

Speech to the CWU Black Workers Conference

Trevor Phillips' speech to the Communication Workers Union's Black Workers' Conference on 2 February 2008

Thank you. I am immensely glad to be here.

As we all know the Trade Union movement has fought for decades to remove barriers to discrimination in all its forms. The CWU, predecessors and others have been vital in laying the foundations for the new Equalities landscape. You've asked me to say a few words about the way in which the new Commission can work with unions, and with the modern black workers movement in the interests of equality and human rights and above all in the interests of black communities in this country.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is Britain's first national institution charged with preventing the causes and the effects of inequality, prejudice and discrimination, promoting and protecting human rights and dignity. It's a key sentence. I can put it like this - what we're about is fairness.

Our vision, saying it quite simply, is to create: 'A society built on fairness and respect. People confident in all aspects of their diversity'

We will act as an independent voice for equality and human rights, tackling discrimination and expanding opportunity. And we are doing this in extraordinary circumstances.

To put it into context, we at the Commission – Helpline, staff and Commissioners - one of whom is a CWU official – can be asked to offer our views, clarify the law or give guidance on subjects as various as:

- how to tackle gang culture amongst young people;
- how better to ensure dignity and respect for people in care, both old and young;
- what actually constitutes discrimination against women, pregnant or otherwise;
- whether a black man who was stopped outside his own flat by police who believed him to be a burglar was a victim of discrimination;
- what legal rights should be afforded to carers. You will have seen in the papers that our legal team won an important legal case recently.
- should a public authority prioritise English translations or English classes;
- what should be the human rights afforded to prisoners;
- what are the implications of the law on abortion for the way in which we discharge our duties to disabled people under statute;
- and there are big, new things that we in the equality movement haven't even begun to think about.

For example, if insurance companies should be allowed to read your DNA and see whether you have a predisposition to some disabling condition, and if so whether they should be permitted to load your premiums for the risk that you might one day develop the condition that you currently don't have - or would this be yet a new dimension of inequality that should be outlawed?

The reason I go through this list is because we have to understand the scale of the challenges we face. These are the issues we will face for the next two generations.

Crucially, I see trade unions as key partners in the fight against injustice and staunch defenders of human rights for people of all different backgrounds. We need to understand how we ensure that difference doesn't become the cause of further inequality.

Let me reassure those of you who are cynical about this new merger and the possible adverse impact it will have on race. I'm here to say that if we get this right, we will be in a more powerful position to affect change rather than when we had single equality organisations.

We are bigger. We have more money. We have new powers that people fought for. And we don't have to compete with other equality causes.

We have a new vision. What we now understand better than we ever did before, partly thanks to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and the Macpherson report, is that racism and equality are a product of the way institutions work. So an important part of our work must be to reform institutions, companies, government departments of all types, so that we can prevent discrimination from happening.

But will it mean that causes dedicated to race equality will have less prominence? I could give you all sorts of assurances, but frankly, one thing I learnt early as a journalist is that if you want to know the truth, follow the money - something which our MPs have been learning in the past few weeks. That is why the very first decision that the new Commission's Board took was to maintain the grants programme to race equality councils and other race organisations to at least the same level as the previous year under the CRE - which by the way, was historically high. Let me be clear that at the EHRC we will still be funding effective Race Equality Councils and other race equality organisations, as well as providing a further £6 million to address all forms of inequalities at the local level, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.

Second, there is the question of whether black people will have a voice at the table. I want to return to this later but it's worth pointing out that the Secretary of State has recently appointed the senior black majority church leader the Reverend Joel Edwards to the Board - a man whose credentials as a representative of black communities can't be challenged; and previously the appointment of Professor Ziauddin Sardar means that one of the major figures in the South Asian and Muslim communities is helping to guide the way we work. And by the way, the fact that they may have kicked me upstairs to head the new body does not make me any less black - I hope you will have noticed.

Everyone around the table at the Equality and Human Rights Commission are there not for one cause but for all. My colleague Jeannie Drake has been playing a fantastic role not just in defending women but also in steering us in a way that helps us tackle all equality issues.

The fact is that we'll still be tackling race equality issues head on. Let me take for example the emerging debate over 'stop and search' this week. I won't be saying too much about this publicly until the publication of the Flanagan Report later next week, but it is already clear that this

issue is in danger of becoming a political football used for point scoring between different parties. And the people who will pay the price of that knockabout won't be sitting on comfortable green benches in Westminster, writing cheques to their sons and daughters. It will be communities black and white who will already be feeling the tension on the streets.

This is not an ordinary political question. Yes, we need to deracialise it. Yes, there is nothing wrong with making the process of 'stop and search' more efficient but the police must remain accountable to those whom they serve.

But we all know the history here; and we all know that whatever qualifications we hedge round it, for many politicians talking about stop and search is code for "We'll get tough on black and Asian people". It's another version of the sly insinuations over immigration.

So in my view, though we should not shy away from tackling crime - and since as a black man I am more likely than most to be a victim of crime - we need to talk about effective measures rather than political signals that could end up causing more harm than good.

All of this is even more important at this time than any others and I could talk about this at length but let me put it simply.

There is greater immigration. We know that there is more migration across the globe than ever before thanks to the jet plane, easier communications and more open borders. The UN tells us that 200 million people or thereabouts live and work outside the country of their birth. We also know that this migration brings us prosperity, adding to our GDP each year by estimates which vary but generally are thought to be in the billion or two range; it adds to growth and to our stock of skills.

Until about two decades ago, we used to worry about single groups of immigrants, usually from the old empire, distinguished by the fact that they were mostly dark-skinned, spoke English and thought of themselves as British people moving to their mother country. They arrived in discrete waves, one after the other.

The signature wave would be the Windrush migrants like my own parents - Caribbean nurses - and later Indian corner shop owners. Today, we face migration that comes from all corners, in all colours and speaks many languages. And they are all arriving at the same time. The signature migrants now are the Polish plumber and the Filipino nanny.

You will know that with this very modern movement of people comes movement of wealth at a rate never possible before the days of instant money transfers. That means that this new type of migration is already generating extraordinary levels of redistribution of income and assets - not domestically but globally.

In 2006, migrants worldwide sent home an estimated \$301 billion in remittances - more than twice the official aid received by developing countries. (Migration Policy Institute, FT). And these figures don't even begin to account for the money sent back through informal channels in internet cafes and grocery stores, which some studies estimate could raise the figure by a further fifty per cent.

But there are real issues for us to confront.

It is becoming clear that the people who suffer the most from the pressures of population growth on our infrastructure are the poorest people, typically the last-but-one wave of migrants, living in the most deprived areas.

We can see this clearly in differential child poverty rates, employment participation, health statistics and worst of all, shockingly poor levels of educational achievement for some migrant and ethnic groups, including some whites.

This also brings with it exploitation. Will they be paid the minimum wage, undercutting existing workers? For many of us in this room, we can see the spectres of what our parents and grandparents faced many years ago. Discrimination, exploitation, humiliation. But then there were no recent migrants to stand up for our parents and grandparents. And shamefully even trades unions were uncertain and in some cases hostile.

Today things are different. Today we have unions led by people like Billy Hayes who will stand up against racism. Today we have conferences like this. It will be hard. But there things that we can do.

I applaud your record, one of the best in the trade union movement, of establishing learning services and training for union reps. In particular, the long history of special education programmes for under-represented groups which has led to younger, black and female union representatives but also the whole range of initiatives which are underway as part of your forward-thinking, enabling approach to spreading diversity within the ranks of the CWU.

However there's a lot more to do. I have to ask myself, would my father still say to me what he said many years ago when we stood on the edge of the sorting floor and watched all the men, a lot of them black, largely what we would have called then West Indian, except for one white man. My father said there goes one of the governors. His point was that he would never be one of those governors. In the old days, we knew we weren't going places. Today, we have ambition but I question whether we are actually making a difference yet.

Trade unions are more diverse than they were 30 years ago but at the senior level, there's still a long way to go before its leadership is truly representative of the multi-ethnic Britain it serves. The CWU are forging ahead; laying a path for others to follow but are we moving as fast as we should be?

I wonder if trade unions are doing enough to change the composition of our Parliament. When selections take place to what extent are they taking the risk of supporting a minority candidate who may not have been around that long, rather than another white man or woman - who may be talented but may add less to the diversity of the House of Commons.

The challenges facing the Trade Union Movement is not just one of representation. If you look at CWU's postal arm you won't need to dig too deep to come across views such as those 'bloody foreign workers' referring to temporary new migrants working in this area.

The rise of support for the BNP is affecting this industry as much as any other.

For what it's worth I think there is a basic principle here. If you work for a universal public service you cannot belong to a political party which is racist and exclusivist. If you won't allow me to sit in the same political meeting as you how can I trust you to treat my children fairly or look after my mother in hospital, or apply the law fairly as a judge or copper? I don't know if this applies to your industry; but we have to think about this issue and I hope that in the debate about the upcoming Equality Act we'll address this question.

My message to you today is that the new challenges facing us all in our different roles needs to be met by new and creative solutions which we are beginning to develop in our newly created organisation. The EHRC however cannot tackle the big issues alone and is looking to develop partnerships with the CWU and others in order to ensure Britain remains competitive and becomes stronger and more prosperous.

Let me come back to the point you were discussing earlier. We can have an agenda in that we know there is a problem; things aren't moving as fast as they should be, despite the many resources and effort being put in. At this rate, the police will not reflect the community it serves until the middle of the 22nd century. At the current rate, black boys will not be at the same level as their counterparts until 2042. That's four or five generations of black children who will fail. At the rate that we are increasing the number of black MPs, it will not be until 2085 that we will get fair representation. It's not that people don't want it to happen but there are structural barriers. We need to change the way the system works.

Here's an example. A group of researchers decided to test America's car buying market. Black and white men and women were given the same script and sent to the same dealership with the intention of buying the same cars. There were seven hundred transactions in all. What did the researchers find? They found that those charged the lowest price were white men. Second were white women; third, black women. The black men were asked to pay a thousand dollars more for their cars.

My point is this. It's not just about the individual. It's about the way the system works. What do we do? Wait until we figure it all out? We need proper representation today. It isn't about us individually. It's about the whole system. I'm not attracted to crude quotas but sometimes we have to do something to break through the barriers.

Tokenism has been given a bad name. Sometimes we have to do something to make a difference.

Finally, and forgive me for speaking directly to the black and Asian delegates here today. Reading The Times recently I came across an article about a subject that I seem to be reading about almost every week. Another black boy stabbed. Yet we have black leadership who are talking down the efforts of others to make a difference. There is space for all of us. This is an opportunity for us to be united and share in this battle.

The responsibility on us is immensely heavy. I want to say to you that we are all in this together. This is the time to make a difference. If we don't, we will be in the worst place we could possibly ever be. We have to be thoughtful and united.

If there is anything I can do, the Equality and Human Rights Commission can do, to work with you to that end, we will do it.

Thank you