

## **Trevor Phillips speech to Conservative Party Conference Muslim Forum**

**3 October 2005**

### **We Need a Highway Code for the Multiethnic Society**

Since I spoke a few days ago, about the danger of Britain “sleepwalking to segregation”, I have been delighted at the seriousness with which most people, including politicians of all parties, have engaged with the issues we are raising.

Today I would like to reiterate our central message about the dangers to race relations in Britain, to make clear one or two things we are not saying, and to ask you to participate in a debate, not about what we all know to be the truth - the statement of the bleedin’ obvious, as we Londoners would say - but how we respond to it.

We have of course been accused of alarmism, of over-stating the case, frankly, we are simply pointing out what most people already know, and what has been demonstrated by independent research.

The metropolitan middle classes can remain in denial for as long as they like. But our job is to confront the reality that most Britons - black, brown, white – face, and change it where that reality weakens our nation’s fabric.

The picture we’ve revealed is not an excuse to throw up our hands in despair and abandon hope that our multiethnic society can work. Quite the reverse. We state the facts, because if we are going to solve our existing problems and avoid new ones, we first have to acknowledge that they exist. If we don’t, we will deserve the worst a multiethnic society can throw at us. If we use our traditional pragmatism, wit and flexibility we can be an example to the world.

That’s why I want to put a critical question to you which, it seems to me, must be at the heart of all modern politics: how should people who are very different in their traditions and lifestyles come to share the same values, and how can they manage to live in the same space peacefully and prosperously? In the words of Rodney King, the man whose beating by the police sparked off the Los Angeles riots in 1992, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along?” How do we manage to get along in a society which, whether we like or not, is increasingly multiethnic and will become more so over the next two generations?

On race relations in Britain, we do not expect everyone to agree with our analysis. We would be astounded if we all agreed about the precise nature of what is happening and how acute the degree of ethnic and religious separation is in any given part of the country.

But what is important is that we do acknowledge that, in spite of the many advances we have made in community relations, we still have a great deal to

do; and that in some important respects we are heading in the wrong direction.

Let me remind you briefly of what we believe is happening and why we have the evidence to support our case:

- We are becoming more segregated residentially; it is true that areas which are predominantly white are becoming more integrated as some minority Britons move in. But given the relative numbers their impact is tiny (I know one black sixth-former in a mostly white school who points out that every one of the 150 students in her year has a black friend - unfortunately all 150 friends turn out to be the same person - her). The real problem is what those who move out leave behind areas which are becoming more and more ethnically concentrated and exclusive.
- New research shows that most schools are more segregated than the areas in which they are located.
- New research from the CRE shows that we are not making friends across the lines of race and religion and that younger people tend to be more likely to socialise within their own ethnic or faith grouping than older Britons.

This cannot be right. And let me tell you why I personally see this as so dangerous.

My family came from a country which has for the whole of my lifetime suffered from racial division. Though I was born here I spent most of my childhood in Guyana, a country rich in natural resources - Walter Raleigh christened it Eldorado for its reserves of gold. It is hugely diverse in its people. The talent of the Guyanese has become an international story, even prompting the Prince of Wales to talk of a Guyanese mafia, including the leader of the House of Lords for example.

Like most Guyanese I grew up with boys and girls of literally all races – we even celebrate the six peoples in the Guyanese national anthem – and every major religion. But I have seen how a divided political system, segregated workplaces and mutual suspicion that causes everyone to fight against his or her neighbour, have destroyed a nation, now one of the poorest on earth. And Guyana is not divided because it is poor. It is poor because it is divided.

We can see the result of such divisions all over the world, including, recently in the USA.

I desperately want to avoid such divisions here.

We know that there is a mix of reasons why this phenomenon takes place. One reason is sheer economic and social inequality. If you are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to be well-educated and live in poor housing your chances of meeting others and making friends outside your immediate community are poor.

Another is cultural - some people want to be near their church or mosque or synagogue, or near the shops or hairdressers that cater to their community.

A third is history, particularly for migrants recruited to a particular trade or factory, and who settle near their place of work.

And fourth, there is protection; for Jews who came a hundred years ago, Asians who came forty years ago and even the Eastern Europeans arriving now, all of whom may be subject to abuse and violent assault by a minority of their neighbours, there is safety in numbers.

But none of these problems should lead to the formation of communities that are shut off from the outside world; that simply makes the situation worse. But that is what we are seeing emerging.

There are two responses I have heard with which I cannot agree.

The first is that the fracturing to which we are drawing attention relates solely to Muslims. Wrong. Other communities show the same tendencies, including some white communities. And indeed, many Muslims are entirely ready to integrate with others if they have the chance to do so.

Second, that social segregation represents a natural instinct in human beings; that we really want to stick to our own kind and we should be allowed to get on with it. That in reality, we care little for people who are not like us. And by the way, that this is a reason to cease immigration.

This is a bizarre argument in a nation which built its greatest achievements out of the energy and enterprise of migrants. There may well be a case for better or tighter control of immigration, its speed and its scale. But this isn't it.

There is very little evidence that the speed of migration makes any difference to the ability to integrate. Jews took more than a century to get here in numbers; East African Asians took days. Both groups are prosperous and integrated.

Nor does scale make much difference. There are three times as many African Caribbeans as there are Bangladeshis in the UK. The African Caribbeans are near the top of the mixing league; Bangladeshis near the bottom.

And we can look at our own history to show that the British people are not by nature bigots.

We created something called the empire where we mixed and mingled with people very different from those of these islands. Not on equal terms, of course, but it was after all, the free trade Liberal Joseph Chamberlain who coined the phrase 'Little Englander' for all those who favoured protectionism. And the phrase 'going native' was coined by the English.

It would also be a travesty to suggest that a people who endured two devastating wars in the first half of the last century in order to ward off tyranny, not just from these islands but from the whole of Europe, would be so small-minded as to say that we could not live with the Polish airmen, the French resistance fighters, the Caribbean mechanics and the Indian infantrymen who also played a heroic role in that struggle.

We are used to the idea of one nation. That is why the prospect of a Britain fragmented and fractured by race and religion is so alien to us. It simply is not in our nature.

But sometimes we forget our history. We forget our internationalism and our openness and we become afraid and withdrawn. We could allow this to happen by accident. We could allow short-term trends to become so ingrained that, as in America, they reach the point where they cannot be reversed.

That is why we are raising this issue. Because, unlike some, we believe that we can avoid that future.

We can make a difference. We at the CRE think that real contact between people who come from different backgrounds is the key here. That is why we want to see young people getting together, on the sports field, or in the music studios. Why we want to see women's groups and sports clubs reaching out to people who may not share the committee's ethnicity or faith, but share their passion for drama or bridge or tennis or gardening. It is why we welcome steps by political parties to show clearly that they can be a home for people of any and every ethnic or religious background. And why we want to ensure that schools do all they can to make sure that, where it is possible their intake brings boys and girls of all backgrounds together.

Let me emphasise. We do not support quotas. We think bussing has failed. We do not want positive discrimination as we've seen it in other countries. And we are not for clumsy social engineering.

But we do not accept that there is nothing that can be done.

That is why we have set out an agenda for integration. It involves three prerequisites.

If we want more integration we must have more equality - no-one will integrate into a society where they are expected to be a second class citizen.

If we want more integration we must have more participation in civic and political society; no-one will be part of a society where they have no voice.

And if we want more integration we must have more interaction; no-one will integrate with people they do not know.

But integration does not have to come at the price of bland and ultimately repressive uniformity.

Today I am addressing members of a political party which is founded on the liberty of the individual. Though we share values and traditions, we also preserve the precious right of an individual to have his or her own, sometimes eccentric, occasionally unattractive, lifestyle. Assimilation of new cultures would challenge that fundamental British value. It would be the kind of repressive authoritarianism that led Edmund Burke to fulminate against the French revolution.

But we are not anarchists. The critical issue in a multiethnic society is how to reconcile respect for our common values and traditions with that individual liberty.

Let me offer a metaphor.

Today we have millions of cars in Britain - of all kinds, shapes and colours. But they all have to share the same road space.

In order for us to do that safely there are some hard rules - laws that mean we must first pass a test of proficiency before we gain a licence to drive, laws that mean we must stop at traffic lights, drive on the same side of the road, and wear seat belts.

But we do not all want to drive at the same speed and in the same way. So there are also some rules of the road which express our common understanding of how to deal with our different ways of behaving, and which help us to manage awkward situations, where no-one is breaking a law but our differences could lead to conflict.

Who has priority at a roundabout? What to watch out for when there are children or old folk about? Which lane to drive in on a motorway? How to warn other drivers when there's a speed trap up ahead?

Most of these - not the speed trap, maybe - are contained in a single document, which, even if it doesn't have the force of law, contains the set of rules of behaviour that allows us all to get along on the road without too many conflicts, a minimum of rage and few accidents. It's called the Highway Code. I think that if we are to live together successfully we need a modern highway code for multiethnic Britain.

In Britain we have always been multiethnic - Scots, Welsh, Irish, Protestant, Catholic, and so on. We have our hard laws that bind us all too parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women, the care of children, settling our disputes peacefully and so on.

But we also have many unspoken rules, which are the equivalent of the Highway Code for our multiethnic society. We respect others' ways of worshipping. We compromise on dress codes - what we wear at work may not be what we wear at home. And above all we use the English language for

everyday intercourse with others - even if there is only one person in the group who does not speak some other language.

But just as the nature of the transport landscape changes - more powerful cars, innovations like motorways and so forth - the rules of the road have to be developed from time to time.

Today, globalisation means that the rules of multiethnic Britain are under constant challenge as we encounter new cultures and our own culture changes. We need a modern highway code for multiethnic Britain, our unwritten handbook for getting on with each other.

Should councils print all their important documents in several languages to encourage participation, or is this encouraging separatism?

What should we do about holy days which are not bank holidays for example? Should we put off that important meeting because it's Yom Kippur, even though only one of the people attending is Jewish?

Are judges right to say that school uniform may not be compulsory for the devout - even though for some it is compliant with Islamic modesty?

Is it really offensive to call someone 'coloured'?

Are there any circumstances in which we sacrifice freedom of expression to protect the minority from ridicule?

We need to find ways of reaching a national agreement on some of these issues. We need to update our highway code of conduct to meet the needs of our multiethnic society.

That is why we welcome the Government's proposal for a Commission on Integration which will study these issues of principle. I hope it will address some of the everyday problems.

But government cannot just decree those rules. We all need to debate and agree those rules. They have to work in our everyday lives. And, just as nothing in our highway code should undermine the fundamental laws of the road, our updated handbook must preserve our fundamental values - we all obey the same laws; we all respect each other's rights; we all sign up to the equality of women, and to equal rights for people whatever their sexual orientation. And we accept responsibility for participating in and preserving the integrity of our community.

We can all see the dangers. We at the CRE have tried to start the process of avoiding those dangers. But in the debate we have begun, in which we hope you will play a major part, there is so much more to be discussed and decided. But we have been this way before. We do this better than any other nation. If we want to create the new rules for an integrated society we can do it.

We first, of course, have to agree that we want to do it.

I hope that you will agree with me that such an agreement would be the greatest prize possible in a world riven with ethnic and religious strife. We can create a Greater Britain, as Britons of genius have done before. It's our generation's challenge. I think we are up to it, but only if we all work together.

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