

Diverse Britain speech

Trevor Phillips, 10 December 2007

Good morning everyone and thank you Matthew. [Referring to Matthew Amroliwala of the BBC.]

I always listen to Ted with attention. [Referring to Ted Cattle of Institute of Community Cohesion.]

He was kind enough to say a few of my lines in his speech. I was very struck by something he said the link to the Green Agenda. He is quite right that this agenda and the living together agenda are very closely intertwined. If we need more living space, the biggest question is where do you get the land to build on? In London, one way is to develop the Thames Gateway. Another is greater density, which means, for example, more Georgian Terraces. These could be a good things but also mean we will live closer together and need to share our resources more readily. I want to say more about this towards the end of my speech.

It does not seem so very long ago that I stood on this very platform at the CRE Race Convention last year, and gave my final speech as CRE Chair.

But, for the reasons Ted has given and I suppose I've just echoed, it's not a moment too soon to follow up last year's event. In today's society, our diversity is proliferating at a pace not yet seen before in human history. We badly need forums for those professionally charged with trying to manage the consequences of change. There have to be more opportunities for diversity professionals to come together for robust, considered and up-to-the-minute debate, to take stock and chart the direction of this fast-moving agenda.

And when I say diversity professionals, I mean everyone in every relevant part of our organisations. Historically, organisations have principally focused their attention and resource on people issues, and on securing the backing of the leadership of the whole organisation.

But we know that isn't enough.

This room five years ago would be much 'blacker' than it is today, I did a little head count and maybe about 30% of the room are from ethnic minorities.

Historically diversity has been within Human Resources.

Saying this isn't an attack on the HR function. The people professionals who specialise in diversity know that they can't do their business well unless they also engage the attention of the communications and marketing people – you won't attract a diverse staff if the brand is relentlessly monocultural or monoethnic.

The Chair of a company can be as committed as she or he likes, but unless Finance also truly understands the value of diversity, no weight of corporate memo writing will ensure that the procurement business is open to new bidders.

The rapidity of change is also why, from our point of view, it is becoming increasingly important to establish common, professional standards for those who are employed to deliver on equality and diversity across their organisations. This we hope will be the job of the professions working together rather than imposed from the outside.

Most of all, and this relates to something Ted said, we have to develop a new and compelling account of the role of diversity and difference in the world of work today.

Its most obvious – and unsettling - manifestation arises from differences based on ethnic, racial and religious diversity, though these are not the only or even, in my opinion, the most serious lines of difference in our societies. But let me start with them.

Age of Difference

In today's era of globalization, the speed, scale and impact of the movement of capital is now paralleled by the movement of people across the planet. Globally, the UN reckons that some 200 million people live and work outside the country of their birth. 227 million pass through our airports, 30 million people staying to visit, study or work.

Until about two decades ago, we used to worry purely about single groups of immigrants, usually dark-skinned, English-speaking, colonial people moving to 'the 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, for example, and later Indian corner shop owners.

In today's post-imperial, post Cold War world, 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 Polish plumber and the Philipino nanny.

And it's happening much faster than before. Half of all current migrants arrived in the UK in the last generation and a third in the last decade. Today, one in four babies born in Britain has a foreign parent.

It is not only the volume but also the diversity of immigration that is significant. That is why even the 17 ethnic Census categories used in 2001 now look pretty crude, when we consider that a single category – Black African - covers Birmingham born sons of Somali herdsmen and Ghanaian barristers, another carers, Polish electricians and South African doctors.

Migration, in and out, has changed the colour and culture of our society and is changing it faster every single year. But the movement of people is only one part of the dramatic change we are experiencing.

We live in an ageing society. There are 9.4m people over the age of 65 now – there will be 12.4m by 2021. This augurs for ageing workforces, but is also an up-tick in the number of middle aged carers who find themselves looking after their own parents just as soon as they thought they would get rid of the kids and start to live the life that they really wanted.

Family structures are changing. There are more lone parents; 8% of households were headed by a lone parent in 1972. In 2005 the figure had risen to 24%. Most of these are headed by a woman, who will face an employment penalty of 40% and may well have to trade down pay for part-time work.

More of us will define ourselves as disabled over the coming years. There are currently thought to be around 10 million disabled adults and 700,000 disabled children in the UK. That latter figure will rise to over a million and a quarter within twenty years. And the days when disabled people were simply invisible – such as the days of my childhood – have passed.

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe. But there are more humanists in Britain than ever before, with an Ipsos MORI poll last year suggesting that even though most tick 'Christian' on the monitoring form, as many as 36% of the British public is actually really humanist in basic outlook.

But perhaps the most extraordinary cultural change has come in the acceptance of homosexuality as legitimate. I'd hesitate to say that the whole of Britain is enlightened enough yet to accept that being lesbian or gay is a normal part of the spectrum of human diversity.

But the fact is that two centuries ago, we hanged more people in this country for buggery than we did for murder. Less than ten years ago we were still arguing about the age of consent. And only this year did we put to rest the issue of equality on goods facilities and services. We now have civil partnerships, and popular sentiment is increasingly turning against the baiting of people on the grounds of their sexuality.

These changes I've described are objective – they describe the mix of people who make up our society. But we are also experiencing a subjective transformation – a subtle questioning of 'who we think we are' as a nation. What does it mean in this society and at this time to be a woman or a man; to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew, to be a disabled person, to be older or younger, to be black, white or mixed race?

One upside of the 1960s and 1970s which I suppose go some way to balancing crimes such as tank tops and embarrassing hairstyles, was that baby boomers like myself became adults with the expectation that we didn't need to conform or defer to authority. Neither we nor the children or our grandchildren accept that we should be trapped by the definitions of what we are set down for us at birth.

No-one today wants to be a prisoner of what the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen calls the 'single focus identity' - to be boxed into having our lives determined by just one

aspect of our identity, whether that is our gender, race or sexual orientation for example.

The sheer range of questions being thrown up by diversity means that, in just one week, we at the Equality and Human Rights Commission – sixty something days old today, our Helpline, our staff and our Commissioners - can be asked to offer our views, clarify the law or give guidance on subjects as various as (and I'm going to give you a list here, it's quite long):

- how to prevent homophobic bullying at school, and I expect, soon, at work
- how to tackle gang culture amongst young people
- how better to ensure dignity and respect for people in care, both old and young
- what constitutes discrimination against women, pregnant or otherwise
- whether an employer can refuse to employ a hairdresser who wears the veil
- what legal rights should be afforded to carers
- what books might or might not be provided in schools or places of worship;
- whether a town in England should be allowed to display 'No Popery' banners on Bonfire Night
- Should a public authority should prioritise English translations or more English classes
- what should be the human rights afforded to prisoners either foreign or domestic
- what are the implications of the law on abortion for the way in which we discharge our duties to disabled people under statute and that's what we have to deal with right now
- and looking forward, if insurance companies should be allowed to read your DNA to see whether you have a predisposition to some disabling condition, Ted reform to the human genetics project; 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 don't currently have - or would this be yet a new dimension of inequality that should be outlawed?

In this new world, we confront such novel questions every single day. And if we are to become the society we all want - one built on fairness, dignity and respect, confident in all aspects of our diversity, we have a lot of work to do.

Above all, we must not allow difference to become an explanation for inequality or for tension. That is the fundamental task of our new Commission – to promote and enforce equality, human rights and good relations.

Well the commonsense British approach too many of these questions is "Let's talk about it. We can sort this out". I agree with that. And our Commission wants to be a forum for intelligent and fair-minded dialogue, based on sensible human rights principles.

But we already know that much of our work can't even start until we communicate more effectively with the public on these difficult questions; and to do that we as a society have to be more comfortable talking about our differences; more generous and less ready to rush to judgement.

Difficulties with talking about our differences

The truth is that because fewer and fewer of us are willing to hide or suppress aspects of our identity our schools, workplaces and communities face a new uneasiness, we face new frictions. Of course these arise from the persistent experience of disadvantage and inequality, from economic and social differences. These present huge long term problems.

However, sometimes tensions arise for cultural and political reasons. Fierce expressions of individual or group identity make others feel uncomfortable. What should we call another person? what language should we use to avoid someone feeling excluded? who patrols that blurred but explosive boundary between free expression and offence?

And at other times tensions arise because well-meaning individuals tie themselves in knots trying not to offend those who do not share their beliefs and because they are unsure whether they should use the language that comes naturally.

The difficulties we encounter in talking about our differences threaten to become one of the greatest barriers to our becoming a society at ease with ourselves. And we are about to enter one of the regular flashpoints – the Christmas season.

We know the recipe for this particular media pudding all too well. Mix typical British unease about cultural difference, add some confusion between faith and ethnicity, and pour in a dollop of liberal guilt. Cook it in an Express oven. Stud with some Winter festivals instead of Christmas celebrations, Garland with anodyne messages of “season’s greetings” and then set the whole thing alight with pointless embarrassment over nativity plays in schools.

At this time of year, such avoidance measures are guaranteed to put the ‘silly’ into silly season, much to the delight of the tabloid hacks and the right-wing press looking for yet more examples of political correctness gone mad.

If any of this were really encouraged by those who care about diversity, the logic would be baffling – to welcome Eid and Diwali and Hanukah in celebration of our glorious diversity, whilst brushing Christmas under the carpet as an embarrassing episode in our mono-cultural past.

Denying Britain’s distinct religious heritage and the celebrations of the Christian calendar can undermine community relations, as people – frankly white people - feel that their historic faith is given less credence and attention than minority faiths and that’s why it is important. No-one serious wants that.

Last Friday the Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks echoed the sentiments of Parmjit Dhanda, the community cohesion minister, that Britain should celebrate its Christian heritage. In this country by the way there are passionate Christian believers from with African, South Asian, Chinese and East European heritage.

We have spoken with Muslim, Sikh and Hindu faith leaders who find it absurd that celebrating Christmas could be construed as offensive to those of other faiths, and who would like Christmas to be celebrated openly and wholeheartedly in this country - and carry a religious message.

No minority community is affronted by this country's Christian traditions. Indeed many embrace its values, whilst holding fast to their own faiths. Muslims for example venerate Jesus That is why Anglican and Catholic faith schools have a significantly higher than average ethnic minority population – over one in five, compared to the average of about one in six.

At the CRE I learned that people who have grown up in religious households, including Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, would rather send their children to an Anglican Church of England or Roman Catholic school than to a non-denominational school. Why? Because in their eyes some faith is better than no faith.

So lets get one thing clear – it's fine to celebrate Christmas, and its fine for Christ to be the star of that show. As the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, I am still surprised actually that I have not yet been dubbed the High Priest of political correctness. But if I were speaking in that capacity, I would ordain it thus.

I know there are some who dislike religion in the public sphere at all. That's a legitimate view in a liberal society. But they should make the argument against Christian Christmas, Hindu Diwali and Muslim Eid on its own merits rather than deploy the supposed sensibilities of ethnic minorities as a Trojan Horse for their ideology. Not only is it simply wrong what we can see is that it gives every racist license to stir up hostility to minorities.

This will be the Equality and Human Rights Commission's first Christmas. Please let it be the last for the politically inspired synthetic political-correctness-is-destroying-our-Christmas stories.

Our difficulty in talking about our differences also lends itself to less seasonal concerns. Whether we are dealing with cries of blasphemy over Jerry Springer's Opera or Phillip Pullman's Dark Materials, or soul-searching over whether it is racist to express discomfort with the veil; it is clear that we need to develop some core principles for talking about our differences in the public forum.

Guiding principles for expressing our differences in today's world of change

This is about the real issues - living together with civility; expressing ourselves freely; talking to each other and about each other without fear or awkwardness or offence.

I think it is well within our reach to establish some basic ground rules and principles for how we talk to each other in a diverse society.

The first of these is well-established in law, and by the way protected by the much reviled Human Rights Act: freedom of expression.

Recent research conducted for the Commission shows that freedom of expression is the human right that most people know to be protected in British law. It is central to the British psyche and as today we celebrate the International Human Rights Day perhaps there is no more appropriate time to assert this as a core guiding principle.

But freedom of expression is not absolute. And most of our conduct can't be and should not be governed by law, but by our values, and our sense of what is right for the community as a whole

So this is the second guiding principle: we need to balance our liberty to say what we want with a degree of restraint and consideration for others.

To live and talk together in today's age of difference; we cannot be fundamentalists about freedom of speech. Because then we run the risk that our human right will cease to be humane.

One clear test of whether a freedom is acceptable is whether it seeks to do harm to others. That is no doubt why, as Ted mentioned, Brighton Council has banned homophobic rap music by the likes of Buju Banton, which the chair of the Council's licensing committee has called 'murder music'.

But equally we cannot over-regulate our freedom of expression, which means that generosity has to be our third guiding principle for talking comfortably about our differences. Now this is not a signal for people to abuse freedom of speech by turning every encounter into a provocation to see just how far we can go in offending others and we've seen some of that lately.

Generosity means that we try to understand when someone is well-intentioned and does not seek to cause offence, even if their language may do so; it means giving the benefit of the doubt rather than creating a tyranny of taxonomy; it means giving people the freedom to speak because the substance of what they want to say and their motivation for saying it is more important than the mode of their expression.

The fourth and final guiding principle is by far the hardest to live by. It is the principle we adhere to when we encounter a difference we simply can't agree with or feel repelled by. It is the principle that has run through British culture down the centuries: toleration.

Rather than take the characteristically French approach of majority rule and minority submission; or the characteristically American answer of voluntary separation, siphoning people off into segregated pockets rather than confronting them with a difference that makes them uncomfortable; in Britain we have historically been simply tolerant. I prefer it that way.

But this is the most difficult task in our age of difference. Negotiating this territory is complicated. In the Commission we use what we call the three C's as guidelines: common sense, courtesy and consideration.

Conclusion

Increasingly, as our society and our population change, these guiding principles of freedom of speech, need to be balanced by restraint and generosity, and exercised in a climate of toleration. They will become crucially important in our workplaces.

Our places of work stand at the frontline of the social and demographic change; it has always been that way. It is at work that we are most likely to meet people different from ourselves, whether the colleagues we work with or the clients and

members of the public that we serve. This makes the task of managing our diversity central to our competitiveness in the medium and long term.

And it means we have to establish what is reasonable behaviour when we express our differences. What we consider to be reasonable is fluid. Once it was perfectly acceptable for people to smoke in the office, now it is seen as normal that smokers avoid forcing their colleagues to inhale. Employers worked with public attitudes to change the cultural norm.

All of you here are going to lead the way in making the principles I have outlined real on a daily basis. In the end like all responsible entities, the interests of business and organisations have to coincide with what is best for society as a whole.

I referred earlier to my role as the High Priest of Political Correctness earlier. None of us likes the mantle but the fact is that you are going to be regarded as the priesthood in today's age of difference. If so let's be proud of what we do: leading the way for living and working together with courtesy, consideration and common sense. It's a tall order, but it is the substance of your discussions over the next two days. One on which we want to work alongside you in achieving.

Thank you