

People On the Move: More Different, More Unequal

Remarks to the Royal Commonwealth Society by Trevor Phillips, 15 January 2008

Thank you.....

It is a pleasure to be here this evening.

I am somewhat daunted by the idea of addressing an audience which knows a lot about the Commonwealth since my own knowledge of the institution is really rather limited.

But as a child and a teenager I was lucky to enjoy the privilege of living alternately in one of the wealthiest members of the club - the UK; and one of the poorest - Guyana.

I can't be scientific about this, but what perhaps was striking about this experience was less how different the two countries are than how similar they were.

In those days Georgetown was a small garden city, with its back to the Atlantic, and its face to the cane fields, riverscape and virgin rain forest that led Walter Raleigh to christen it Eldorado. Its people were as diverse as you could imagine - Europeans, Asians, Arabs, Africans, Native Americans - the only people I felt I'd never met as a teenager were Australian Aborigines. On the other hand, there was no TV, few fancy restaurants and one major library in a city of 200,000 people.

What a contrast to 1960s London - the heart of world fashion and music, but which still experienced annual smogs, and wretched Dickensian poverty; a capital which showcased its glamour, wealth and power, yet left it to slum landlords like Peter Rachman to put a roof over my parents' heads; a city rich in cultural history, most of which was made utterly inaccessible to its working class residents.

Of course my inner city school here didn't do Latin, while at Queen's College Georgetown, teachers looked askance at anyone who couldn't conjugate his verbs.

We wore the motto "'Fideles Ubique Utiles" on our uniforms, and sang the school song "Reginae Collegium" at every Assembly .

Yet, to tell the truth, I never had too much difficulty moving from one to the other. There's an important piece of background here.

In almost every one of the Commonwealth's 53 nations there are schools distinguished by names like King's, Queen's, Bishop's, or the names of their original benefactors. These schools were set up largely in the 19th century to educate what would probably then have been described as promising native children, with the potential to become doctors, teachers or lawyers - and crucially, future political leaders. But they all adhered to a pattern which people of my age and kind throughout the Commonwealth would still recognise long after their methods and traditions had been abandoned by supposedly progressive educationists here in the mother country.

So on either side of the Atlantic we studied Tudors and Stuarts. We produced Julius Caesar, Richard II and Much Ado About Nothing. We learnt Kipling and Blake by heart. Our debating societies followed procedures laid down by Erskine May. And when the time came to leave for university Oxford, Cambridge, London, and Edinburgh seemed the only respectable destinations for academically able boys.

Perhaps less high-mindedly, we read Enid Blyton and WE Johns' Biggles, and still believed that Germans said things like "Donner und Blitzen".

And like boys all over the Commonwealth we knew that civilised people played cricket.

I think that by itself is a pretty fundamental bond.

But there was something else which I now realise we valued even more, even if we couldn't articulate it.

The history of most Commonwealth nations gave us an experience of living with cultural, ethnic and racial diversity not witnessed since the last days of the Roman Imperium. You could regard it as the prototype for today's huge movement of people across the globe in search of work.

In some ways the British Empire functioned as a vast labour market machine, ensuring that skills and labour shortages were responded to quickly and efficiently. As a direct result of the Empire's policy of shipping migrant workers across the globe to fill labour market shortages: skilled Scots and Welsh engineers turned up in Canada and India, Indian labourers sailed to Africa and the Caribbean, and Chinese farmworkers were shipped in just about everywhere.

My old class lists in Guyana show names like Ali, Ishmael, Persaud, Chan, Ming, Ten Pow and Singh as well as the conventional European names given to the descendants of slaves - Adams, Harris, Alleyne, Moore.

As in so much of the Commonwealth, behind the racial and religious kaleidoscope there lay a bitter and often violent history of ethnic feuding which still disfigures that small country. One of my own classmates and friends, Donald Rodney, in later years

saw his brother, the writer and academic Walter Rodney murdered, largely for espousing the cause of non-racial politics.

Yet in spite of it all we could hold fast to two fundamental, binding ideas - ideas which have helped many Commonwealth nations to avoid the fragmentation that has destroyed other societies trying to cope with ethnic difference.

The first was that whatever the variations in the way we worshipped, or which part of town we lived in, QC boys (and the girls at our counterpart, Bishop's) shared a single tradition. Of course, like schoolboys everywhere, we believed that our academic capabilities were higher, our athletes were stronger and swifter, our musicians and artists more creative than those of other schools. Our common desire to be on the winning team itself reduced any racial animosities that we might have felt.

But underneath the elitism there also lay some more creditable values.

We believed that a liberal democratic state in which individual freedom is assured, and where talent, and hard work are rewarded, was superior to any alternative - including in those days, Communist authoritarianism, ethnic separatism or the various brands of theocracy on offer.

We were taught that, whatever your background you owed something to your country - and that all traditions could and should play a part in nation building. That we would all have, somehow, to share this space.

I have no illusions about the deep racial differences that still exist, but I think that we genuinely felt that it should be the aim of a people to find a way of living together in tranquillity. No matter how hard, integration should be a sine qua non for a modern society. And at the heart of that integration there had to be a mutual tolerance that would transcend racial and ethnic difference.

In my experience since then - and I have worked in and reported from over 30 different countries around the world - though this desire for a blend of shared values and mutual tolerance may be found in many places, nowhere is it more deeply embedded than in those which share the historical inheritance defined today by the Commonwealth.

Without wanting to bang the drum for some sort of Imperial exceptionalism, I believe that those values were inherited from the specific history we share - a history which includes the startling Elizabethan doctrine of toleration, the abolition of first the slave trade and then slavery; and the defining mid-twentieth century fight against fascism. And those values have been communicated and sustained through our common language, English.

So I base my remarks tonight on an empirical finding - or you might call it an ingrained prejudice. The 1.7 billion people who are tied together by the history of the Empire and Commonwealth still have a real, visceral link that it will take many generations to sever, irrespective of political and religious differences.

And the burden of what I want to say tonight is that our planet has never been more in need of that shared set of values and that common sentiment of toleration than today.

At the Equality and Human Rights Commission we believe that there are two fundamental challenges that face the human race.

One is the bundle of issues that arises from climate change and environmental degradation; the so-called green agenda.

The other, perhaps less talked about challenge, is the set of conflicts that arise from human difference - differences across the lines of ethnicity, religion and belief. And we know all too well that attitudes towards sexual orientation (in Jamaica for example) age, gender equality and even sometimes disability can lead to definite tensions between groups of people with different cultural traditions.

Put simply, there's the twin challenge: in the 21st century - how will we live with our planet; and how will we live with each other?

Happily for me, and maybe for you, the Equality and Human Rights Commission doesn't have to deal with both of them. We only have to make sure that people who are very different can live together. It is integral to our mandate of reducing inequality, promoting human rights, strengthening good relations.

But we face this challenge in unprecedented circumstances.

We confront a landscape that has changed radically from when our forerunners, the CRE, DRC and EOC began their work.

Looking across Britain today we can immediately see an increasingly diverse nation; but more than that, we need to look beyond our own coastlines in a world with fewer boundaries.

A world in which the economic and social maps are being re-written daily as businesses, people and skills move not just to the next town or 'down the valley', but across the globe. This is the reality of globalisation and the most significant truth of modern times.

We cannot under-estimate the size or complexity of the global challenge – nor can we predict its next turn - but we do know that we can no longer corral either pollution or population behind man-made national borders.

And while the globalising economy spreads opportunity and wealth, it can also foster insecurity. and anxiety that produces tensions between different groups. We know transnational communication is increasingly highlighting the different approaches to human rights across the globe.

And the spotlight on globalisation is illuminating two profound challenges to public policy across the globe.

First, that domestic economic policy no longer exists. If anyone thought that they could hide behind tariff walls or protectionist labour policies, the sub-prime banking crisis put paid that delusion.

This spotlight has also shown us another disturbing truth; that globalisation unchecked and unmoderated can lead to greater inequality.

Even in developed nations, global change has had the harshest impact on those least well-equipped to respond: those with the thinnest assets, with fewest qualifications or those short of job ready skills. And in the modern economy, increasingly the most disadvantaged are those who lack the cultural capital to foster the essential 'soft' skills necessary to progress in life and work.

The second truth that our increased understanding of globalisation has brought home is even more uncomfortable for governments. They are no longer in control. The internet, liberalisation of capital markets, cheaper and faster international travel, and the spread of English have removed previously impenetrable barriers between ordinary people.

Never have the direct interactions of ordinary citizens all over the globe been so decisive in determining how governments behave. For the first time, when it comes to relations between states we are seeing the people calling the shots. Indeed in some areas, far from citizens being confined to the framework predetermined by the interests of their state, governments are struggling to catch up with the actions of their citizens.

That is why, the desperate attempts of some - in Kenya, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, for example - to hold back the tide of democratic freedom seem so anachronistic, and why they are doomed to failure. The role of government has now moved from directing the actions of citizens to supporting them.

Let me illustrate this for a moment by looking at what must surely be the most unsettling aspect of today's political landscape - though paradoxically the one that offers the greatest expansion of opportunity to hundreds of millions of people for increased prosperity and redistribution of wealth: migration.

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.

This country sees 30 million visitors, students and workers each year.

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 also probably adds to growth and certainly prevents growth being stifled by the absence of skills.

A recent report by the independent Ernst and Young ITEM club, which uniquely uses the Treasury's own economic model, tells us that without migration, UK growth in the next decade would fall from a healthy 3% per annum to a far less robust 2.2%, with all that implies for reductions in public service provision and employment levels.

Migration is increasingly being built into the fabric of international economic relations. Attempts to suggest that governments can somehow turn the tap on and off at will are, to use the vogue word, delusional.

At the same time people like myself who deeply believe that modern migration is an inevitable consequence of technological discovery, economic progress and political freedom cannot and must not run away from the social challenge that it presents.

This is not just an issue of getting used to new cultures and races.

21st century migration has become today's litmus test political issue, because it is the single clearest everyday manifestation of change in our world. It is why it remains at the top of every survey of public opinion as the most salient issue to voters.

It is also becoming, unremarked, the conduit for the most rapid and largest scale redistribution of wealth and assets in the history of the world. And it means that the often less than edifying debate we have in Western countries about migration, has simply missed the point of what is happening.

The nature of migration has changed radically over the past fifteen years, and the flows we confront today, both immigration and emigration are at one and the same time vastly more significant and massively less menacing than is widely supposed. Whether it becomes a benefit or a burden is down to how we handle it. In a sense we can paraphrase Bill Clinton's words about globalisation: migration isn't a policy, it is a fact.

The only thing that matters is how we respond to it.

Let me explain.

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.

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 the Polish plumber and the Filipino nanny.

You could say we have moved from serial and imperial immigration to parallel and polyglot migration.

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)

In the USA the level of remittances to Mexico alone has, according to the Financial Times, reached \$US23 billion each year. The US\$13 billion sent home each year to the Philippines amounts to more than one-eighth of the country's GNP.

The biggest money transfer company, Western Union has seen its global revenues almost double to US\$ 4.5bn in the past five years.

In the UK even the official figure sent overseas in this way tops £5bn a year. Polish migrants in Europe, according to the Polish national bank remit some £1.8bn a year - that's some £9m a day, over half of which currently comes from the UK. (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.

Increasingly, these remittance aren't being used just to buy new shoes for children. They are being used to buy land, build property and start businesses. Interestingly 19 of the 20 largest IT businesses in India were created by Indians who had started their business lives abroad, in Europe and the United States. (MPI)

There are other effects besides the redistribution of wealth.

Modern migration has precipitated the phenomenon of the plural city – cities in which no one ethnic group holds the demographic majority.

Plural cities are the urban societies of the future. They promise energy, creativity and freedom from drudgery for the rich and not so rich. They promise jobs, opportunity and the chance to save and build assets for poor migrants.

But alongside the bright promise comes the shadow that public policy and politics have to dispel.

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.

The point I am making here is that we do need migration, but that unless we are careful, whilst we contribute, rightly, to the building of opportunities abroad we could be creating a well of left-behinds here at home.

That is unfair and why many ethnic minority and poor white Britons, are concerned about the consequences of modern migration.

It is not only the volume but also the diversity of migration that is significant. We have more different kinds of people rubbing shoulders than ever before; and we know from our experience in the Commonwealth that you can't simply pretend that the world is divided into simplistic racial categories devised by the 18th century taxonomist Carl Linnaeus - black, white, red, brown and yellow.

Even the 17 ethnic categories used in 2001 Census now look pretty crude, when we consider that a single category - African - covers Birmingham born sons of Somali

herdsmen and Ghanaian barristers, another Polish electricians and South African doctors.

That means that our historic policy of simply leaving well alone and hoping that people will somehow muddle their way towards the integrated society won't do any more. It was never going to happen by accident anyway; but this new, modern kind of migration demands more proactive public measures than we've ever used before; the laissez-faire multiculturalism of the past simply will not serve in this new era.

And there is one further factor that means that cultural differences which might have, in the past, disappeared within a generation may not now do so.

Modern communications mean that migrants will never again have to lose touch with the land of their heritage. The average length of stay - which used to be over 20 years is falling rapidly as Polish and other migrants commute from Wolverhampton to Warsaw.

Let me emphasize that I am not lining up with those who say that we cannot cope with this new migration. Quite the opposite. Groups like Migrationwatch are right to address the issues but we have to do better than offer dodgy arithmetic and a counsel of despair. I believe that our historical inheritance as part of the Commonwealth fits us better than any other group of people anywhere in the world to manage the inevitable pressures of the new, hyperdiverse world. But we won't do it unless we are active in exploiting the lessons of that heritage, including the lessons of what we failed to do.

Let me finally set out three things I believe we can learn from that heritage.

First we can recognise that a diverse society is an inescapable consequence of human freedom. But that such a society will never be at peace with itself if difference becomes an explanation for inequality. Inequality traps us into a box marked black or white or woman or man or disabled - and consigns us to live out the destiny that the box contains.

But in this age of difference one of the principal aims of a progressive society must surely be to liberate each and every one of us from that box, both in others' eyes and in reality.

Let me emphasise that this doesn't mean that our identities aren't important to us.

Women in the workplace don't want to have to behave like men in order to get ahead; Muslims don't want to have to sink a few beers down the pub in order to be eligible for promotion; gay men and women don't want to have to stay in the closet in order to climb the career ladder.

But just as none of us wants to be forced to conform to the corporate type, so we do not want our destiny to be defined by those bits of our identity that other people decide are important.

So we do need to ensure that people are not shut out of jobs by other people's bigotry. But truly to reconcile equality with diversity, and fairness with opportunity we have to do more than stop discrimination. We have to go further and help people to

compete for the jobs that are available. That is why we take an intense interest in the skills agenda.

In this world of rapid change we have to ensure that people are equipped with the human capital which can give them an equitable stake in the global market place. Domestically therefore that cannot mean a focus on shutting out skilled migrants administratively; it means instead making their presence economically unnecessary.

We'll do that by ensuring that more of our young people have the capacity to compete for the skilled jobs that are available. This is particularly the case for the children of recent waves of migrants - African-Caribbeans, Somalis and Turks, who are falling behind in the jobs market.

The Prime Minister has been much criticised for using the phrase "British jobs for British workers" because the phrase was once used by the more thuggish end of the far right.

I think that this is both unfair and unfortunate. I think I know enough about Gordon Brown to be sure that he would be horrified to think that his words are being taken to imply some kind of racial exclusivity. In fact I would say his concern has been above all for those ethnic minority young people currently shut out of the jobs market.

In all his uses of the phrase it was clear that what he has been trying to raise is exactly the same point I am raising here - that to stand a chance in the modern world, all our young people need to have the skills to compete. If we try to shut out foreigners without providing the skills amongst British workers all that will happen is that the jobs will go elsewhere.

In a sense what we really want to make sure of is that we have British workers ready to do British jobs.

Second, we can recognise the importance of our common cultural heritage.

I would not make the case for this being based on either arbitrary symbols or a national religion. What our Commonwealth experience tells us is that many faiths can exist perfectly comfortably side by side without privileging any of them.

I need as a child in Guyana I was lucky to be able to celebrate not just Christmas and Easter, which I knew all about, but also several other public holidays such as Eid, Phagwah (or Holi as it's called elsewhere) and Diwali, the origins of all of which I was utterly ignorant.

There's an important point here. I didn't have to be a Hindu to get that Holi mattered. My ignorance isn't something to be proud of - but you don't actually have to know the origins of the rituals that bind a nation together in order to participate in them. After all, a quarter of British adults say they don't really know what Christmas is about - for example where Jesus was born; but December 25th remains, I am happy to say, an important shared national festival.

So by the way, is Bonfire night, whose anti-Catholic origins are frankly pretty morally dubious. But perhaps we don't need to bother children with the idea that they are symbolically throwing a Roman Catholic on the flames.

What perhaps is more important today is that these are special moments to celebrate our families and our communities.

Even more significant than national days is the way that we talk to each other in a diverse society. Literally. English is the single most important language in the world, partly driven by the commercial imperatives which our American cousins are so good at; but in reality made really powerful by our British cultural heritage.

That is why I so welcome the strong support to English learning that the government is now providing, and in particular the government's proposal for free classes for those who want to make this country their new home. I am thinking, for example of women who have come from the Indian sub-continent to settle with their husbands. Without English proficiency they can hardly be expected ever to become active members of local communities never mind enjoy the benefits of getting a job and earning a wage.

My own view is that those who just want come to work and return home are welcome; but they, on the other hand should come with some language proficiency, or else the cost of their tuition should be borne personally or by their employers.

And in the so-called war against terror, the Prime Minister must surely be right when he says that our ultimate weapon is not security or military action. It lies in the attractiveness of our culture, our ideas and our way of life, expressed through our creative output, both refined and popular.

And here, I strongly believe that the Commonwealth has a special role that distinguishes us from the United States-led version of the Anglosphere.

I don't want to disparage the genius of American writers, artists and performers who lead the world in so many ways. No-one can deny the might and seduction of Hollywood, for example.

But if our culture is to say anything about our aspirations, surely our ambitions should rise higher than cartoons about rats - and if we want to win culture wars, the enduring traditions of a language that produced Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton and the King James Bible must surely have a powerful role to play.

Finally, I believe there is a campaigning role for the Commonwealth to play in this new era that will inspire people to be the best, most humane and most moral that they can be.

I spoke earlier about the common heritage that led to the abolition of the slave trade, which we marked last year.

I don't think that it is an accident that the most popular movement against global poverty was sparked off here in the UK by Live Aid. This is part of a moral tradition, which though not exclusive to the Commonwealth, is unusually strong within this club.

We consider moral indignation and outrage at the deprivation of human rights to be natural reaction, not a sign of impertinence, or as they used to say in the Soviet days, decadence. We set standards for humanity that are hard to meet - which

perhaps explains why we ask more of the each other than some other international institutions.

So there are still great wrongs for us to right. And against a background of huge worldwide movement, most of it voluntary, we need to think in particular about the estimated 12 to 20 million people enslaved in child labour and bonded servitude in the world today.

In many of our cities, there are trafficked girls and young women from Eastern Europe, Africa, South America and Asia imprisoned in hovels and brothels and dingy flats. In one notorious case, women were openly sold for several thousand pounds in a modern-day slave auction outside a coffee shop at Gatwick Airport. They are sold into domestic and sexual servitude. They are being raped several times a day.

There are illegal immigrants, brought into the country from all over the world on false pretences by unscrupulous gang masters, their passports confiscated on arrival, their rent often in excess of their wages.

Whether farm workers, domestic servants, cleaners and caterers in our cities, or factory workers in our industrial towns, they are paid a pittance, beaten and exploited, and threatened with being shopped to the police if they complain. So they live without rights and without protection.

And across the world, many children still toil in slavery. According to the International Labour Organisation, 74 million children in the world under 15 are in hazardous work from which they should be "immediately withdrawn". That is substantially more children than the entire population of the United Kingdom.

This may be a different type of slavery to the indentured bondage of Africans two centuries ago. But it follows the same principle that has run through slavery through the ages: imprisonment and exploitation for economic gain; the supply side of an equation where so long as the demand is great enough, someone will supply someone else and take away their human rights.

We all have a role to play here. Government has a role to play – in allocating resources and in embedding equality and human rights at the heart of its policy.

And international institutions have a role to play in making the process by which those who want to move to work, but not to settle less cumbersome, and more legitimate. As prohibition-era America showed, the lure of the illicit transaction will diminish if licit transactions become more common.

In plain English, if parents in Africa or Albania, China or Thailand are able to send their daughters abroad to earn legally, then they are less likely to allow them to be spirited away into slavery in a seedy brothel in London or Rome.

If our Commonwealth is to have meaning in the 21st century surely it has to be by taking the lead in issues of this kind.

In a world where sooner or later every country will have to find its own answers to the challenge of global people movement, how we manage this aspect of global

migration will depend on our values. There are values which could lead to an authoritarian, repressive and ultimately self-defeating outcome.

These are the values of fear. But there are also values that could give us a liberal and open-minded approach that encourages greater prosperity and integration. These I would say are the values of hope.

The Commonwealth's heritage and experience could be crucial in ensuring that we choose hope over fear.