

Stephen Lawrence speech: Institutions must catch up with public on race issues.

Speech by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission to mark the tenth anniversary of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

19 January 2009, Race in Britain: Ten years since the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

Good morning. Thank you everyone for joining us today and there's some people who I know are tremendously busy.

We've invited you to join us in marking the tenth anniversary of the publication of Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, conducted by Sir William Macpherson. This is the first of a series of events that we and others will be organising during the next month to recall and reassess the impact of what I believe to be one of the most influential such reports of my lifetime.

Over the course of this next month we'll be looking at how we can use what we have learned in the past ten years to build a fairer, more racially equal society. It's a debate we wanted to start with you here, today.

That debate could not come at a more pertinent and pivotal moment. Our nation is changing dramatically. We are becoming more diverse by the day. We are about to see a massive overhaul of our equality legislation. For the first time in many years, social mobility, or class as we used to call it, is being articulated and addressed as a driver of disadvantage. And not before time.

After a record period of sustained economic growth, we are now in recession. As the financial meltdown starts to affect ordinary citizens, protecting equality and fighting disadvantage takes on a new urgency. People who gained the smallest rewards in the good times are now being asked to carry the biggest burdens in the bad times. As ever those who are already stuck at the bottom of the social and economic pile know that they are going to get it in the neck.

But we must not allow the legacy of this particular recession to be an angry, embittered permanent underclass looking for targets on whom to vent its rage.

We all know that in the wake of the lean times can come resentment and division, all too often along the lines of race and faith. At the very moment when we need to remind ourselves that we are all in this together, for many, every instinct will shriek that it should be every man or woman for themselves; or that people who aren't like us are somehow less worthy of an equal place in society. And this isn't because people are intrinsically racist or divisive.

We can't level that accusation at the anxious couple with a young child, who fear that one of them will be thrown out of work. We can't condemn the resentment of the young black man who sees himself outperformed and outcompeted in the labour market by a multilingual graduate from Eastern Europe.

We can't simply dismiss the anger of the older worker who feels that she has been cast aside for a younger less experienced colleague. And our empathy is going to be stretched further and further as time goes by.

If this recession lasts more than months we may face a greater danger. It is that we start to turn the clock back on crucial social advances that have been made in the years since Stephen Lawrence died.

What's at risk?

More flexibility at work for parents, especially women.

Our greater consciousness of the need to take the interests of ethnic minorities into account.

Our acceptance of difference in sexual orientation.

And a better understanding of the fact that our frequent failure to take the rights of disabled people into account isn't their problem but ours. Losing these values would turn an economic recession into a social counterrevolution.

The battle to defend those values lies at the heart of the mission given by Parliament to the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

That mission is to ensure, that even in the worst of times, our destiny is not limited by our origins. That our life chances are not merely the sum of our parents' backgrounds and the racial or gender category into which we are born. That our success or failure does not become the hostage of age, religion, belief or disability. That our ambitions are not frustrated by the whims of bureaucratic or oppressive authority.

The good society is one in which - each and every one of us is free to become the person we both can be and the person we want to be. That is the ultimate human right that we should enjoy in a free society.

It was this inalienable and fundamental right that was denied to Stephen Lawrence on that April night in Eltham in 1993. His friend, Duwayne Brooks, escaped alive but is condemned to be haunted forever by what he had seen. Stephen Lawrence did not escape. He was killed in the unprovoked attack. Had he lived he would be 34 today.

The police investigation did not lead to any prosecutions. They closed the case virtually before it was open. No one has been convicted of his murder.

In those days the fact that nobody in authority seemed to care enough to ask seriously who caused the crime was not extraordinary. Contemptible, yes, but not extraordinary. It was a ghastly commentary on the temper of the times.

But Stephen Lawrence's murder and the campaign that followed marked the moment Britons changed, in one respect at least. Today I think we would care.

That change did not happen by accident. It happened because of the actions of many people, most of whom I cannot speak about today; but let me mention four.

First and foremost Doreen and Neville Lawrence. Doreen is in the United States this week for the inauguration. Over the next month we will have many opportunities to recall her dignity, her steadfastness and her leadership, but suffice it to say that without her, we would have had no Inquiry, no Race Relations Amendment Act and probably no serious change in the behaviour of many of our public institutions.

Second, a personal point. The media could have ignored this story. But my then colleagues at London Weekend Television, where I was Head of Current Affairs, particularly the younger, minority researchers, kept insisting that this particular murder was worthy of investigation. They, along with BBC's Panorama did not let the events of that dreadful April night go unrecorded, and they woke up the rest of the media.

Third, the Home Secretary in 1998, Jack Straw, took over from a politician - Michael Howard - who had resolutely set his face against an inquiry. Jack, against the will of some of his colleagues,

appointed Sir William, and chaired the follow-up group himself to ensure that the Inquiry's recommendations took effect.

And finally, though it is no secret that my own political views do not always accord with those of Associated Newspapers we cannot ignore the role played by the Daily Mail. In the fight against bigotry and prejudice I don't think you can demand ideological purity of your allies. It is what they do that matters.

When the Daily Mail ran the front-page headline - 'Murderers' - above the pictures of the five alleged killers, it challenged racism in a way that no other paper had dared to do before and I think has done since. And that was the personal decision and the action of its Editor Paul Dacre. But my point here is this. Stephen Lawrence did not die in vain. After that night our world changed. But the change was not inevitable. It turned out the way it did because of the actions of people, many of them ordinary folk, who said that racism and prejudice should not go unchallenged. We stand on their shoulders and today, ten years on we too need to embrace that responsibility, faced with new circumstances and new opportunities.

This month we celebrate what they did yesterday to make our country a better one today.

My question this morning is this : what will we do today to make our country a better one tomorrow?

To start with we need to complete yesterday's task.

There is still a mountain of work to do to tackle racial prejudice. Stephen's murder did not mark the end of racist violence. The more recent murders of Anthony Walker, Kriss Donald and Zahid Murbarek stand as a grim testimony to the vicious racial prejudice that individuals can still harbour.

Neither did the heart-searching over the Inquiry banish stereotyping and prejudice in the police. Any initial hopes of that were shattered by the BBC documentary *The Secret Policeman* in 2003. The evidence of extreme racism by police officers in a training centre could not have been more damning. In response, the Commission for Racial Equality launched an eighteen-month inquiry which led, amongst other things, to a ban on BNP or NF membership among police officers - a remarkable achievement by the CRE.

But something historic has happened. The campaign to bring Stephen Lawrence's killers to justice did mark a sea-change in public attitudes to racial injustice.

To illustrate how far we've come, compare where we are now to 1974, when Stephen Lawrence was born.

In the seventies, the National Front had a membership of over 17,000 and rising. British Asians arriving from East Africa were spat at in the streets. We had 'sus' laws, which police used enthusiastically and almost exclusively against non-whites. Expressions of racial prejudice were still acceptable within the political elite. Alf Garnett was one of the most popular characters on our television screens.

In 1993, when Stephen was murdered, both racial violence and police apathy were common. But the nineties also saw mass anti-racist action – led not only by traditional protest groups such as the Anti-Nazi League, but also, more importantly, by community and ethnic minority groups some of whom were new to such activity. The tide of public opinion was starting to turn.

Research published recently by Robert Ford at Manchester University shows that this was the moment that racial prejudice declined markedly. The nineties became the turning point when most people in Britain generally became comfortable with the idea of a black or Asian boss or spouse. And the trend is clear: the younger you are, the less prejudiced you are likely to be.

So here's where we are today. 15 years on from that dark night in Eltham, we are a society more comfortable in our diversity than ever before.

I'd like to give you a small, symbolic example of that change. In the mid-nineties, when I took my younger daughter to her first football match - she was just seven - she was forced to witness a torrent of racial abuse directed at a black player. And the abuse came not from some drunken teenage yob, but from a middle aged professional who I ran into a few weeks later at a posh city dinner. But he regarded the words 'f***ing black twat' as just a normal Saturday afternoon's banter.

By contrast, two weeks ago I was sitting in a hotel in a small town in the rural South West of England. A young boy - he must have been about seven years' old – came in, sat down next to me and asked if he could watch the football. We got into a conversation about our teams. I said I was a Chelsea fan; he said he used to be but now supported Arsenal. Then he asked 'You know Joe Cole and Ashley

Cole? They play for Chelsea, don't they?'. 'Yes, of course'. And he turned and without any trace of irony asked 'Are they brothers?'

For him skin colour said no more about the individuals than the colour of their hair. Maybe this is naive. And maybe if he had been from Burnley, or Bradford or Birmingham, his attitudes might have been different. But I think as a nation we've come a long way since Stephen was born.

Let me make what I suppose to some will be a controversial statement.

If we are considering the attitudes of the majority to the minority, today Britain is by far – and I mean by far – the best place in Europe to live if you are not white.

In a MORI survey published by the Commission for Racial Equality two years ago, we asked about where people would prefer to live. Just 25% of Brits say they would prefer to live in all white areas. Too many, but compare that to the 44% in Greece, 42% in Belgium 39% in Portugal and the 37% in Denmark.

And the proportion of white people who said they would mind if a close relative married a black or Asian person fell from 33% to 12% over five years; those who would not mind rose from 22% to 54%.

Tomorrow, we will be publishing figures from a similar poll we conducted this month. I find it hard to imagine that the trend will change.

Ethnicity is no longer the barrier it used to be when we choose our partners. There are variations between different groups - transracial partnerships are still far more common amongst Afro-Caribbeans, for example, than those from South Asian backgrounds.

But overall multiple heritage Britons are amongst the fastest-growing minority groups and are by far the youngest, minority group in the country.

A report we are publishing today shows there is a new and growing diversity amongst the young. Almost 20% of children under the age of 16 are from an ethnic minority. Nearly 10% of children live in a family which has multiple white, black or Asian heritage. Across the board, the complexity of heritages that weave into our national identity is becoming richer by the year. This is one of the most fundamental changes we will see for over a decade.

It does not mean, however, as some people are suggesting, the disappearance of one racial group or another. We have been this way before - in Georgian times when London had a black population of between ten and twenty thousand freed slaves, runaways, sailors, soldiers and entertainers. A century later they were no longer visible. But they were replaced by new groups of Black Britons and in any event, some never ceased to celebrate that part of their heritage.

Today I believe we should regard this new phenomenon, not as a loss, but as a glorious opportunity for us to build a permanent bridge across the chasm of racial difference that still disfigures our society. People of dual or of multiple heritage, I think have a special role to play in bringing us together; their existence does not in itself prove that we have turned the corner in race relations - but they are a potent symbol of that better Britain that we could become.

The truth is that amongst Britain's under-35s - the Stephen Lawrence generation - people are more comfortable with racial diversity than their parents and probably their grandparents, or any generation in living memory. And they need to be in the world we now inhabit.

Our super-diversity goes beyond ethnicity.

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%, and the head of these families is usually a woman.

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. The 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 - the fastest-growing religion in Europe. But there are also more humanists in Britain than ever before, with an Ipsos MORI poll in 2006 suggesting that as much as 36% of the British public is de facto humanist in its outlook.

As we have always done, at an individual level most British people are embracing these changes.

Today we are a nation where men are noticeably more relaxed about the prospects of having a woman boss. As I said we no longer expect disabled people to be invisible, though perhaps there are taboos like mental health still to break through. We are engaged in a serious debate about the value of the older worker.

Perhaps the most extraordinary cultural change has come in the acceptance of homosexuality as legitimate although I'd hesitate to say that the whole of Britain is enlightened enough to accept as yet that being lesbian or gay is a normal part of the spectrum of human diversity. But the fact is that less than ten years ago we were still arguing about the age of consent. And only last 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 because of their sexuality.

And frankly if we wanted a symbol of how readily we are going with the historic flow, tomorrow we will see a man of dual heritage sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. There is little doubt that despite the warnings of a few Cassandras, the vast majority of Britons welcome his astonishing achievement. Yes, we are changing.

But there is an ugly truth we still have to confront.

We may be more at ease with our diversity, but sharp inequalities remain.

We live in a society where ethnic minorities are twice as likely to be poor as white people . And it's getting worse. Children from ethnic minority groups – all ethnic minority groups – are even poorer than their parents, as well as their white counterparts.

We live in a society where the government feels it necessary to appoint a spokesperson to defend the rights of the older person.

We live in a society where a 45% employment penalty faces women with children .

We live in a society where for every pound earned by our sons, our daughters will take home less than 85 pence for doing the same work; and irrespective of their talent, and despite the recent evidence that the women could hardly do worse than the men, there seems little chance for any woman aspiring to rise to the top echelons of our great private companies.

We live in a society where nearly half of the UK's estimated three million lesbian, gay and bisexual people dare not reveal their sexuality to those they work with , and where transgender people face open hostility.

We live in a society where a disabled person is likely to be poorer and more likely to be unemployed than a non-disabled person.

And we still live in a society where young black and Asian men are several times as likely to be stopped in the street by the police, without any discernible reason for the disparity.

We still live in a society where an African Caribbean young man is at least as likely to go to jail as he is to go to university.

And in case anybody forgets the impact of poverty and class, we still live in a society where 85% of poor white boys do not get five decent GCSEs.

In fact we live in a Britain where the most important contributor to our life chances - educational success - is so strongly associated with our race and our class that we can predict which new born babies will and will not succeed in life with some accuracy based just on their race and their postcode.

So what is happening here?

Why is it that a Britain that feels more tolerant and open, which has shed some of the prejudices of the past, and which manifestly wants to be fairer and more equal, still carries these dark shadows of prejudice and inequality?

Why is it that Britain cannot yet become the country in which most Britons want to live?

This paradox, of course was at the heart of the report published by Sir William Macpherson; and it was his attempt to name the problem it that caused the greatest controversy.

When it was published, the Inquiry report was ground-breaking for one simple reason above all others: it looked institutional racism in the eye and levelled the charge.

The concept wasn't a new one. It had a long history going back to the black power movement in the United States in the 1960s, where activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles V Hamilton used it to refer to the pervasive anti-black attitudes embedded in the American establishment.

Stokely Carmichael also used the term to refer to the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate service to ethnic minorities - a definition used almost exactly by Sir William in the Stephen Lawrence report. In truth the aim was to play down individual blame, and prevent the usual defensive reaction to any suggestion of racial bias.

Yet, the use of the term in the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry was incendiary. It rocked the foundations of the police service and caused wide-spread anguish in government.

Well, today most people would argue that despite the controversy, on balance the positive changes provoked by MacPherson have outweighed the cost of the political turmoil.

The Report led to a major change in the law. For the first time the police service, along with all other public institutions, were subject to the race discrimination legislation from which they had previously been exempted. And race equality law became stronger. Public bodies had to show that their services delivered for everyone, whatever their colour; they had to think about race equality before implementing a policy, not afterwards.

The report we published last week revealed they have made much progress.

There has been real improvement over the last decade in how police recruit ethnic minority staff. There is a better understanding of how to deliver a public service that doesn't discriminate against people because of the colour of their skin. And there is a consciousness amongst the service that they need to start seeing people as individuals and not merely as members of a category.

Perhaps the litmus of test of progress in the past decade is this. Would the police deal with Stephen Lawrence's murder differently today? Evidence from the murder of Anthony Walker in Merseyside in 2005 indicates that they would.

After Anthony's murder, the police's response may not have been perfect, but by comparison it was swift and unequivocal; the murder was quickly labelled a racist crime; the local community was keen to help, and arrests were soon made. None of these things happened in the case of Stephen Lawrence.

So for those who were ever in any doubt: institutional behaviour does make a difference to real people's lives, and in cases such as Stephen's and Anthony's it can make the dividing line between justice done and justice denied.

So this was a great step forward.

But there is still much more to do. There are major problems with a 'canteen culture', particularly among specialist units such as firearms, anti-terror, and robbery, which ethnic minority recruits see as 'closed shops'.

Staff retention remains a big concern - in 2007 almost twice as many ethnic minority officers quit or were sacked in their first six months of service compared with their white colleagues.

But does this mean that I believe that the Met - or any force for that matter - should be pilloried with the single blanket accusation of being institutionally racist?

Well, I don't think so. That would imply that nothing has changed. And it would not do justice to the sophistication of our understanding of what produces patterns of racial disadvantage.

But there's no easy headline here, no general absolution. No-one gets off the hook that easily. My real point is that I think it's the wrong question to be asking in today's Britain if what we are really concerned about is achieving change. We need to get beyond a debate about words.

When the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry attacked institutional racism it had a value. But in hindsight we can see that it was principally shock value rather than analytical or even motivating value. It shook up a system locked by inertia and complacency. It said what needed to be said, and it produced change.

But to have a productive debate about institutional reform today, we need to break what has become an unproductive deadlock over a single phrase in which those who line up one side are accused of being in denial, whilst those who line up on the other are attacked for ignoring progress and guilt-tripping white folks. And there are three substantive analytical reasons why I think we need to move on from this linguistic standoff.

Firstly, as I've said, the phrase 'institutional racism' has become cloaked in misunderstanding. The fundamental point about the term is that it should be a way of helping us to understand the blockages in the system that turn organisations of decent, fair-minded folk into opportunity deserts for women or ethnic minorities.

Yet it has never been read that way by most of those who needed to change. People came to think it meant that an organisation is permanently infected by racism from top to bottom; that somehow police officers become racists as soon as they don their uniforms - and that they can never change. If that were true then we really would have lost before we started.

Secondly, people can be disadvantaged by public bodies, whether as employees or as a member of the public, on a range of counts - their gender, sexual orientation, age, faith, disability and sexual identity. And just from the patterns of the Commission's casework, we know that almost invariably where we find racial bias we will find old fashioned practices that produce gender bias and inequality on the basis of sexuality, or discomfort with gender reassignment.

We know in a way that we did not in 1998 - nor was it part of Sir William's brief to find out - that the deep, dark roots of racist attitudes also give rise to poisonous branches that bear the bitter fruit of misogyny, homophobia and religious bigotry. Every one of us could be a perpetrator of some kind of prejudice; and every one of us could be a victim.

There should be no hierarchy of victimhood. We all share the need to destroy the roots of prejudice and we will all benefit from the withering of any of its manifestations.

And that leads me to my third point about institutional racism. The term should never have been exclusive, but it has become so, largely courtesy of our friends in the media. It has been turned to imply that those who are passionate about equality would advance the interests of any person with or without merit just because of their race or that we have no understanding that in many parts of our nation the colour of disadvantage is white as much as it is black or brown. None of us equality warriors believes that and none of us should be pinned with the label of reverse prejudice.

Let me be clear, I am not saying that institutional racism as it was described in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report has been obliterated. Public institutions are not now exonerated with a single sweep. Our mission has not been achieved.

But we need to stop rerunning the same old argument as though nothing had changed. That is because we have actually succeeded in gaining much change, partly through the work of those who campaigned with the Lawrence family; and because we now know that we face a new challenge that needs new methods and new remedies.

If we need to give that challenge a name let's call it, for example, systemic bias - the way in which the system works to destroy our ambition for fairness and our desire for equality; and the way it can disadvantage people because of their race, gender, sexuality, age or disability - or indeed their class - in spite of everyone's efforts to the contrary.

At the heart of this new challenge lies the need to tackle the cultural inertia that produces that systemic bias.

Much of the problem lies in a simple phrase: that's the way we do it around here.

It may be tradition to conduct most work socials at the pub, washed down with several pints of beer, but the effect on Muslim colleagues may not be so innocuous if they are looked over for promotion because managers don't feel they know them personally.

A late hours working culture may not deliberately set out to disadvantage any particular individual, but when women don't clock up the invisible brownie points because they have to collect their children from nursery or school, it can subtly set them subtly apart from the boys.

It may be ignorance rather than malice that sees ethnic minorities being the only ones in a group whose nickname is related to their ethnicity, but as they become trapped in that single identity over time, it's not quite so harmless.

But old habits die hard. And the reality is that institutions, steeped in their own history and culture, will not change overnight, or even over a couple of years. And sometimes our instinct is to defend the indefensible. The man I spoke of earlier who shouted racist abuse at that match so long ago tried to defend himself by saying that 'If he'd been Scottish I'd have called him a Jock twat'. Well, equal opportunity bigotry is not a defence of the thoughtlessness that reinforces a culture that no-one wants

That is true wherever and whoever you are. I am the son, the brother and the uncle of soldiers. I am a journalist. So frankly I don't think I am either delicate or politically correct when it comes to language - I wouldn't have survived ten minutes in my profession if I had been. But I also know this: sometimes banter isn't just banter.

Few of us feel that Prince Harry is some kind of racist or homophobic bigot, however ill-judged his choice of fancy dress costume, however crude and offensive his remarks. But we can see he likes to be one of the boys. And as one of the boys, he operates by the unwritten code of his environment – a code that didn't once cause him to question whether calling fellow officers 'Paki', 'raghead' or 'queer' was insulting or inappropriate.

Ditto the Prince of Wales and 'Sooty'.

That neither Ahmed Raza Khan nor Kuldip Dhillon made a complaint says more about their powerlessness as isolated individuals in the face of a pervasive, unwritten social code, than it does about how they may actually feel about these names. None of us wants to look like we're oversensitive about our race. None of us want to be labelled crybabies. And frankly, though a cat may look at a King, even the toughest tabby knows that it only has nine lives. Challenging authority is an heroic business and not all of us can afford to be heroes.

But we can't use the individual's need to survive in a particular environment to fit in to excuse a code of behaviour that should have no place in modern Britain.

So how do we tackle this?

There is only so much that edicts from the Commission can achieve. I certainly don't think that we need to get bent out of shape about the careless act of one junior officer, however famous he is. The Army's disciplinary system should deal with this, without outside interference.

That is why we will not intervene on this case, though we have made known our expectation that the Army will share their investigation into this episode with us, along with their proposed actions for culture change.

But the Harry incident is more important as an example of the problem that we all now face in dealing with the subtleties of prejudice and bias.

These subtleties can't be fixed by law alone.

This was something Samuel Johnson spoke about. He said in one of his famous sermons: 'A thousand methods of torture may be invented, a thousand acts of unkindness or disregard may be committed, a thousand innocent gratifications may be denied, and a thousand hardships imposed, without any violation of the national laws.'

But can the law play a part in addressing those thousand small acts of unkindness that can make life a living hell for some?

And can a Commission like ours make a difference, not as interfering politically correct busybodies, but by using our statutory powers in a modern constructive and intelligent way?

Well, to coin a phrase of our time, I would say 'yes, we can'.

The law is just one part of the mechanism to create change. But it's an essential part. It provides the discipline and the direction; and it provides the sanctions.

By next year, we will have a single new Equality Act. It provides an immense opportunity to make an historic assault on bias and prejudice of all kinds; and to use the most contemporary weapons to address inequality.

The key provisions of the Equality Bill will be to introduce a new single equality duty on public bodies; to extend the opportunities for positive action; to consolidate the use of public procurement to increase equality; and to strengthen enforcement.

We welcome all of this. We want to expand the pro-active elements of the public service duty, first introduced by the Stephen Lawrence report. We want the existing inspectorates in areas like health, education and local government using their powers to hold authorities to account on equality and good relations. We want to see communities empowered through involvement, and public services improved as a consequence.

And let me absolutely clear. Though we are not trigger happy, rushing to court at every opportunity, we do know the value of an equality duty on public service delivery.

We recently demonstrated that irrespective of the organisational change that saw the Equality and Human Rights Commission replace the CRE the way that such a duty can be effective in serving more than one protected group in the same action

Last July the Commission went court, using the race equality duty and provisions for positive action, to argue that Ealing Council needed to reconsider their mistaken decision to withdraw funding from Southall Black Sisters. We were successful. We made a difference to that particular organisation, and more importantly to the hundreds of women who would have had to suffer brutality and violence in silence if Southall Black Sisters had folded. It was a victory for Southall Black Sisters, a victory for race equality, a victory for gender equality and a victory for a community.

Besides a stronger public service duty we want to make sure that the 175 billion pounds of taxpayer's money that is handed over to the private sector for goods and services each year goes to companies that model the best equality standards.

And we want to see positive action smashing through glass ceilings that have existed for generations in many workplaces.

The Bill will also, I hope, place a new duty on public bodies to pay attention to society's class divide - not because race equality has become less important – let me be absolutely clear about that. That's not what this is about. But because some kinds of racial disadvantage cannot be dealt with without attacking socio-economic disadvantage. We cannot, for example, hope to improve housing conditions for Pakistani heritage families without doing so for their white neighbours; nor can we raise the educational achievement of African Caribbean boys without doing the same for their white classmates.

But the way we construct and enforce the new law will matter crucially.

We need to act in a way that chimes with the new mood amongst British people - open, tolerant and fair-minded yes; but impatient of bureaucracy and hostile to unnecessary, authoritarian interference in our everyday lives.

To start with therefore we can make the law, clearer, simpler and less Byzantine.

Our new law needs to focus less on process and more on outcomes. At present our equality law encourages a health authority to be more concerned about making sure that it has neat paperwork, than about compelling its hospitals to reduce the number of young black men in sections in psychiatric wards. This cannot be right.

No-one intended this to happen, but it is one consequence of the statute we currently have, which has grown up piecemeal.

To get a comprehensive picture of our anti-discrimination legislation you'd have to wade through 35 acts, 52 'statutory instruments', 13 codes of practice and 16 European Union directives – that's about 4,000 pages of legislation. It can barely be understood, and it offers too many opportunities to escape enforcement.

To ensure effective enforcement, we need to see a dramatic reduction in the red tape involved in complying with equality law. If you were to multiply the number of public bodies by the number of equality schemes soon to be required, there would be 315,000 different equality schemes floating around the system. There is no way in which we could ever assess and monitor those schemes without a Commission the size of the Chinese Red Army.

We need to stop the bureaucratic paperchase. Because the danger is that we will create public services that are expert at superficial ticking boxes but don't actually change people's lives. In practice we would be colluding in reducing the enforcement regime to a paper tiger.

Instead we need a new commonsense, practical attack on unfairness. A refreshed battle for social justice.

That is our ambition for this new, landmark Equality Act.

We'll have to work hard to make that happen. And bearing in mind what is happening across the Atlantic, what we see when we look at Parliament is an outstanding example of racial, gender and disability exclusion. We will be saying more about this in our response next week to the potentially historic Speaker's Conference on representation in the House of Commons. But what is clear is that to get better legislation would be easier with a Parliament that reflected the demography of the nation it represents.

Parliament may be the pumping heart of our democracy, but its lifeblood is white, male and straight. That has to change.

We have a record number of ethnic minority Members of Parliament – all of fifteen. We have the prospect, to be welcomed whatever her party, of the first Asian woman MP. But it cannot be right that we have a more ethnically diverse House of Lords than our House of Commons.

For Parliament to be representative of gender, we would need twice as many white female MPs and ten times as many ethnic minority women.

And it's difficult to know how representative Parliament is on grounds of disability - many disabilities are not evident - but estimates for the Lords put it at around one per cent, where the national average is closer to 14 per cent.

All this has to change, and the Speaker's Conference gives us the chance to trigger reform.

2009 could be the year that changes Britain. That would be the legacy that the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry deserves. It would be the revolution we owe to Stephen Lawrence for our collective failure to protect his right to life.

This is our chance to make up for this failure.

It is our responsibility to make that better Britain.

And our Commission stands ready to embrace the challenge.