

**Equality and
Human Rights
Commission**

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Religion, belief and the rule of law

Remarks by Trevor Phillips at the first Open to Question debate, Royal Society of Arts, London, 26 February 2008

Thank you Matthew, and thank you everyone for being here.

This is the first event in an occasional series that the Equality and Human Rights Commission will organise, with partners such as the RSA, on topics of interest and sometimes controversy.

The fact that we are the hosts for these events will not always mean that we ourselves have a fixed view, but rather that we believe they should be debated, that different ideas and approaches should be held up to scrutiny, in as calm and constructive an atmosphere as we can muster.

Why is our Commission getting involved in this at all?

Well, there are three reasons for our body, which is independent of government and which aims to be authoritative, evidence based voice on matters of Equality and Human Rights to venture into these troubled waters. At the heart of our mandate sit three big ideas: equality, human rights and good relations.

The issue we are discussing today would probably, on the face of it, sit slap bang in the middle of our mandate for promoting good relations between different groups in society. And frankly, if we cannot even speak about our differences without anger, we can kiss goodbye to any prospect of understanding. So our first aim, with this kind of event and others that we have planned is to make a contribution to good relations

by providing at least one channel of communication that allows strongly held views to be expressed without rancour and without the intrusion of personal or party politics.

Second, the very fact that we can hold such a debate is guaranteed by our Human Rights framework. We are in many ways the country that invented the language of human rights. And we are a nation addicted to decency, fairness and rule of law - all central concepts in that same Human Rights framework.

Unfortunately, in this country, the idea of human rights has become attached to the notion of undeserved benefit - that is to say people exploiting the community's goodwill in their own selfish interest. It may be good politics for some people and some media to paint human rights in that way; but actually human rights are about something quite different. They are in essence, the ground rules for a fair, just and decent society.

In mounting events of this kind we hope to establish Articles 6, 7 and 8 as part of the conduct of British public life. They are the articles that refer to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression; and freedom of assembly and association.

Thirdly, however, alongside good relations and human rights there is an equality element to these events. In Britain today, we believe that there is a serious inequality in the weight given to the voices of different parts of our society. To put it another way, there are many of us who can command a platform and have our views heard. But there are also many people who are both invisible and inaudible. We want to try to give some of those voices more weight in public debate.

Of course, this is inevitable. And we could go on about the distorting power of the media. But to be honest I don't myself think this is the whole story. Those of us who do have a public platform have a duty to use it wisely. I think it is less than dignified for a powerful public official

like myself for example, to say things which we know are going to be contested, even controversial, and then to complain when the media have a go at us. We can't attack others for not understanding what we say when the meaning is there in plain sight, in black and white. Nor can we complain of harsh treatment by the media when we ourselves invite the media to be our messengers. And we can't fall back on the defence of unclarity when we are the authors of our own text.

Having said all of that, let me say that though I don't really accept the feral beasts theory, I hope that the way we approach these debates will encourage people who write and comment to wrestle a little harder with some of the dilemmas we face today.

Britain, like most of the Western world, faces some difficult issues arising from the very fact that we are a democracy that values freedom. The fact that people now want to be themselves and to express their identities - whether that is related to their gender, race, sexual-orientation, age, religion or belief, disability - is a wonderful thing. It is what freedom should mean. But there are difficult choices and frictions that come with freedom; and some of them raise hard questions about how we reconcile diversity with equality.

Our Commission is already having to make big, serious judgements on matters to which there are no longer easy - let us say - black and white answers. A few examples:

- how to tackle gang culture amongst young people
- how better to ensure dignity and respect for people in care, both old and young - in private or public institutions
- should a public authority prioritise English translations or more English classes
- what are the implications of the law on abortion for the way in which we discharge our duties to disabled people under statute

- and looking forward, new challenges - 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 a new dimension of inequality that should be outlawed?

It does not help us to make the best judgments for society as a whole if we cannot speak honestly about our doubts and uncertainties without being pilloried.

Yet today it seems almost impossible for any public figure, even those who do express themselves clearly and simply to do so. We should be able to say what we mean; and people ought to be able to hear what we say.

This Commission is dedicated to this proposition. We intend to work hard to simplify our language. We will over time use the most modern and direct means of communication including social networking.

But most of all we hope to use all the means at our disposal to give the British people permission and the means to speak about the difficult issues. Let me be crystal clear. If anyone thought that the Equality and Human Rights Commission was invented as a new politically correct thought police, then think again.

Our mission is to liberate people to speak openly, albeit with courtesy, consideration, and candour across the lines of race, gender, faith and other divides - and of course across the barricades of partisan politics. Today is our first public manifestation of this mission. I for one look forward to hearing what you David have to say, and of course, as always, will be listening intently to the reactions of my fellow Commissioners.