

## **Colonisation in Reverse: How Globalisation is Changing Britain**

Trevor Phillips  
Nottingham University 8<sup>th</sup> February 2006

---

Ladies and Gentleman, thank you very much for your invitation.

One of the unexpected bonuses of being a public figure is being able to return to university towns I may once have visited years ago, and to campuses I may have occupied in those distant days of big flares and big hair.

It is a particularly great pleasure to be here in Nottingham giving this year's memorial lecture commemorating the contribution to education and progressive politics made by one of Britain's great social democrats.

Like many others, I have no doubt that Hugh Gaitskell, had he lived long enough to win the 1964 general election, would have served his country as prime minister in the same pragmatic, yet passionate manner as he did the miners of Nottinghamshire while working here as a lecturer. I regret that he never did.

Nevertheless, the legacy of his efforts to modernise the Labour party reverberates across the political landscape today.

### **Gaitskell & solidarity & colonies**

Gaitskell's political contribution to British politics peaked as the sun set on the British Empire, and while he rose to be Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Atlee government, his years as leader of the Opposition left an indelible mark on British politics.

First, whilst he is now most readily associated with the Butskellite' consensus politics of the 1950s and 1960s, Gaitskell was a socialist.

He argued intensely that socialism should be identified with its ends – greater equality, rather than its means – nationalisation. That was true then and it is true now.

In progressive politics we can often lose our way when we confuse ends and means. It does matter how we advance the cause - particularly when we are in government. But dogmatic devotion to outdated modes and structures is a warning that a progressive movement is turning into a conservative and reactionary monument.

For example when Bill Clinton criticised the anti-globalisation movement by pointing out that globalisation is a fact not a policy – he was making the point that faced with that new fact progressives have to find a new response.

But in any and all circumstances some truths are definitive. For progressive politics the most definitive is a commitment to equality.

This is not a fluffy rhetorical concept. It has to be real and measurable. A society which claims to be socially just should be one in which each person knows – and we can show statistically - that our life chances are not adversely affected by accidents of birth such as, for example, their gender, ethnicity, or whether or not they have a disability. It should be a society in which each person has the ability to participate fully in civic life, and to influence the political and policy decisions that affect their everyday lives.

This is a big ask against a background of the massive international economic and social forces driven by instant communications and easier international travel. We saw in Gaitskell himself, faced by the decline of empire, the stirrings of contradictions which once again trouble progressives, now faced by the forces of globalisation. For example, where does our internationalism stop?

Just over 40 years ago, the House of Commons debated immigration policy, when the Macmillan Government proposed controls designed explicitly to keep New Commonwealth migrants - black people - out of Britain.

We know from the Cabinet papers that have since been released, that there was a fear of increased racism, and the fear that there would be a backlash that would threaten peaceful community relations.

Rather than standing up to that challenge, the Macmillan Government gave in. Hugh Gaitskell rightly opposed that law because it was racist. He believed it breached the principles of equality, and he made this clear in public debate. Just as Atlee had waved away complaints about the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948, he argued that we need not fear migration; and that anyway it would ebb and flow with the economic needs of the country.

Yet Gaitskell also opposed British membership of the European Economic Community, declaring it to be the "end of a thousand years of island history". Whether or not you agree with the island exceptionalist view of British history (I don't) no one can doubt that our long-term future is inextricably linked to the rest of the world.

By the bonds of international trade.

By faster, cheaper telecommunications and travel

By the threat of environmental catastrophe.

And by the reality of global terrorism.

These forces do not respect political borders. The response of British society now to the social consequences of globalisation is as critical to our future prosperity as was our reaction to the decline of empire.

This is true the world over. But like other European nations we have a special set of challenges from globalisation, which are not shared with newer nations such as Australia and the United States.

Our unique challenge lies in our imperial history.

Globalisation means that we are increasingly colliding with our own past as those we previously colonized turn up here in these islands. This means that our approach to a multiethnic future cannot be the same as those newer nations.

The famous Caribbean folk poet Louise Bennett predicted as much in the 1950s when she wrote her satire "Colonization in reverse" which starts (with apologies to anyone who actually can speak Jamaican patois)

"What a joyful news Miss Mattie  
Ah feel like me heart gwine burs -  
Jamaica people colonizin  
Englan in reverse

By de hundred, by de tousan  
from country an from town  
By de shipload, by de plane load  
Jamaica is Englan bound"

And she then put the key question in her own very special way:

"What a devilment a Englan!  
Dem face war an brave de worse;  
But ah wonderin how dem gwine stan  
Colonizin in reverse"

We are as I say colliding with our past - but this time we are not the masters. We are, like all others in the West, having to negotiate our way through the management of migration essential to our economic prosperity. It won't be a simple process.

There are 200 million people who work outside their country sending home some \$150 billion each year - more than the entire flow of official aid across the world. 60 percent come to more prosperous, western countries. We need them. They need us. That is one powerful reason why Britain is changing and has been changing since Gaitskell's era.

### **How is Britain changing?**

So when Bill Clinton famously said that globalisation is not a policy - it's a fact – he added that the only issue for progressives is how we respond to it. It isn't going to stop.

I know that this isn't news to anyone here at a University which launched a £20m campus in China last year, thereby becoming the first independent foreign university allowed to set up there.

Of course the other side of that particular coin is that there are also more students coming here, a good proportion from China. As we know, ours has been one of the most successful nations when it comes to attracting overseas students.

But we also know that Britain's market share was slipping, with countries such as Australia drawing an increasing number of students. To encourage growth, the government has in recent years increased funding to finance promotional marketing, and has also made changes to the visa system to make the system more straightforward for overseas students.

One of the practical consequences of this market-driven policy is that the number of people in ethnic-minority groups is growing significantly as the aging white British population continues to decrease.

Let's consider one migrant group not very often spoken about, the Chinese in Britain.

Population estimates released by the Office for National Statistics<sup>1</sup> a fortnight ago show that the Chinese community in England grew faster than any other ethnic group between 2001 and 2003 (at 11 per cent a year). This was largely because of the arrival of people born in China.

That growth was being led by students. The number of Chinese students studying in the UK has risen from 2,883 in 1997/98 to 32,000 in 2002/03 – 17% of all international students in the UK. Many of these students are self-funded and a signal of the economic growth and increasing wealth in China. They contribute around £1.14 billion to the UK economy.<sup>2</sup>

The majority like to stay to get some work experience here before they return to their own country. As they pay full fees, the student population is very welcome in this country. This

---

<sup>1</sup> (ONS) 26 January 2006, Population Estimates by Ethnic Group for 2001-2003  
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=14238>

is just one example of the way that globalisation carries both enormous benefits for us – but at the same time changes who we mean by “us”.

Over the next two generations the challenge of integrating new and settled communities, as they live together both in the short and long term, will grow as globalisation picks up speed.

The task for progressive politics is to keep us on course for greater equality even as the demographic terrain around us continues to shift.

### **Hobbes – solitary, nasty, brutish, short**

That is of course why social democrats are social democrats. We believe that progress will not happen by itself. There must be positive intervention by public policy to counter the trends to isolation and inequality.

Adam Smith’s invisible hand, powerful as it is, is insufficient for this task. Its outcomes are too haphazard for a civilised society under stress. It may be the case that in pursuing his own interest, an individual sometimes ‘promotes that of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum submitted by Universities UK to in Jan 2005 Treasury Committee Inquiry Impact of China on the World & UK Economy - Memorandum from Universities UK.

wider society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it'<sup>3</sup>.

But if we thought that way collectively, we would almost certainly not have built up the solidarity required to establish a welfare state. This of course is the traditional social democratic case, made by Beveridge, Attlee and Gaitskell. But I think that if Gaitskell were here today even he would say it's not enough.

We may have escaped Hobbes' state of man in nature – “nasty, brutish and short” - by understanding that this is the outcome, as he put it of being “solitary”. Our community enforces social rules and provides us with mutual security.

But for some in our society, life is still all too often literally ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. Ethnic minorities around the country find themselves disproportionately amongst those whose life chances are the least promising, who are more prone to be victims of crime, and who have higher rates of infant mortality and lower life expectancy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations

Year by year we see people trapped by disadvantages which have nothing to do with how much their parents earn, or how many assets they own. I witness this every day at the Commission for Racial Equality

We know that, for example, whatever class you belong to, your race is an obstacle all by itself. For example, African-Caribbean men and Pakistani men, when compared with white men of similar qualifications, will, on average, be earning between 5,000 and 6,500 less each year.

And the impact of race on people's life chances is not reducing with time. Rather the opposite; our colour seems more likely than ever to trap us in the place into which we were born.

Today I can tell you with statistical certainty that an African-Caribbean boy has twice as much chance of seeing the inside of a jail as he has of taking a university degree.

I can tell you that a Muslim man or woman who goes for a job is a third as likely as a non-Muslim to get it.

And I can tell you that a Gypsy or Traveller child has about a one in four chance of passing five good GCSEs, and virtually none of getting three A-levels.

This is not about bad guys who put down blacks. It defies belief that every employer is consciously or subconsciously discriminating in such a way as to produce the ethnic pay penalty I mentioned a moment ago; or that British teachers are not only so racist, but so subtle in the exercise of their prejudice that they can ensure that on average Chinese and Indian students perform 50 and 25% better than the average at GCSE whilst African-Caribbean, Pakistani and Gypsy children do 30, 40 and 50% less well.

The fact is that a pattern of racial bias may have very little to do with individuals and their intent, but is ingrained in the system with which we work.

And the reality is that there are several barriers currently impeding successful integration. Some of them are straightforwardly about discrimination. Some of them are about class. Still others are systemic. And some are cultural.

Of course it is not all bad news. According to a report published by ONS last year, the children of some migrant communities are transcending Britain's class system and beating their working class white peers into well-paid jobs.

The study, which examined the class position in 2001 of those growing up in the 1960s-80s in England and Wales, also showed that family background remains important in achieving occupational success and avoiding unemployment, but that there are differences across ethnic groups.

The authors found that 56% of people from Indian working class families took up professional or managerial roles in adulthood, while only 43% of those from white, non-

immigrant families went into such jobs. Among youngsters from Caribbean families, the figure was 45%.

But if it is true as Gaitskell strongly believed, and I believe, that education is a means by which a person can acquire skills to participate in the economy and to fully exercise civil duties as a paid up member in British society, then the avenues to achieving both remain blocked to an increasingly disconnected and disenfranchised constituency.

So the first and primary task of progressives confronted with the task of sustaining solidarity and preventing a lapse into solitude and fragmentation, must be to ensure that people feel that they have the same chance to succeed in society as everyone else. Or else why would anyone ever want to accept the responsibilities that go along with citizenship?

Gaitskell said: 'Let us not forget that we can never go farther than we can persuade at least half of the people to go'. I would argue that we cannot get very far as an aspirational, yet increasingly fractured society that leaves many behind.

That is why we at the CRE talk now insistently of the importance of an integrated society. This is often misunderstood so let me say a little about exactly what we mean by this phrase.

## **A Vision for an Integrated Society**

In an integrated society everyone signs up to a single core set of values held in common and defined legally – democracy, equality between men and women, the integrity of the person and freedom of expression; and when and where these core values conflict with ancestral cultural values, those core values must take precedence.

I won't use this lecture to get into the debate about cartoons and freedom of speech. But the events of the past week do pose a profound challenge for all of us.

At the heart of that challenge lie two questions. First where should the balance lie between two equally undesirable extremes?

On the one hand, old style cultural assimilation in which everyone is expected to discard their own heritage – ethnic, regional, linguistic – in favour of a single norm – historically set by white middle-aged men from London.

On the other a cringing abandonment of the core values and behaviours that distinguish democratic, liberal, modern, Britain from other less diverse and open societies.

And then a second question arises because this delicate balance changes all the time. How do we know when we find the balance and how do we express it? In this country matters are even more complicated, because on these large questions of culture and behaviour we tend to avoid explicit statements of what is and isn't acceptable.

There's a really bad reason for this. In the old days there was no problem in establishing where the balance stood because in those more deferential, less democratic times, the middle classes, the London Times, the BBC and the man from the Ministry just told us what to think and how to behave.

Today, resolving this balance must be a task for the whole nation. But this is not some abstract philosophical debate of the kind lampooned by Swift in the battle between Lilliput and Blefuscu over the proper way to eat an egg. We need a political mechanism to negotiate and renegotiate the social rules in a constantly changing Britain. Otherwise we will find ourselves floundering in dangerous waters with some very serious challenges arising from the strains caused by globalisation.

In practice for example:

- What do we say to evangelical African churches that see it as acceptable to traumatise a child, claiming they are ridding her of evil spirits?
- How do we approach white working class communities so fixated by the belief that their every ill is caused by their Asian neighbours that they withdraw their children wholesale from local schools, and allow their children to make a sport of persecuting every local family that is not white?

- What is the answer to Sikh activists who think that their feelings of offence caused by a play are more important than the principle of freedom of expression?
- And what is the response to the almost casual acceptance that the majority of children in the African-Caribbean community grow up without a father-figure, in spite of all the evidence that this causes immense damage both to them and to the community as a whole?

The point is that all of these issues lie outside the ambit of our current anti-discrimination regime, or any envisaged by the recently passed Equality Bill.

The law could be brought to bear in each instance; but, although this may catch a few cases, its lack of subtlety will simply drive the behaviour concerned underground in the first two cases and, in the latter two, merely confirm the belief amongst Sikhs and African-Caribbeans that society is hostile to them.

As for the recently highlighted friction that exists between university students and town residents, I think that that's best left to the experts here to find a solution.

That is why the CRE's integration agenda comprises three key elements all of which take us beyond the role of law enforcement agency.

We want to see:

- equality of opportunity and esteem for all racial groups;
- equality of participation and power for all racial groups;  
and
- equality of interaction between all racial groupings.

All three of these elements have a legal component; but each of these aims needs the whole society to play a part in their realisation. I will say a little more about the role of politics later.

## **Segregation**

None of us can have the least doubt that the events in the Perry Barr area of Birmingham in October were of national

importance. What took place in France was of international significance. In Europe, North America, Australia, and indeed much of Asia, Africa and the rest of the Americas, modern societies are struggling with the same question.

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?

It was telling that people interviewed in the Perry Barr area routinely protested that the Asian and African-Caribbean communities lived side by side. I don't think I ever heard anyone talk about living together.

As a nation we are becoming more ethnically 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.

Of course, it would be nice if much more of Britain were more diverse. But at this moment, this is not the most urgent problem. The real crisis lies in the areas which the middle-class minorities have left behind; areas which are becoming more and more ethnically concentrated and exclusive.

To make matters worse, the one place – the public education system- which should be teaching our children to live together appears to be doing the very opposite. In universities it has been vividly demonstrated recently by the Guardian newspaper that higher education is increasingly colour-coded, with the higher prestige, better-funded universities largely white enclaves, whilst large, poor, urban institutions are disproportionately non-white.

For example, of the Russell Group universities, 9 last year could not count more than 30 African Caribbean students in their ranks.

Of course, universities are merely amplifying the polarisation that has taken place in schools. An exhaustive study by Professor Simon Burgess and his Bristol University colleagues , shows that far from schools becoming sites of

integration, children are slightly more segregated in the playground than they are in their neighbourhoods; and that means that not only are the children not meeting each other, neither are their parents.

A glance at the OFSTED data for Perry Bar in 2004 shows a remarkable pattern. The constituency has an ethnic minority population of around 43% according to the 2001 census. Yet of the seven major secondary schools, three are unmistakably white schools, two with 83% of their pupils falling in the white British census category and a third 73% white. Three others, on the other hand, are ethnic minority schools with minority populations of 74%, 95% and 98.5%; in the last case that 98.5% being almost exclusively South Asian.

Only one school - a Roman Catholic school - has a more even spread of ethnicities; ranging from 31% Black Caribbean through to 26% Asian, 22% white and 14% other ethnic minority, mainly Vietnamese.

It can hardly be a surprise that against this background children in the area are growing up as strangers to each

other. It would therefore probably be unreasonable to expect them to want to socialise away from school, or after they leave.

Surveys by the CRE confirm this, showing that when it comes to social and cultural choices, we are not making friends across the lines of race and religion. Worse still, younger people tend to be more likely to socialise within their own ethnic or faith grouping than older Britons.

When we leave work, most of us leave multi-ethnic Britain behind.

Last year, we showed that most Britons could not name a single good friend from a different race; fewer than one in ten could name two and, even in London, which is one-third black or brown, a derisory proportion of whites had non-white friends.

Just as alarmingly, we showed that young people from ethnic minorities were twice as likely to have a circle of friends exclusively from their own community, as were older ethnic minority folk.

This year we repeated the exercise.

Behaviour in white Britain has not changed a bit. Last year, 94% of white Britons said that all or most of their friends are white. This year it is 95%. Once again a majority - 55% - could not name a single non-white friend, and this was true of white Britons of all ages, classes and regions.

What the figures tell us about the behaviour of ethnic minority Britons is even bleaker. Last year, 31% of ethnic minority Britons said that most or all of their friends were from ethnic minority backgrounds; we found that this trend was stronger among the young than the old. This year the figures show a marked turn for the worse.

The 47% of ethnic minority Britons who last year said that most or all of their friends were white has now shrunk to 37%; and the proportion who have mainly or exclusively ethnic minority friends has grown from 31% to 37%. This is way beyond any statistical fluctuation.

It also remains true that younger Britons are more exclusive than older Britons. It must surely be the most worrying fact of all that younger Britons appear to be integrating less well than their parents.

We know that there is a mix of reasons why this segregation phenomenon takes place. One 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 reason is history, particularly for migrants recruited to a particular trade or factory, and who settle near their place of work.

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

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.

These are all perfectly understandable reasons. But, whatever the reasons, I think that the absence of interaction between communities is not just morally unacceptable, it is damaging.

So what are we to do about it?

At the CRE we think that the key is real contact between people who come from different backgrounds. Recent events in France have offered a vital clue as to what could be a successful European approach to integration, especially with those whom we have in the past colonised.

### **The Miracle of Marseille**

The one city which did not experience major violence in France last autumn was Marseilles, despite its high ethnic minority population (thought to be about 30%, although the French do not keep official figures) and its 32% rate of unemployment amongst minorities.

The French authorities generally attribute this to two factors. Elsewhere, the complaint from the minorities was about not being treated as French men and women. They held up their identity cards to protest at not being treated as true French men and women, like others in their cities.

But in Marseilles, which has been a port of call for North Africans for over a century; familiarity across ethnic lines has helped to build a specific city identity – the Marseillaise – which can be as important as your race.

For us this is probably something like being a Londoner or Scots or Welsh. Our surveys tell us that though few British Asians for example would be happy to describe themselves as English, they positively want to be called Welsh, Scots, Londoners, and of course, British.

This idea of a transcending non-ethnic identity, whether national or local is vital. But that isn't the whole story.

Uniquely, the geography of Marseilles - squeezed between the sea and the hills – has always prevented the local

authority from building suburbs to house ethnic minorities separately. So this is a city, though still socially divided, in which people of different races have to mix every day in almost every way.

Proximity helps to reduce hostility, because whether people want to or not they have to use the same transport, the same shops and probably many of the same schools.

Of course, we know that we can't go in for Soviet style social engineering, telling people where to live. Rightly no-one would want or tolerate such an assault on their freedoms. But Marseille shows us that in the long term it is vital that we make it easier for people to share their experiences, even if only for parts of their day or week.

That is why we want to see young people getting together, on the sports field, or in the music studios.

It's why we fund projects like Soft Touch Arts in Leicester who are using the arts to bring together young people who would not otherwise ever meet other.

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.

One of my favourite examples is the Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project (MECOPP) at the Sighthill Day Centre in Edinburgh, which has turned an all-white day centre for elderly people into a multi-racial centre with minimal tensions.

Here, the elderly folk, especially the women found an unusual transcending identity, which far outweighed their differences. No woman, it seems whatever her cultural background believes that there is someone good enough for her son; the ladies in the group I met confessed to a common hatred of their daughters-in-law - after they found they had this in common it hardly mattered whether they wore skirts or saris!

But we want to go beyond isolated examples of good practice.

We want to ensure, for example, 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 think it may be time to reconsider the tyranny of the school catchment areas which allow middle class, mostly white, parents to colonise the best state schools.

### **CRE's Integration Agenda**

As I mentioned earlier, the CRE's agenda for integration involves three key elements – equality, participation and interaction.

This is a three-legged stool. None of these aims can be delivered without the other two. They are utterly interdependent.

Moreover, let me repeat: integration does not have to come at the price of bland and ultimately repressive uniformity. Our vision of integration is not the same thing as assimilation.

Integration is a two-way street. The majority accommodates and adopts some of what the minority brings to the party; the minority can be proud of its heritage, even while adapting its ways to be compatible with the majority with whom they now live.

The fact is the British people don't have to be persuaded of the case for integration. All our surveys show that the race equality movement's struggle to win respect for cultural and ethnic diversity has been emphatically won amongst the British people.

But in a multi-ethnic society integration doesn't happen without some creative compromises.

And any such settlement, if we are truly to own it, and stick to it, almost always transcends the law. A law cannot tell us how to behave to each other; it can only provide the framework for our interaction.

Any legislation which attempted to tell us how to treat our neighbours or our work colleagues would be drowned out by shouts of 'nanny state' and 'political correctness gone mad'.

Parliament cannot tell us who to mix with, and the courts cannot compel us to respect someone else's traditions.

This is about changing people's attitudes - and that means everyone's attitudes no matter their cultural background or nationality. It is work that may have to be permitted or supported by legislation – but in the real world, it is work that must go beyond the reach of statute.

What does this mean in practice?

The last serious attempt to prepare properly for a group of foreign migrants, to lay down for their benefit what we are about as a people, and to set out how that was expressed in the way we behave towards each other, came before I was born. In 1942, the US and British government provided each American GI with a document entitled "Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain".

We may no longer have to explain pounds, shillings and pence; or to tell people not to use the word “bloody” in mixed company.

But perhaps it is time for us to be explicit about what that book called “plain, common horse sense: (an) understanding of evident truths” about our way of life.

Truths such as (I’m quoting)

- “The British are reserved, not unfriendly”
- “The British are tough – don’t be misled by the British tendency to be soft-spoken and polite.”

And here’s an important one in a section highlighting the courage and sacrifice of women when under fire, and pointing out that no British woman in that war had ever quit her post or failed in her duty:

- “The British woman officer or NCO can – and often does – give orders to a man private. The man obeys and knows it is no shame...when you see a girl in khaki or air-force blue with a lot of ribbons on her tunic – remember she didn’t get it for knitting more socks than anyone else in Ipswich.”

My point is this: we are a hugely diverse society both in our origins, our behaviour and our beliefs. What we have in common are two things. First an accepted way of treating each other – for example our respect for and acceptance of equality for women, whatever our cultural heritage.

Second, our ways of managing and negotiating our differences. That is the process we call integration. And today, perhaps, there is no more important site of integration than politics.

After all, in a democracy the most important defining characteristic – almost a sacred rite, I’d say, is the act of electing our Parliament and our elected councillors. In that moment we are all equal and we are all the same.

No one's vote is more significant than anyone else's. No cultural difference separates one person's cross from another's. And no barriers of geography, class or ethnicity prevent us from placing that cross where we want to. In a sense, the ballot box is the perfect site of integration.

That is one reason why politics is so important. Because it is where we negotiate our differences across the lines of class, culture, ethnicity and faith.

It should be the arena in which any group to which we belong – racial, political, religious – can find a voice that is as loud and persuasive as any other's.

But, of course, this isn't a perfect democracy. Some of our voices are muffled because they come from places, or speak with accents not immediately recognised by all.

## **Politics is Key**

One of our evident truths is that no one will be part of a society where they have no voice. Under-representation of ethnic minorities in politics undermines the legitimacy of our

democratic system, and weakens our ability to pass and implement socially just laws and policies.

We do have a record number of minority MPs at present - all of 15. Proportionately we should have more than 60. The House of Lords is actually doing slightly better proportionately. Maybe they will help us design better law. But it's not enough.

If we measure the numbers from 1987 when the first minority MPs were elected since the war, we are adding just three new minority members every five years. At this rate, we won't have an ethnically representative House of Commons until the year 2080. None of us in this room will live to see that day; worse still very few of our children will witness it.

When it comes to public appointments between March 2002 and March 2003 the proportion of those appointed who were from ethnic minority backgrounds actually fell from 6.2% to 5.3%.<sup>4</sup>

This trend really has to be reversed, starting at the democratic end.

---

<sup>4</sup> Source: House of Commons Library paper: *Social & General Statistics - Ethnic Minorities in Politics and Government (2004)*

So we, as part of our agenda will be asking political parties to set themselves a simple target in next year's local elections - between them to reverse the decline in the proportion of local councillors who come from ethnic minorities.

It does not concern the CRE what the split between parties is or how they do it within their rules. But unless we can see the mix of our local representatives change it is hard to imagine how our parliamentary diversity will increase. And only if that happens can we have confidence in the promises of commitment to racial equality.

More than that, if we want people from all communities to engage with civic life, we must create outlets inside and outside of conventional politics. A fully enfranchised society requires more people from ethnic minority communities to get involved in the democratic process by voting.

The Electoral Commission and ONS estimated recently that 10% of the population in England and Wales who are eligible to be on the electoral register had failed to register. The level of non-registration is as high as 18 per cent in London and disproportionately high for some ethnic minority communities and young people.

The messages for them are clear:

If you want to influence local decisions that affect you, then you should vote

If you're not on the electoral register, you cannot vote.

Voting is the most important kind of participation – participation in power.

That surely must be the answer to extremists. Terror can give you power. But it's negative power, and it only lasts as long as people fear you.

For progressives there is only one path to true, lasting and irreversible change. When I was a student we used to talk about permanent revolution. I still want it. But after the Berlin Wall came down, after the end of apartheid, after peace in Northern Ireland we now know the real truth. The staging post to that revolution won't be the bomb factory, but the ballot box.

Thank you.

ENDS