Reflections on Race

Rounding off the Runnymede Conference on ‘Cohesion, Diversity, Equality’ on 19 January 2005, Professor Bhikhu Parekh looks ahead.

I would like to share a few thoughts not on the day’s proceedings – although I have views on faith schools, citizenship and so on – but on where we seem to be going in the field of race, and make a few reflections on the Home Secretary and Fiona Mactaggart’s statement on race.

I am very impressed with the Policy Statement. I think it shows enormous commitment. It is fairly comprehensive and it refers not just to what the Home Office should be doing, but what all the major government departments need to do.

I am also impressed with the fact that the statement is very timely, for three reasons.

Although we have made quite a bit of progress on race we still have a long way to go, so a statement of this kind which indicates the direction is greatly to be welcomed. As Trevor Phillips said this morning: we are about to embark on a new wave of immigration, and therefore if we are not going to make the mistakes of 1948 and the 1970s we desperately need a coherent statement of what we should be doing with the new immigrants. And therefore a statement like this is a first proactive intervention in public life by any government, and so I welcome this.

I also welcome it for slightly selfish reasons – not personally but institutionally selfish. The statement articulates a pluralist vision of Britain. Ethnic minorities are recognised not as homogeneous but consisting of different groups with different requirements. Many of the phrases, the ways of thinking, seem to draw so heavily on – or describing it in one term, I would say that the government is thinking of Britain as a ‘community of communities’, an overall partnership with various communities. Therefore if I were to say that the government is thinking of Britain as a community of communities, an overall national community which is made up of communities and derives its vitality from them.

Now, having said how much I welcome the statement of the Secretary of State, I want to share four observations very quickly.

(1) The government rightly intends to place new responsibility on the CRE, such as the responsibility to advise public bodies to promote race equality to monitor and assess their progress and to build a close partnership with public-sector inspectors. The CRE will need not only additional resources but in due course, as it begins to implement the new remit, new powers. So I think we will need to revisit the statement in a year or two to see how the new resources and new powers are being processed.

(2) I was a little surprised that there wasn’t very much – perhaps it was not the function or purpose of this statement – on increasing ethnic minority representation in political and other spheres of our life. We desperately need ethnic minority representation in the House of Commons, the higher echelons of the judiciary and the Civil Service.

It seems that once again we might need to revisit this issue to see what we can do: maybe Trevor Phillips’s idea of all-black or ethnic-minority lists of candidates or, if this is unlawful, other ways in which we can increase the numbers.

Of course Labour has a good record – in the House of Commons or even the House of Lords – but the other parties are lagging behind. We will have to think very seriously about how we increase the representation of ethnic minorities, not in a symbolic way but in terms of certain voices being heard in places where decisions are made.

The panel discussion we’ve just witnessed today was particularly striking as we heard all kinds of views expressed, from different ethnic minority points of view; a kind of critical engagement with different perspectives. This doesn’t happen in the House of Lords or House of Commons in the same way because the percentage of ethnic minority representatives is very small. So we will have to do something to address this very seriously.

And the government is thinking very seriously in terms of public bodies – the statement talks about 30,000 public bodies. Now the concept of public bodies has in fact been the subject of debate in the House of Lords. The BBC is a public body, but what about the media as a whole? And should we not be thinking harder about how to increase the ethnic minority representation in the media?

One of the striking things is that since the media plays such an important role not only in interpreting our public life, in deciding how we relate to each other, but almost in creating an alternative political reality, the question is: are the ethnic minority voices heard effectively in the media? And not just ethnic minority reporters, but in terms of significant columnists, commentators, who as a matter of routine reflect the ethnic minority points of view. Some of this debate about faith schools, incitement to religious hatred – I have yet to see a well-considered ethnic minority series of voices, from different points of view, because we are not all agreed on this, being represented in the media. And I think we will have to visit that fairly soon.

(3) My third point has to do with racist incidents being fairly widespread. I don’t need to bore you with statistics, particularly in Fiona’s presence, who, I think, as a minister, has been extremely sensitive to these questions. Although I think we are beginning to tackle them, the problem remains. You can hardly open your newspaper without reading that some black or ethnic minority person has been beaten up or that a racist incident has taken place.

Although I think the Police are reasonably active in beginning to deal with the problem of creating a cohesive society is not entirely in its own hands. It will require the cooperation of lots of communities. In other words the government is increasingly thinking in terms of partnership with various communities. Therefore if I were to describe it in one term, I would say that the government is thinking of Britain as a community of communities, an overall national community which is made up of communities and derives its vitality from them.

The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report. &amp;#x2013; Since I was associated with that Commission and with that report, I am pleased to see that the government is thinking very seriously in terms of public bodies – the statement talks about 30,000 public bodies. Now the concept of public bodies has in fact been the subject of debate in the House of Lords. The BBC is a public body, but what about the media as a whole? And should we not be thinking harder about how to increase the ethnic minority representation in the media?

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1 Launched at this conference on 19 January, Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society. The Government’s strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion has been produced by the Department of Communities and Local Government, Social Exclusion Unit, Race Equality and Faith and Community Cohesion Unit, Other documents were published alongside this strategy. They include Race Equality in the Public Services, the Summary of Responses to Strength in Diversity, and material on the running of the Runnymede Trust. Further details and copies of the report can be obtained from the Runnymede Trust.

continued to scar our public life, declining in some cases, but sometimes reappearing in different forms. And the situation therefore is that we must continue the momentum. Drastic changes are needed – and how do we do this?

I think it was President Clinton who made a very powerful statement on the occasion of the one million man march in the US when he said that ‘Racism is black man’s burden, and white man’s problem’. In other words, it is something which society cannot allow itself to be relaxed about. It is from the topmost people in society that the lead must continue to be provided and momentum constantly generated. And to provide that kind of momentum the Prime Minister, who is taking a lead, must be even more active in constantly hammering away at some of these issues. I was pleased too that the Queen in her Christmas Day broadcast talked about the celebration of diversity. But these kinds of messages will have to come again and again, so that there is a decisive shift in the public attitude.

Finally, I think it’s not just a question of what the government does, because what the government does depends on the space available to it. I’m a little disappointed that so far as the ethnic minorities are concerned in the last 15–20 years we have not been able to throw up a very vigorous and powerful anti-racist movement. There are all kinds of reasons for this, but in the absence of such a movement as there was in the 1960s and 1970s, two things tend to happen.

- There is no grassroots pressure on government.
- Without this pressure, government tends to be subject to right-wing pressures – the Mail will continue to dictate the agenda. Not that it has done so successfully with this government, but the danger is always there. To counter that danger you need a very powerful anti-racist movement. This is not for the government to do; it is up to us. And I hope that a conference like this can at least seriously give thought to why that kind of anti-racist movement has not sprung up. Not the old kind of anti-racist movement, but one that can arrive at a common minimum programme upon which different groups, in spite of their different requirements, can come together. Without that kind of anti-racist movement, we will not be able to generate political momentum, and the range of choices open to government will remain limited, and the space for manoeuvre constrained.

While we talk on the one hand about what the government could be doing, we should also be thinking about what we could be doing.

### Question Time Panel Session

Immediately after Paul Elliott had completed his presentation, Jeremy Vine led 7 panel members onto the conference stage for a question and answer session in ‘Question Time’ format. The panel members he introduced were:

- Fiona Mactaggart, MP
- Dr Beverly Malone, General Secretary, Royal College of Nursing
- Rita Patel, Director, Belgrave Baheno
- Michelynn Laffèche, Director, Runnymede
- Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain
- Kieran Poynter, Senior Partner, Price Waterhouse Coopers
- Derrick Anderson, CEO, Wolverhampton City Council

A lively debate was kept animated and on the move by Jeremy Vine, who chaired with a deft touch, involving all panellists in the discussions that followed questions submitted in advance of the session. A significant section of the debate was taken up with a discussion of the merits of faith schools, while other topics included integration, Britishness and the value of difference, positive discrimination and positive action, incitement to religious hatred, citizenship and social values, and what contributes to community cohesion. The debate can be read in full on our website [www.runnymedetrust.org].

Panel speakers (pictured clockwise from the top left) are Beverly Malone and Derrick Anderson, Michelynn Laffèche and Kieran Poynter, Iqbal Sacranie with Rita Patel to his left

Jeremy Vine, in the chair, is flanked by Fiona Mactaggart and Iqbal Sacranie