nightmare would soon be over. Another minister Arthur Creech-Jones, soothingly reassured the House that “they won’t last a single winter”.

But the threat of immigration then was inflated, just as it is now. Europe had seen huge refugee flows in the aftermath of World War II; literally hundreds of thousands of people moved across the continent.

Yet here we were talking about just over 400 British subjects looking for opportunity, a job, and a home away from home. As civil servants of the day acknowledged, there were no logical grounds for treating a British subject coming to Great Britain from Jamaica any differently from one leaving Scotland.

These people were Brits, they venerated the monarchy, half had fought in Europe, all had grown up celebrating the Empire. So what was the worry? Well, no-one mentioned race – but it’s clear that the debate about their presence was really about their colour. And this is where we could see Attlee’s courage and moral stature. He refused to be panicked. His response, to a letter from incandescent backbenchers, was measured and calm.

He declared simply: ‘If our policy were to result in a great influx of undesirables, we might, however unwillingly, have to consider modifying it. But I would not be willing to consider that except on really compelling evidence, which I do not think exists at the present time.’¹

And just in case you thought getting consensus on immigration and asylum is the political equivalent of mission impossible, consider these words written in *The Times* several decades before by one of Attlee’s contemporaries.

‘We must not’, he said, ‘betray the old, tolerant and generous practice of free entry and asylum to which this country has so long adhered, and from which it has so greatly gained.’

The author? None other than Attlee’s opponent in the post-war election Winston Churchill. Admittedly, this was written when he was an aspiring Liberal MP for North West Manchester, a constituency with a large Jewish population, but being a true Conservative, he never changed his mind.

Much of the debate today on this issue echoes a past era, with much heat and emotive language, and a little light offered by the small band of old-fashioned purists who consider that political debate should accommodate some facts.

I hope that between now and May 5 we will hear more of the latter and less of the former.

¹ Phillips M, & Phillips, T (1999) *Windrush*

And when it comes to those sources of enlightened thought on this particular issue, I was pleasantly surprised by Rupert Murdoch's entry into the debate this week. On Tuesday, Mr Murdoch declared himself, like the CRE, a fan of a points based system immigration for the UK.

Speaking from the USA this week, he said: "The idea of a points system for immigrants who want to come and live there, who would enrich the country in the ways immigrants have this country, I think is great.....I don't think you need to put a cap on it unless you started to see a lot of unemployment arising out of it, which I think is highly unlikely. If you bring skilled people into the country I think it would enrich the whole country and create a lot more jobs. I am pro-immigrant."

Here are words I never thought I'd say: I totally agree with Rupert Murdoch.

The Commission for Racial Equality has spent the past year trying to persuade politicians to discuss the issue of immigration openly. That is why we suggested to leaders of both Labour and Conservative parties that they should consider the Australian and Canadian points systems². Happily they did and now both support versions of such a system – one with a rational and ordered basis.

However, a rational system doesn't prevent people from occasionally putting forward variants on the policy that are impractical, heartless, or racially biased. Inexplicably, those who are relatively recent arrivals can be the most anxious about who follows them.³

Murdoch's comments echo our own sentiments, and mark a significant shift in the content of the immigration debate away from discussion of where migrants are from, towards a focus on what skills they bring.

Why is this important? Because the debate about immigration in this country has been devilled by the fact that we have always rationed entry by reference to the potential immigrant's origins rather than what he or she brings. This by definition is an ethnic or racial policy – and that also explains why it is almost impossible to discuss the issue without the spectre of race looming over the debate. This new approach means that instead of focusing on who a potential immigrant's parents were, we focus on what we need and what they bring.

Politicians have a choice about the way they deal with the real issues we face. They can either be blown around by the swirling gusts of journalistic opinion, or they can set a steady course for the country while, to paraphrase Kipling, all around them others lose their heads.

² Independent (2005) Comment – Trevor Phillips: This debate over Immigration is so Foolish 23 February 2005 <http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=613760>

³ Independent (2005) Comment – Trevor Phillips: This debate over Immigration is so Foolish 23 February 2005 <http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=613760>

Attlee had a keen sense of what was just; on this occasion ensuring that Britain did the right thing, rather than indulging in politically expedient rhetoric. There may be lessons for our contemporary politicians.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

Attlee Legacy

Attlee also provided a benchmark for our current crop of potential statesmen and women in other ways.

Attlee's, social democratic philosophy was formed as he built a political career in inter-war Britain. As he said himself, he was from a 'typical family of the professional class brought up in the atmosphere of Victorian England'.⁴

His Limehouse constituency offered a bird's eye view onto the kind of disadvantage chronicled by Booth and Rowntree in their studies of poverty. He witnessed the general strike of 1926, and the Jarrow March to London, and he saw that lives of people who we might today describe as hard-working families could be ruined by political failure or lack of boldness, just as much as by the arbitrary acts of fate.

Is it any wonder that his was the administration that gave us 'cradle to grave' social protection, establishing universal access to a GP for all?

He used his huge post-war mandate to set a clear, aspirational vision for the country, and a programme for achieving it.

His government, at the urging of Beveridge put in place the basic elements of the Welfare State.

And crucially he locked in a basic level of economic and social security for British citizens – leaving a giant footprint on British society.

While there has been much tinkering around the edges, the Welfare State is still there – and I'm sure we are all grateful to those who have contributed to making it what it is now.

All of this was born of Attlee's belief in equality. What separated the social democratic left then from all others – and still separates us - is a fundamental certainty that democracy and equality cannot be separated. You cannot have one without the other.

This is best summed up by de Tocqueville's remark that "*a passion for equality is the heart of a democracy*" For the Stalinist left democracy was dispensable if it interfered with the march towards equality; for the liberal right, democracy, can co-exist with huge disparities of wealth and power. In my view Attlee was right and they were wrong.

⁴ Hennessy, P (2000) The Prime Minister

Today we live as beneficiaries of his legacy. Pensions may not be large enough. Housing benefit may not be as generous as we'd like, and the NHS has its flaws. But our expectations today unlike those of our grandparents, are that no-one should die from neglect and poverty; that no Briton should be without a roof over their head, and that no child should cry for want of medicine or sustenance.

This is a humbling achievement. But it should no longer be enough for 21st century Britain. If Attlee were here today he would be setting us new challenges.

Challenge to the Progressives

I believe that the principal challenge to progressives today remains the quest for the true equality. We still, to be worthy of the label of progressive, are compelled to place at the heart of everything we do an irreversible, irresistible aspiration for greater equality. This is what the new hero of the American democrats, the African American senator Barack Obama "the politics of hope".

I know precisely as you do, what the alternative to the politics of hope and aspiration are. They are the politics of despair.

That despair comes from the knowledge that Britain became more unequal in the last quarter century. That fact is well-documented; the scale of change, less so.

At the end of the 1970s, the richest tenth received 21% of total disposable income. This rose to 28-29% by 2002-03. More than half of this increase was accounted for by the top one percent, and most of this by the top half a per cent.

The changes at the bottom were equally dramatic.

At the end of the 1970s, the poorest tenth received about 4% of disposable income. By the early 1990s this share had fallen by more than a third to between 2 and 3%, where it has stayed.

By the early 1990s, relative poverty in the UK was twice the level it had been in the 1960s, and three times what it had been in the late 1970s. By the end of the 1990s of fifteen industrialised countries: only the USA had and Ireland had higher relative poverty overall.⁵

I am passionately committed to the idea that this society can be more equal, fairer, more decent and more productive than it is at present.

Like you, I am not blinded to the massive changes taking place in our society. Yes, we have become more affluent. We have also become a more diverse nation. We should not ignore the fact that what Attlee put in place has allowed us to focus our attention on new ways in which people's lives can be blighted.

⁵ Hills, John (2004) *Inequality & the State*. Oxford University Press

One of the things that has not changed is that it is often ethnic minority communities that live the most unequal and disadvantaged lives.

I will deal with race in a moment, but let me just acknowledge that there are other indicators of chronic disadvantage – some economic in origin, others clearly not. In the early years of the 21st century, we are witnessing the cementing of a whole series of different kinds of inequality. They are substituting themselves for those that Attlee and his team, attacked.

For example, while it is almost unheard of now for anyone to die in a gutter from lack of medical care, it is still the case that a person can be paid less for a job because of their gender.

We know also, for example, that housing is now the single greatest repository of wealth held by individuals in Britain, and that certain groups of families are today more likely to be trapped in low value areas, and miss out on the better services, jobs and resulting life-chances that a move to a more prosperous area could bring. According to Shelter⁶, ‘housing is taking us back towards the deep social divisions of Victorian society’ – a place from which Attlee’s political generation worked tirelessly to deliver us.

What is worst is that disadvantage is still likely to transfer itself from one generation of a family to the next. Just as the young still benefit from their ancestors’ hard work, prudence or good fortune, so many Britons carry the burden of their ancestors’ poverty.

At the CRE we talk often about the need to prevent our origins affecting our destinies in an undesirable way. It would be perverse for the life chances of our young in 2005 to mirror those of Attlee’s constituents. Yet:

We shouldn’t just moan about how bad these inequalities are;

We shouldn’t just seek to ameliorate them; instead

We ought, in the years ahead, to work together to eliminate them completely.

The experience of minorities

This may demand a major shift in understanding about the causes of inequality, especially for those in progressive politics.

Traditionally the focus of the centre left’s assault on inequality has been purely economic. But year by year we are seeing people trapped by the accidents of birth which have little to do with how much their parents earn, or how great the assets they own. Inequality can arise independently of economic status. And the apparent driver for many kinds of inequality are our racial, gender or other intrinsic differences.

⁶ Shelter (2004) Know Your Place

But, theoretically, diversity does not have to lead to inequality.

Or, to put it more precisely, in a good society there should not be any statistical relationship between your race, gender, place of birth and your life chances. The problem is that in our very real and very imperfect world, all the evidence says that difference means inequality.

It is the role of public policy to ensure that arbitrary circumstances – location, colour, sex, do not determine your fate.

This is the battle we face every day at the Commission for Racial Equality, so I am going to focus on racial inequality to illustrate the point – But I believe a similar case could be made about gender, or religion or about sexual orientation or disability.

In the field of race equality where experts have looked at these issues in depth – such as in the realm of employment – coming from a minority ethnic community still appears to carry added disadvantages.

We know that for example, whatever class you belong to, your race is an obstacle all by itself – for example African Caribbean men and Pakistani men, when compared with white men of similar qualifications, will on average be earning between £5,000 and £6,500 less each year.

And the impact of race on people's life chances is not reducing with time. Rather the opposite – our race seems more likely than ever to trap us in the place into which we were born. Babies of mothers born in Pakistan are on average twice as likely to die before their first birthday.

I can also tell you with statistical certainty that an African Caribbean boy just as able as I was has twice as much chance of seeing the inside of a jail as he has of taking a university degree.

I can tell you that a Muslim man or woman who goes for a job is a third as likely as a non-Muslim to get it.

And I can tell you that a Gypsy or Traveller child has about a one in four chance of passing five good GCSEs and virtually none of getting three A levels.

This is not just about the poor. Of the 17,000 doctors on the grade just below consultant, earning at least twice the average wage 12,000 of them are from ethnic minorities. They could consider themselves well-off were it not for the fact that they have little prospect of the advancement likely for their white colleagues.

I coined the phrase 'snowy peaks' a couple of years ago to help explain this phenomenon to government ministers in relation to the civil service. I told them to think of Whitehall as a mountain range.

At the base of each mountain you find large numbers of women and ethnic minority workers, whereas at the summit you find a small amount of white, middle class men. Snowy peaks can still be found in many parts of our society.

The typical response to racial inequality over the past generation has been to blame bad attitudes amongst racist people. This is a comforting idea especially for liberals (small "l"). It says that the real problem is someone else, and if only they could be as enlightened as us, then everything would be ok and we could stop worrying.

Unfortunately the theory that it's all the fault of some bad guys who are not us doesn't really stand up. Of course there are people who have racially biased attitudes in every workplace, every school, every hospital every company.

But it defies belief that every employer is consciously or subconsciously discriminating in such a way as to produce the ethnic pay penalty I mentioned a moment ago; or that British teachers are not only so racist, but so subtle in the exercise of their prejudice that they can ensure that on average Chinese and Indian students perform 50 and 25% better than the national average at GCSE whilst African Caribbean, Pakistani and Gypsy children do 70, 60 and 50% as well.

Could we know more about the true causes of many of the disadvantages ethnic minorities face? Would that help us to better address their most pressing problems, and thus change the situation they are in?

The answer to both is an unequivocal yes. As Attlee's handling of the Windrush issue suggests, good public policy often stems from the assembly of better evidence.

Let me give an example.

Southall is apparently the least credit worthy district in the country. Why? It's a prosperous area, full of thriving businesses. It turns out that Sikhs don't like to borrow, and as a result banks can't predict whether they will pay back a loan. Clearly not a case of all bank managers hating people with turbans!

So a knee jerk response which says that we come down like a ton of bricks on discriminatory bank managers will fail; far better to get a smart young computer whiz to rewrite the software.

Is all race inequality down to discrimination? This example suggests not. But, different ethnic communities living side by side, but separately, can through no fault of their own experience varying degrees of access to equality.

This doesn't just work one way. Being White is no guarantee of advantage. When I started work with the CRE I said to everyone that my principal business would not be telling the 8% of us who are black or brown how bad we felt, or reciting the statistics of

our oppression – though I will say something about the experience of minorities tonight. I said that my principal work would be with the whole society.

Indeed I have made no secret of the fact that one of my greatest concerns is the quiet crisis that is engulfing young white men. This is not just a problem of a minority which commits crimes or are guilty of anti-social behaviour. If that is all there were I would feel confident in sending the Home Secretary out to sort them out sharpish.

But the danger signs are that whilst Chinese boys and girls, Indian boys and Girls are doing well at school, white boys are joining Gypsy, Pakistani and African Caribbean boys at the back of the pack. This is a disastrous waste of ability that we cannot afford. But it also presents a political threat we cannot ignore. These young men are a fertile feeding ground for extremists, just as are their Muslim equivalents. But as they've told me, they have the added bitterness that no-one appears to care much about them – after all, as they say to me “The Pakis have got you, the CRE to look after them”.

Integration

That is why in our work with young people in recent months we have brought together teenagers of all backgrounds to tell us what they want us to do for them.

In most cases, they're pretty clear: they want safety – from gangs, from violence, from drugs, they want something to do – more youth clubs, places to go that don't cost a fortune and that they can get to on foot, and they want a chance to do better than their parents.

With that in mind I must congratulate the Foundation for putting at the heart of its current work, the development of the Attlee Youth and Community Centre in Spitalfields. I don't need to remind anyone here that Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse and deprived communities in London.

More than half of Tower Hamlets' pupils are of Bangladeshi origin, while another 11% come from black African and Caribbean backgrounds. Ninety different languages are spoken in the area, and three-quarters of pupils speak English as an 'additional language', another well-recognised barrier to educational success.

The key to my job lies partly in persuading Britain that the pursuit of equality is not just for minorities. It also lies in making it plain that true equality in a diverse society goes hand in hand with integration. Being separated from mainstream society is a virtual guarantee of inequality.

The importance of the Attlee Community centre is heightened by a little piece of research that YouGov carried out for me late last year.

The poll asked 3,000 Britons about their circle of friends (the pollsters limited the number to twenty – which I thought was a bit unfair until they told me that most people don't have twenty friends).

What we discovered was that whilst most people from ethnic minorities can say that the majority of their friends are white, the reverse is definitely not true. Half of all white Britons could not name a single non-white person amongst their friends; only 6% could name more than two.

And in case you thought this was the dreaded countryside effect, I should remind you that most of us live in urban areas where we come into contact with people different from us all the time; and I should also tell you that the figures for London, whose population is one-third visible minority are scarcely better than the average – fewer than 20% of white Londoners could name more than two non-white friends.

But not all the problems are about white attitudes. Some ethnic minority Britons do have exclusively non-white circles of friends. But whilst amongst older people that was true of about one-fifth – not surprising really – amongst younger people, who you would expect to be more socially integrated the figure was about two fifths.

Community centres, such as the one this foundation is building, provide a setting for greater interaction between increasingly stratified groups in our society.

Of course, I am not naïve enough to believe that the sprouting of hundreds of similar centres around the country alone will solve the community tensions, or build the trust and sense of civic belonging that denote true integration.

The reality is that there are several barriers currently impeding successful integration. Some of them are straightforwardly about discrimination. Some of them are about class. Still others are systemic. And some are cultural. The cost is colossal.

The grim outcome of such a future is all too easy to see if we glance across the Atlantic. In the USA 9 out of 10 African American children study in black majority schools; 9 out of 10 white Americans live in all-white districts. These may look equal from a distance – but guess whose schools are better and whose districts are more crime-ridden, run-down and neglected? And why should white Americans ever care what happens to their black, or indeed Hispanic neighbours if they live such separate lives that the fate of one has no impact on the fate of the other?

Equality Review

So what are the solutions?

Discrimination and disadvantage still permeate many parts of our society and economy. The reasons for these disadvantages are complex and mutually reinforcing. Low skill and employment levels, poor housing, health, as well as cultural factors such as diet, and living in a deprived area, all influence each other, and untangling all the causes of disadvantage will never be precise.

The simple answer is that we still do not understand enough about the true causes of many of the disadvantages people face, with the result that we fail to address the real problem, and then wonder why we are failing to change the situation.

That is one of the reasons why the Prime Minister has asked me to review these issues across the spectrum to inform the work of the soon to be established commission for Equality & Human Rights.

I expect the Equalities Review to carry out a root and branch review to investigate the causes of persistent discrimination and inequality in British society, as well as making an important contribution towards both embedding equality in government policy and achieving greater equality in the UK.

But if it were just a review of existing legislation, it would be a very short exercise. In practice it will investigate more fundamental issues.

We may have to rethink completely: what we think the causes of persistent inequality and disadvantage are, and what true equality really looks like in different areas of life. Is it pure proportionality, or something else?

What do I mean by this second question?

Three years ago, the British Medical Association said that too few men were training to become doctors⁷. For the first time ever, more women than men graduated from medical schools.

Six out of ten students at that time were women, and some people were worried that medicine may become overly-dominated by women in the future.

Should we have brought in a programme to redress the balance? Or should we consider that actually, as long as there are no barriers to entering medicine, gender equality in this profession may never be a 50:50 split?

Essentially our review will look at the barriers that hold people back relative to their peers, whether these hurdles are cultural, geographical, or related to the nature of 'constrained choices'. These questions rarely crop up when the spotlight remains on economic inequality.

One principal is important. When we talk about achieving equality more broadly, we must recognise that everyone starts from a different point. For example, the fact that some communities suffer from Sickle Cell Anaemia, or Thalassaemia or Cystic Fibrosis means that health service resources may need to be focused in areas where they are concentrated. That of course means that resources may be distributed unequally in order

⁷ BBC(2002) Women 'dominating medical schools'
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/health/2002/bma_conference/2091015.stm

to promote greater equality. The remedy to inequality in a diverse society is not necessarily identical treatment.

The review will help us learn more about the true barriers to equality, and propose some new levers for dismantling them.

We have a great chance to use the next few years to make an all out assault on inequality of different kinds, to bring about sustained and irreversible gains for equality, and to leave an indelible footprint on British society - as permanent as that left by Clement Attlee and his team.

And just as they led an agenda to slay the giant of want and ignorance, we need to attack the evil, insidious demons of institutionalised inequality.

I believe that we need a new agenda for equality, one that goes beyond simply improving life for the poor, or stopping discrimination.

An agenda that addresses the fundamental cause of the alienation I talked about earlier – the fact that far too many of us are trapped by our origins, whilst a lucky few escape. It is an agenda that has to hold out the prospect that liberation is not as an accident open only to the fortunate few, but one that could be available to every person.

Governments cannot make everyone a cabinet Minister, not everyone will be a star footballer or a great musician or scientist – but they can ensure that no-one should be preordained to repeat their parents' lives because of prejudice, lack of education or thwarted ambition.

To deliver an agenda for equality that transforms the ambitions of people in this country would be an historic achievement. The process will involve a new vision and the asking of some difficult questions.

The dividing lines of Britain 2005 will certainly provide a major set of questions. If Attlee were still here, he would have turned his attention to these, and dealt with them in the same manner as he did his issues 60 years ago. We need to analyse and banish inequality. We need simultaneously to promote equality and entrench progress towards more equal life chances for all people.

My hope is that the next government grasps this opportunity to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged groups whatever their backgrounds. In fact the quest for a more equal Britain must lie at the very heart of what it means to be British. Our history is a record of unselfish commitment to greater equality, but also to the social integration of newcomers. The British people deserve a government which has the confidence and the ambition to reach for the skies and to deliver a future in which each and every one of us can find and express all our talents.