

## The age of difference

### Trevor Phillips speech at Sheffield Hallam University 27th November 2007

I was asked yesterday to suggest my favourite piece of music with which to start this event. Well, Parry's setting of Jerusalem isn't actually my favourite piece but I thought that in spite of the fact that he isn't a Yorkshireman, Blake's unparalleled vision would be an appropriate frame for my remarks tonight.

Most people assume that Blake's satanic mills were here in the north; actually, as his best biographer, Peter Ackroyd points out he only left London for one short period of his life, moving all the way to Sussex; and the mills in his mind were probably the huge warehouses and factories on the South Bank of the Thames. The green and pleasant land of his imagination however may well have been built on what he had been told of the Yorkshire moors or of the Pennine walk.

Blake was, as we know, a mystic and a radical; he was anti slavery and pro women's liberation at a time when both causes would have been seen as unfashionable, if not downright subversive.

When he died in 1827, this country was about to embark on the richest period of imperial expansion and technological discovery it had ever experienced - a period which would set the scene for the two great challenges that we face this century, and both of which are obliquely referred to in Blake's text.

One challenge is the bundle of issues now exemplified by global warming and climate change; can we enjoy the fruits of our own industrial and technological success without destroying the very resources on which that success is built? In the face of rampant

consumerism and economic growth, can we remain that "green and pleasant land"?

The other great challenge is embodied, in the frequently neglected opening lines of Blake's poem. These lines replay the recurring legend that Christ left the Holy Land and came here to England:

And did those feet in ancient time  
walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
on England's pleasant pastures seen?

Those "feet" of course would have belonged to an exotic foreigner and the countenance divine would have been far from your standard rosy cheeked Englishman. Blake casts Christ as the ultimate migrant - alone, perhaps bringing his skills as a carpenter to a land in the throes of an earlier period of globalisation and rapid industrial transformation.

What Blake doesn't ask - but we could ask today is - how would that refugee or migrant - the equivalent of our Polish plumber or Brazilian builder - be received? Would we live up to Blake's vision of Albion?

We now face these two great challenges head on. In the twenty-first century how can we live with the planet; and how can we live with each other?

Happily, in my role as Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission I am not required to tackle the challenges of climate change directly. But the question of how we live with each other falls entirely into the EHRC's domain. And it is a domain that is widening in scope and deepening in complexity at an astonishing pace.

In just one week the Commission – 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:

- 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 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
- whether 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 looking forward, if insurance companies should be allowed to read your DNA to 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 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 day. And if we are to become the society we all want - one built on fairness, dignity and respect, confident in all aspects of its diversity, we have work to do to reconcile the demands of freedom and of solidarity; of diversity and equality. Above all, we must not allow difference to become an explanation for inequality. That if anything is the first job of our Commission.

So tonight I want to throw the spotlight on some of the very human tensions that arise in a society facing change more radical and sweeping than at any time since the industrial revolution. And at the heart of that change lies a fundamental set of demographic, social and cultural dilemmas that are probably unprecedented in human history.

Some of those changes are objective - about what kind of people we are - and I want to come to those a little later.

But some are subjective - about who we think we are; 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, balancing crimes such as tank tops and embarrassing hairstyles, was that baby boomers like myself became adults with the expectation that we did not need to conform or defer to authority.

As a result, none of us any longer accepts that we should be trapped by the definitions of what we are set down for us at birth. None of us wants to live a stereotype. None of us wants to be victims of what the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen calls the 'single focus identity' - to be the prisoner

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

But if inequality does anything to us, that is what it achieves - 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. 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. That 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 we do not want our destiny to be defined by our DNA.

For no group has this issue of freedom from the accident of birth been more significant than for women. But as elsewhere the gap between aspiration and reality still remains far too wide.

We know that women's pay remains more than 17% adrift if you are thinking full time work, and more than double that if you consider part-time working. We know that having a child places a woman at a 40% disadvantage in the labour market. We know that too many girls are headed for the five C's - cleaning, catering, clerical, caring and customer service - none of which generally leads to a sixth C - career.

But today I want to focus, not so much on what women may think of themselves or even the institutional barriers to their equality in the workplace or education. Instead I want to address the most direct and brutal way in which we are currently driving women back into a box marked "un-free".

Today there is an undeclared war against women in this country. This is no exaggeration.

Each year some three million women face will experience violence in one form or another. Rape, or the threat of it; assault, often at the hands of someone they know; intimidation through stalking; sexual abuse, either by a member of their own family or someone they know, much of it routine and known to others in the family; genital mutilation; and forced marriage.

On average two women die each week at the hands of a partner or an ex-partner. 80 000 women experience rape or attempted rape. An

estimated 1.2 million women experienced stalking in 2003. 4000 trafficked women are in enforced prostitution in this country on any given day, locked in dingy flats, drugged, threatened and effectively enslaved.

And we should make no mistake about this. These are crimes against women. There are male victims yes, but the truth is that this war is against women because they are women. The figures speak for themselves. In fact they scream.

- 42% of female homicide victims in 2000/2001 were killed by a current or former partner; the equivalent figure for men was 4%.
- In 2005/6 92% of the more than 14 thousand reported rape victims recorded by police were women.
- And 85% of those forced into marriages against their will are female.
- 81% of domestic violence victims in the same year were women.

This is the experience of women of all classes, races, ages, disabled and non-disabled. Poorer women may be more likely to experience violence; disabled women more likely to face abuse - and some kinds of women are less likely to get support or protection, but the fact is that nearly half of all women become one of these statistics at some point in their lives.

Most women who experience this kind of violence will live with the consequences both physical and emotional for the rest of their lives. They will not "just get over it". Their relationships, life chances and personalities are likely to be transformed. Many will be haunted by the thought that it will happen to them again. Or that it will happen to another woman. Though we congratulate ourselves on the new freedoms of women in modern Britain, we are in fact a society in which millions of women secretly live under a reign of terror for no other reasons than that they are women.

That would be bad enough. But that isn't the real scandal here. The real scandal is this: that we as a society avert our gaze and walk away. We do it in a million ways.

- We say - it can't be serious as it sounds.
- We say - don't worry, dear, you'll get over it.
- We say - what are you complaining about - this or that happened to me and I got over it.
- And we say - are you sure you didn't provoke him or lead him on?

Is it any wonder then that relatively few women come forward to complain? And is it surprising that when the legal remedies seem ineffective, and in many cases compound the trauma of the assault?

A new survey entitled Map of Gaps, to be released tomorrow by the End Violence Against Women coalition and by the Commission, demonstrates the grim truth of our collective culpability.

In a fair Britain, every woman should have someone to call in a crisis, should have access to a place of safety, should have genuine backing in her search for justice, and should be treated with respect and dignity by the health services, criminal justice system and other agencies. In truth, in most parts of the UK, none of this is available. There are some areas of the country - such as here in Sheffield - where things are different, but they are few and far between.

- A third of local authorities, in spite of their legal duty for well-being of their citizens, have no specialised violence against women support services.
- Most women have no access to a rape crisis centre, and fewer than a quarter of local authorities provide any sexual violence service at all.
- A third have no service concerned with domestic violence.
- And fewer than one in ten local authorities provide any specialised services for women and girls who have suffered forced marriage, genital mutilation or so-called honour crimes.

In practice what we are saying to these three million women is - unless you are very lucky or very courageous or very well-off - you are on your own. In practice if you want to complain you risk being branded a troublemaker, or an hysteric, or a slut. You are forced to be a lone heroine.

Our aim should be to ensure that no-one has to be a heroine to gain justice. We should be to be the kind of country that says to women in this situation "you are not alone".

Our short-term aim should be to ensure that wherever a woman lives, there is a specialised support service that will enhance the self-worth of women and affirm their right to protection and justice.

In the longer term of course our aim should be to change attitudes to ensure that this combination of cruelty and neglect is no longer a feature of our society. We need to stop blaming women for what men do. A previous survey by End Violence Against Women showed that 42% per cent of young people know girls whose boyfriends have hit them. 40%

knew girls who had been pressurised into sex; yet 27% thought it was acceptable for a boy to "expect to have sex with a girl" if the girl had been "very flirtatious".

We need to do more about the casual contempt for girls shown by many boys. We need to boost the self-esteem of girls in the way being promoted by organisations like Girlguiding UK so that young women are both more careful and more assertive. And we need to avoid any public attitudes that suggest that some kinds of assault or rape are somehow more forgivable than others. Rape is rape, violence is violence and no is no. The law must reflect that, and it should be fully enforced.

But changing attitudes is the work of decades; many women's organisations have been campaigning for a cultural shift of this kind for my lifetime and longer. But we can't afford to wait that long to deal with this crisis.

Our Commission has a role here, as the regulator of public bodies in respect of their equality duties. This postcode lottery seems clearly to me to point to a clear violation of the duties laid down in the Equality Act of 2006, in which all public authorities are proactively enjoined to ensure that their services treat men and women equally - and I stress the word equally - not identically. That means that all women are entitled to at least the level of support provided by the nine authorities that our report identifies. They show that it is possible to do the right thing.

Tonight, we are putting every public authority involved here - local councils, police authorities and others - on notice. The Equality and Human Rights Commission intends to make the treatment of violence against women the first acid test of their fulfilment of their duties under the Act.

We expect everyone to sit up, pay attention and to provide adequate services; and I am saying this well ahead of their budget setting process, so there can be no excuses about lack of resources. If you don't provide, what you actually mean is that it doesn't matter enough to you. If so, fine, but we think that at least half the electorate needs to know that you really don't care. And we intend to tell them.

In twelve months' time we will ask public authorities where they stand. If they don't measure up, they can expect to be named publicly. If they don't act, they will see us at their doors with compliance notices. And if they still can't be bothered, they need to put their expensive lawyers on retainer today.

I've so far been addressing a challenge which a socially just society has to confront whatever its makeup.

But many of today's pressures stem from the way that the mix of people who make up our society has changed substantially in recent years - by race, by age, and by disability status for example; not to forget the effect of more people being open about to themselves and everyone else about their sexual orientation.

So I want to turn very briefly to that set of challenges; very briefly because I have addressed this topic at length elsewhere, and because I know that many of you are already very familiar with the issues.

These real world changes have happened partly because in this country we are living longer; partly because some of us define ourselves differently - as disabled for example; and partly because some possibilities - for example gender reassignment - which were previously unimaginable are now possible; but most of all, and most unsettling for many people, immigration and emigration have begun to change our ethnic and racial mix.

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. 227 million pass through our airports, 30 million people staying to visit, study or work. Globally, the UN reckons that some 200 million people live and work outside the country of their birth.

Immigration has become today's litmus test political issue, because it so clearly reflects the rapidity of change in our world. 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.

And it all happens much faster than before. Half of all current migrants arrived in the UK in the last generation and a third in the last decade.

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 - African - covers Birmingham born sons of Somali herdsmen and Ghanaian barristers, another Polish electricians and South African doctors.

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. And indeed it is the very ease of with which people and funds move that makes this new type of migration so much part of our new world.

In 2006, migrants worldwide sent home an estimated \$269 billion in remittances - more than twice the official aid received by developing countries. In the USA the level of remittances to Mexico alone has, according to the Financial Times, reached \$US23bn each year. Here even the official figure tops £5bn a year. 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.

Immigration has changed the colour and culture of our society and is changing it faster every year.

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.

I don't expect Sheffield to be first amongst that list - we can expect to see Malmö, Toronto, Birmingham and Leicester for example, ahead of you. But you too are changing. I was startled when visiting the city's schools last year to be told that though the ethnic minority population of the city is below 12%, the minority composition of its primary school entry cohort was not much short of 30%. This is a long way from the 1970s Sheffield I first knew when my eldest brother worked here, admittedly for a short while, as an engineer.

It is clear that we need this migration to sustain our growth. But it is also becoming clear that the people who suffer the most from the pressures

of population growth on our infrastructure are the poorest people, in the most deprived areas. That is unfair and why many ethnic minority Britons, who are still disproportionately poorer than average, are just as concerned about the consequences of parallel, polyglot immigration as anyone else.

But immigration is only one part of the objective, real world change we are experiencing.

We can see change all around us in our own families and households.

Like the rest of Europe we are ageing as a society. There are 9.4m people over the age of 65 now – there will be 12.4m by 2021. By 2050 the number of people aged over 80 will double.

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%.

More of us will define ourselves as disabled over the coming years. There are up to 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.

We need to talk about how we manage this huge set of challenges. The opening up of debate about difference would be the most potent defence against all forms of bigotry. But we need to take this debate out of the realm of pure politics, or journalism. We need disciplined minds and serious, dispassionate inquiry. This unfortunately is not what we had last night at Oxford University.

All that said, we are no longer a country which instinctively reacts against diversity. But we do need to find new ways of living with difference.

In 2003, early in my time at the Commission for Racial Equality, I paid a series of visits to some of the Northern English towns which had experienced disturbances in 2001. Most of these towns were deeply segregated by race, and remain so.

Yet meeting young people in a sixth form college in Oldham, I was struck by the fact that there was a certain ease of interaction across the lines of colour and faith amongst these teenagers.

When I talked to both Asian and white students about this, they all said the same thing of the other group: “We get on fine at college, but

between Friday afternoon and Monday morning we never see them". The fact is when there wasn't a reason to come together, they stuck to their own side of town. But in the safe and neutral environment of college they found a common identity as students.

There were direct parallels when I visited an integrated school in Northern Ireland last week where school was the only opportunity for these young people to interact. What was striking by the way was the degree to which the students' positive experience contrasted with the continuing divisions in their communities.

One primary school head teacher told me that that very week, a so-called peace wall was being built between the two communities locally, and that it ran right alongside the school itself.

Yet despite the difficulties, there is no question in my mind - or it seems in theirs, by the way - that the 62 integrated schools represent a good future for Northern Ireland.

The point here is that the demands of education may be for many the only lever that offers any of us the opportunity to step outside our essentialist communities, and to develop our full potential. In short education can give us the opportunity to remember that we have more in common than divides us.

And this lesson isn't just one for the young.

A few years ago I visited a local day centre for the elderly on an estate which had previously been largely white. Asian families had recently moved in and the local council had made strenuous efforts to integrate the day centre. Their success was limited at first; the Asian elders showed up but sat and ate separately. But by the time I visited all that had changed. I asked a group of older ladies what had made the difference.

They offered several somewhat unconvincing reasons. And then one rather brave lady turned to me and said, "Look it's like this. We eventually started to talk about our families, and naturally we talked about our sons. And we discovered that we had one great thing in common."

"What was that" I asked. She leant forward and said "We all knew that our sons had married the wrong woman".

Sometimes we can find our common ground in surprising places.

But educational institutions should be the living embodiment of the fundamental proposition that we can find more to share than to quarrel about, given the chance. Even schools, colleges and universities where people study exclusively with people from the same backgrounds as themselves can still provide spaces where we can learn about people who are different from us.

Survey evidence shows that the strongest correlate for the absence of prejudice is a university education. We do not know whether the evidence tells us that the absence of prejudice relates to the fact that university graduates are more likely to be liberal and open-minded, or even middle class. I actually do have a view. I think it is actually more likely that the real cause is the effect of having to live away from home for the first time with different people: people you've never met; many of whom you don't understand, don't like and hope you'll never see again; but with whom you're going to have to co-exist if you're going to get your degree. That to me is the most likely explanation.

So what can schools and other educational institutions do to help tackle the challenge of living together?

**First, they can avoid making things worse by planting new dividing lines.**

In England and Wales, we know from work carried out at Bristol University that schools are typically more segregated than the area in which they are located. This arises from the operation of parental choice. There is nothing wrong with offering parents more choice; but there should be levers in the system that prevent the aggregate effect of many choices leading to a spiral of separation.

In some towns in England, for example Oldham, consideration is now being given to location of new city academies with a specific aim of ensuring that the schools are shared by districts with very different ethnic compositions. This can be done through relatively simple adjustments to the planning regime, and though it may cause some doubts to start with I believe that in the long term it will lead to better schools overall – which is what all families want.

We will also expect universities to start thinking again about their makeup; far too many of our universities have now become, in effect, colour coded, with some well funded older institutions largely white or white and South Asian. A diverse future has to include all kinds of people in our professional classes and the responsibility for change here lies squarely with higher education.

## **Second, they can positively bring people together.**

The government has now announced a £3 million school twinning project in an effort to break down barriers. Last week I was in Bristol, talking to Council leaders concerned about ethnic divisions between schools and the gang culture that often goes with them. Some schools are almost 100 per cent white. There, they've developed a school twinning project in which children from different schools had sessions in school time to discuss issues around diversity, difference and culture. They believe that in time this will bridge some of the gaps.

In Kirklees there are over 90 primary schools which are effectively mono-cultural. Through a school twinning project that brought together pupils from different backgrounds together to share and experience different cultures.

## **Third, educational institutions can remember that sometimes the real difference isn't just race or gender or faith but class.**

The facts are that socio-economic divisions, or as we used to call it, class, still throw up the greatest inequalities.

And here we could get really radical.

In 2000, the local education authority in Wake County, North Carolina took the decision to abandon its policy of trying to mix students by race, and instead opted to mix them by economic background. Some 40 districts across the USA have followed suit, using free school meals as a proxy for poverty.

The system doesn't single out individual students. The districts are divided into hundreds of small units, each classified by the number of children who qualify for free school meals. The goal is to ensure that no school has more than a certain percentage on free school meals; or more than a quarter underperforming on regular tests. The balancing of numbers is achieved by moving a whole unit of children rather than an individual.

In Wake County something exceptional has happened. Despite overcrowding, and a 45% non-white mix, the county's schools are performing so well that white families are now returning from the suburbs.

Tonight I've focused on two of the central aspects of our differentiation - they are perhaps the most widely recognised markers of difference - ethnicity and gender. On the face of it for that very reason they should

be the least unsettling; but it may well turn out to be these two lines of difference which most threaten to destabilise Western societies today.

Indeed I would go so far as to say that if you asked me to gamble whether it is the rising sea level or the rising tide of interethnic conflict and continuing injustice against women that is more likely to bring modern societies to their knees faster, I have no doubt where I'm putting my money. Mother Earth will eventually see us all off; but it's us, the kids, the brothers and sisters who are more likely to bring the house crashing down with our quarrelling and mistreatment of one another.

On the other hand, we have a great prize before us. Blake's green and pleasant land in which a dark skinned stranger can ply his trade and walk without fear or hostility is the place that I imagine most of us want to live. His radical vision of women's freedom is perhaps what we thought we already had. Well, there's more work to do to achieve that happy Albion.

I am pretty sure that William Blake didn't have the Equality and Human Rights Commission in mind as his angel of delivery. We don't really do bows of burning gold, swords, spears, and though I like my car, I don't think it'll stand in for a chariot of fire.

But we're here to play our part, and we'll do so vigorously. But this is a battle for our whole nation. We know that if we can draw on the energy of people liberated from fear and prejudice to be their true selves we can move a little closer to Jerusalem.

Thank you