

Groupthink: Can we trust the BBC on immigration?

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Introduction

The BBC is the world's most famous cultural institution, renowned for the quality of its journalism, broadcasting and online services.¹

So wrote Georgina Born in *Uncertain Vision*, her anthropological study of a corporation that, even with increasing competition from the Middle East, Russia and China, still sets the gold standard for news reporting. Trusted around the world – and, despite recent scandals, at home – the BBC is one of the most respected of British brands.

Britain is a country built on great institutions, but the BBC is the one that is most deeply embedded in people's lives: 93 per cent of British people consume some part of Auntie's output every week. This makes it immensely powerful – a near monopoly that accounts for 70 per cent of television news coverage.² It is similarly dominant on the internet and radio.

As a state monopoly, the BBC's influence in British society and beyond is awesome. Not only does it set the cultural and political agenda, but to a great extent it shapes the boundaries of acceptable opinion and public morality in a way that the Church once did. While Britain's newspapers have been rightly criticised for their recent behaviour, it is fair to say that they wield nothing like the cultural power of the BBC, and they enjoy little confidence among the public. By contrast, the BBC acts as a 'gatekeeper' of British public opinion; any opinion on the other side of that gate lies 'beyond the pale'.

There are few subjects as contentious as immigration – or as important. The recently published results of the 2011 Census show that the policies pursued by Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 have led to a demographic change in the country that is proportionately as large as the Anglo-Saxon invasion and that dwarfs anything since.

Opinion polls show these policies to be immensely unpopular. Not only is there overwhelming support for stricter immigration controls, but there is also

a deep divide in society over the extent to which people believe racial and religious diversity has improved life in Britain. Enthusiasts for a diverse, multicultural UK remain something of a minority, with most people feeling ambivalent, and a small number actively hostile.³

Yet it is hard to find those sceptical voices represented on the state broadcasting monopoly.

This report looks at the BBC's coverage of immigration since the election of Tony Blair. It focuses largely on news and current affairs programmes, such as the *Today* programme, *Newsnight* and the *News at Ten*. It covers television, radio and, since it is an increasingly large area of the BBC's power, BBC Online.

As well as specific policies, the report covers issues related to race and multiculturalism, which are interconnected to immigration in diverse ways. Although the focus is on news, some elements of drama serve to illustrate the Corporation's cultural attitude to diversity.

The BBC takes allegations of bias seriously. The purpose of this report is not to 'bash' the Corporation, but to continue the dialogue begun by Dennis Sewell's report on BBC bias, *A Question of Attitude*⁴ – and to ask whether one side of a hugely important debate has been listened to.

The BBC is currently undergoing an impartiality review under Stuart Prebble, who will ask whether 'due weight' has been given to a range of opinion. It is the fifth such review by the BBC Trust, and BBC Chairman Chris Patten has said that it will cover 'Europe, immigration and religion' because 'they are subjects we have had criticism from time to time about' concerning 'breadth of voice issues'.⁵

In July 2011, the then director-general, Mark Thompson, conceded that 'taboo' subjects such as immigration were avoided by the BBC for fear of its appearing too right wing: 'I think there were some years when the BBC, like the rest of the UK media, was very reticent about talking about immigration. There was an anxiety whether or not you might be

playing into a political agenda if you did items about immigration.'⁶

This review also comes after serious questions were raised about the Corporation's handling of the European issue ahead of the currency crisis, which many Eurosceptics felt vindicated them. In the 2011 Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet *Guilty Men*, Peter Osborne argued that the BBC had betrayed its charter commitment and become 'a partisan player in a great national debate'.⁷

The statistics back this up. The Global Britain think tank's Newswatch report for winter 2011 found that, over a period of just under three months, only 0.4 per cent of coverage on the *Today* programme was devoted to the potential benefits of withdrawing from the EU.⁸ Back in 2004, a Centre for Policy Studies report discovered that on the 'big six' BBC news slots, Europhiles were given 61 per cent of coverage and Eurosceptics just 30 per cent.⁹


BBC bias is an old Tory complaint, a cliché even in the 1980s and 1990s. But the issue of bias has become more pressing, partly because Britain has become more fragmented, and not just ethnically. Hence the title of the 2007 BBC impartiality report, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*, which referred to the complexities of avoiding bias in a highly diverse country (the spokes of the wagon wheel representing the various voices of modern Britain).

The Bridcut report, as it is also known, set out 12 'guiding principles' for the BBC, the first being that 'Impartiality is and should remain the hallmark of the BBC.'¹⁰ The BBC defined impartiality as involving: 'a mixture of accuracy, balance, content, distance, evenhandedness, fairness, objectivity, open-mindedness, rigour, self-awareness, transparency and truth'.

It went on:

The continuing changes in British society mean that the parameters of 'normality' and 'extremism' have shifted. Reporting from the

centre ground is often the wrong place to be. Impartiality does not entail equal space for every attitude, but it should involve some space provided that points of view are rationally and honestly held, and all of them are subject to equal scrutiny. It is not the BBC's role to close down debate.

But the question remains: on the most important subject of modern times, is this what happened after 1997? 

1

‘Knowledge Migrants’: Labour’s first term

The period since Tony Blair was first elected has seen the biggest demographic change in modern British history. The population of England and Wales rose by 4 million in a single decade, following a staggering increase in net migration, which topped 300,000 in 2004 alone. By the end of the decade, gross annual migration was running at 600,000. In London, between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of people who identified themselves as white British fell from 58 to 45 per cent, and in two East London boroughs it dropped by up to a third.

This is an extraordinary movement – largely the result of changes to immigration policy at the turn of the century. In the latter years of the first decade of the twenty-first century it became almost a cliché to say that ‘it’s not racist to talk about immigration’; but only a few years earlier people genuinely feared that to speak of immigration matters was to invite just such an accusation.

Those early years of the Blair government were in many ways the high-water mark of politically correct attitudes to race. In 1999 we had the Macpherson Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence – a process given almost entirely uncritical coverage by the BBC. And the following year came the government-sponsored Parekh Report which defined ‘Britishness’ as an alien concept for many, for whom it had ‘systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations’.¹¹

During the early Blair years, asylum was an issue of great concern. There was a rise in asylum applications in Britain from just over 30,000 in 1997 to 75,000 in 2000.¹² Some newspaper coverage had become quite critical of asylum seekers, many of whom were regarded as economic migrants, and the BBC was concerned that this criticism might escalate into hostility. On 22 February 1999, it ran a report headlined: ‘Immigration debate must not descend into racism’.¹³

How does one measure bias? Impartiality is in the ear of the beholder, and when Conservatives identify what they perceive to be a slanted tone to

BBC reporting, almost by definition only a Conservative would notice. On the other hand, one can to some extent quantify certain aspects of reporting. One of these would be the angle the report takes (e.g. a BBC report on 22 April 2001 entitled ‘Tory asylum lock-ups “impractical”’ stated that ‘Conservative plans to detain all asylum seekers arriving in the UK have been dismissed as “impractical” by the government.’).¹⁴ Other aspects would include the space devoted to each side, the number of people speaking, and the amount of sympathy one is expected to feel.

A look at news reports from television, radio and BBC Online during the period 1997–2001 shows certain features that appear in most (if not all) reports:

- an implied suspicion that Conservatives were using the issue for cynical, electoral advantage (something not suggested of their opponents);
- the idea that raising the issue could lead to violence against refugees (something that never materialised); and
- a sympathetic, personalised focus on asylum seekers, but not on natives.

There was also a marked imbalance in the number of voices on each side: not only were there two pro-immigration parties to outnumber the Conservatives, but there were additional pro-immigration voices provided by pressure groups and charities.

On top of all this, there was a tendency in reports of opposition initiatives or statements for the government response to be given the lead slot, whereas news reports on government proposals were not angled towards the opposition’s viewpoint. This perhaps reflects Labour’s greater ability to manipulate the media during this period, as well as a willingness on the part of Labour MPs to court headlines by making accusations of racism.

By way of illustration, a March 2000 story from the BBC website opened:

Home Secretary Jack Straw has warned that Britain’s record on racism leaves ‘no grounds for

complacency’. MPs were debating government proposals to tighten up anti-racism legislation in the wake of the report by Sir William Macpherson into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence.¹⁵

The government proposals for more equality laws were partially welcomed by Conservative Ann Widdecombe, and the report quoted the Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman, Simon Hughes. It concluded:

But former Tory frontbencher Shaun Woodward, who defected to Labour last year, criticised the Conservative Party over its attitude to racism, saying some MPs would use ‘discrimination for short term political gain’. He said: ‘It should be condemned and not championed by the leader of the opposition. The idea of using immigration to hurt, to use discrimination as a weapon to stir up prejudice and thereby secure votes simply beggars belief.’

Presenting two people against one suggests that the two are mainstream; three against one is a consensus, especially when the last word is given to someone accusing the minority party of having nefarious motives.

Another common theme was that, by mentioning the subject of immigration, the Tories were ‘whipping up [the] anti-asylum vote’. A report by a UN refugee agency that ‘strongly criticised the Tory local election manifesto, saying it plays into the hands of racists and xenophobes’ was covered on BBC radio, television and online.¹⁶

A television bulletin showed 50 National Front supporters threatening to march against asylum seekers in Kent, and then cut to a UN spokesman saying the Conservatives had ‘lowered the whole asylum debate’.¹⁷ In a radio report Jack Straw was heard saying that the Tory language was ‘reminiscent of a nastier age’, and he accused Ann Widdecombe

of coming close to playing the race card.¹⁸

The BBC’s view of the issue is well illustrated by the 18 April 2000 edition of *Newsnight*. The BBC correspondent Mark Mardell called the content of a speech Conservative leader William Hague had made that day on immigration ‘a more hardline policy’. He added that there were fears that Hague could leave the ‘middle ground consensus on immigration’.¹⁹

The Conservatives had raised the issue of asylum in a local council election leaflet distributed in Thurrock, a largely working-class area of Essex. The programme featured interviews with two locals – one of them a highly inarticulate man in a car – and a doctor from Afghanistan. Also interviewed were a Liberal Democrat councillor (who called the Tory literature ‘distasteful and ... verging on the defamatory’) and a Labour councillor (who said the Conservative leaflet was ‘dangerous’, just one more ‘extremist’ policy).

Hague had denied being racist, but Mardell quoted a ‘senior’ Tory strategist as saying: ‘It’s about winning 50 seats back at the next general election, not about the long-term future of the Conservative Party.’ Ex-Tory Shaun Woodward called the leaflet a ‘right-wing lurch ... trying to identify the prejudices and the fears that those people who actually voted for the Referendum Party hold dear’. Finally, there was a policy expert, ex-politician Phillip Oppenheim, who called it a bit of populism, a ‘tactical issue’; he was of the opinion that, come the election, asylum would be forgotten – the ninth or tenth most important issue.

The accompanying BBC Online story, headlined ‘Asylum camp plan attacked’, stated: ‘The government has attacked Conservative leader William Hague over his proposal to detain asylum seekers rather than let them live in the community.’²⁰ It quoted Jack Straw (who called the Tories ‘cruel’ and ‘cynical’), the immigration minister Barbara Roche and Simon Hughes. Thus the BBC Online report addressed the story from the Labour perspective

(featuring three voices to one). Meanwhile the *Newsnight* report clearly gave the impression that, in the hunt for votes, the Tories were irresponsibly winding up racial hatred over an issue that didn't really matter to the people of Thurrock. In total five informed speakers made this point, while presumably no one could be found to argue that asylum was a legitimate source of discontent. (That nobody from the Conservative Party would appear on the programme is not the BBC's fault.)

So what about the people of Thurrock? The 2011 Census showed that the town had undergone dramatic demographic change, with the black population of the area increasing by 1,500 per cent in just a decade, making it the fourteenth most African constituency in Britain.²¹ In an area that, until recently, had experienced very little immigration, minorities now account for almost a fifth of the population. As a result, the BNP came from nowhere at the start of the century to win 7.9 per cent of the vote in the 2010 election. By contrast, Labour, which had won 63 per cent of the vote in 1997, was down to just 36.6 per cent in 2010; the party lost the seat to the Tories for the first time since 1987.

Does it matter? If the demography of Thurrock follows that of areas like Barking, just a few miles to the west, then within a few years the majority of the people who lived there in 2001 (and their descendants) will have left the area, following changes of which they strongly disapproved, but which they were powerless to prevent.

On 18 April 2000, using a rather aggressive tone, *Today* presenter Jim Naughtie asked Tory Chairman Michael Ancram: 'How worried are you, inside yourself, that this kind of debate will start to climb up the political agenda and the inevitable result – and we had a reference to Germany earlier – that racial tension will increase?'²²

Later in the programme, Simon Hughes was able to repeat his view that 'I think they are playing

this particular issue for their own party motives.'²³ Never during the period under consideration here were the motives of the Liberal Democrats called into question.

The BBC, while quite properly concerned about any potential violence against refugees, appeared to treat the residents of those areas where asylum seekers were concentrated as troublesome 'nimby' types. Following an incident in August 1999, during which 11 people were injured – some of them stabbed – in a fight between locals and refugees in Kent,²⁴ the BBC's immediate concern was not that the lives of local people could be disrupted, but that 'right-wing extremists' could take advantage. A television report about the Kent incident looked at the problem from the point of view of an Afghan family that was leaving Dover because of the violence.²⁵ The coverage of the refugees was sympathetic, and it featured talking heads from the immigration charity Migrant Helpline and from Asylum Aid. It is right to humanise refugees, but the refugee perspective was the only one offered.

On 19 April 2000, the Tories were again accused on Radio 4 of racism, with Ann Widdecombe aggressively questioned and once again attacked over the use of the word 'bogus'. 'But that is exactly the kind of language that people say condemns all asylum seekers or refugees', said the presenter.²⁶ The accompanying BBC Online news story quoted Widdecombe, but it also included a spokesman for the prime minister saying that William Hague's plans for a shake-up of the asylum process were further evidence that he was 'stirring up' the issue. It likewise cited Jack Straw and the Refugee Council (which criticised the proposals as 'draconian and expensive').²⁷

As it turned out, asylum would become less of an issue as the government turned to the attractions of economic migration. The first sign of this came on the BBC's website in July 2000: 'Migrants "benefit UK economy"'.²⁸

The story went on:

Home Office Minister Barbara Roche has used a conference speech in Paris on Friday to put forward the new ideas and she told delegates that 'immigrants have had a very positive impact on the societies they join'.

Speaking before her speech Ms Roche denied the move amounted to a shift in government policy on the politically fraught issue of asylum seekers.

The idea that immigrants benefited the country went unchallenged.

In September 2000, BBC television news reported on the 'emotionally charged' issue of immigration, claiming that more immigrants would encourage the 'knowledge economy'.²⁹ This, it was to turn out, would herald the start of a dramatic acceleration in immigration under the Labour government, which relaxed the rules on work permits. Of course, no one outside the government was to know that (the same was true even of those in charge, who did not seem to be entirely sure what they were doing).

The report featured a potted history of immigration, which it suggested had been halted by Enoch Powell (although in fact serious immigration restrictions were introduced in 1961, when public opinion began to harden and it was agreed that there was no economic benefit to be derived). 'It's the economy which is now driving government to reconsider the rules', the reporter told viewers, over footage of a nurse at work. It suggested that there was a need for a 'faster, more open system'. It then interviewed an IT consultant and a business leader, both of whom called for more immigration. '[The government] wants to get the message across – that workers here are an asset, not a threat to Britain.'

There was no counter-argument. The implication was clear: immigration is in our interests, and it's only raw public prejudice that is preventing it.

The accompanying BBC Online report claimed:

The information technology sector alone is forecast to need 250,000 people over the next decade. There are also shortages in areas such as engineering, healthcare, teaching and catering and agriculture. Earlier this month, the NHS announced it would be drafting in nurses from China in order to meet staff shortfalls. Britain faces a demographic time-bomb, with a quarter of the population expected to be over 65-years-old by 2050, Ms Roche is expected to tell the IPPR [Institute for Public Policy Research].³⁰

The report covered immigration minister Barbara Roche's appearance on the *Today* programme, where she told Ed Stourton: 'We do live now in a global economy where skilled people are at a premium and it's not always a buyers' market.'

She concluded: 'This country is a country of migrants and we should celebrate the multi-cultural, multi-racial nature of our society, and the very positive benefits that migration throughout the centuries has brought.'

Although the BBC Online story did say that the Conservatives were opposed to any relaxation of the immigration regulations and instead highlighted the need to train the British workforce properly – 'something Labour argues is already a priority' – the minister's assertions that Britain needed nurses and that it was a nation of immigrants both went unchallenged, even though both were highly contentious: a 2004 paper reported that Britain then had 100,000 fully qualified nurses not currently working in the profession.³¹

A day or two later, the BBC website again reported on the speech that Roche had by then given at the IPPR, in which she called for an 'immigration rethink' and warned of a 'demographic time-bomb'.³² Ann Widdecombe was quoted in response, but the last say went to the Professional Contractors Group, which called on Roche to relax a law that made it

harder for IT workers to come to Britain.

Meanwhile, another television report on the Roche speech featured a nurse from the Philippines and a friendly IT employer, who were both in favour of more migration. According to the reporter, computer experts and nurses were needed, 'and that may require a very different approach to immigration'. No dissenting voices were heard.³³

The business benefits of immigration were again highlighted in February 2001, when *Newsnight* reported on 'the changing face of Ireland'. Among those interviewed was a gentleman from the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, who said:

We do need people to come here, with high, medium and low skills. In society generally, this is a new issue. I'd be very concerned that Ireland would not be open and tolerant, as one would expect ... There is a view emerging and there is some evidence emerging that there are quite a degree of racist tensions beginning to develop in Ireland. From a business perspective, that could be extremely damaging.³⁴

The report then quoted an African migrant: 'In every ten black people, you will see six who have been racially attacked or been the victim of racially motivated incidents.'

That is quite a serious allegation that would surprise most visitors to Ireland. Why was it not challenged?

Tory race rows

By the beginning of 2001, the Tories' chances of winning the upcoming election were somewhere between slim and non-existent. However, they were undoubtedly damaged further by the 'race row', which was extensively covered by the BBC in the weeks running up to the vote.

The trouble arose after an MP, John Townend, claimed that 'Commonwealth immigration' had undermined Britain's 'homogenous Anglo-Saxon

society' and said that Enoch Powell had been right in his pessimistic forecasts about its impact.³⁵ The row was given extensive coverage on the BBC: *Newsnight* of 28 March reported that the Tory's race remarks recalled Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, while BBC News Online's political correspondent recalled 'a series of incidents in which Tory MPs and local activists have been accused of racism'.³⁶

The BBC devoted a huge amount of coverage to this story – out of all proportion to its importance. Townend's comments were indeed controversial and perhaps inflammatory, but they were not illegitimate. The comment about a 'homogenous society' is clearly contentious and contains language that is perhaps alarming to some; but these views are shared by very many licence fee-payers (indeed, according to several polls, by around half the population). They are not obscure, extreme views, yet the BBC clearly presented them as evidence of thought-crime that needed to be extinguished, rather than as an opportunity for honest debate.

The story was covered across several bulletins. A BBC television news report in March 2001 stated that it had 'unmistakable echoes of the late Enoch Powell'. It added: 'Some have accused the Tory leader of choosing his own words unwisely'.³⁷ Simon Hughes was shown blaming the Tories for the problems. Townend himself was interviewed on the *Today* programme, as was Conservative Francis Maude, who faced an extremely hostile interviewer, and was cowed into saying: 'We don't have and never have had – or not for a thousand years – a homogenous Anglo-Saxon population here. We have an extremely rich mix of ethnic backgrounds, which has been enriched ... and this is part of what makes Britain special and wonderful'.³⁸

The BBC also linked the racism issue with 'Mr Hague's controversial speech to his party's spring conference in Harrogate in which he spoke of Labour turning Britain into a foreign country'.³⁹ This was a link made several times during the BBC's coverage of the row, during which time any

proposals designed to reduce immigration were usually referred to as 'controversial', 'divisive' or as 'whipping up emotions'.

While all this was going on, much coverage was given to a 3 April 2001 story about Britain being criticised by the UN for its apparent racism. BBC Online ran with the headline: 'UK attacked over refugee "racism"'.⁴⁰ It began:

Britain has been accused of being racist and intolerant in its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. A report from the Council of Europe's racism commission says that a 'xenophobic' attitude is evident in the media, political debate and government policy.

A television news report on the story featured interviews with a daffodil grower, who wanted immigrants to be allowed to help harvest his perishable crop, and with the author of the Council of Europe report, Eva Asmussen. The news report went on to point out that the 'British press is singled out for intolerance and inflammatory coverage'. In defence, Barbara Roche said the report had 'made some very serious errors'. Nevertheless, the journalist said, it maintained that 'politicians should send a more positive message'. She concluded that 'most [migrants] appear to want to work'.⁴¹

A later news broadcast said that 'the report criticises the whole tone' of the political debate, which 'aggravates the climate of racism and xenophobia'. The reporter signed off by highlighting the report's recommendation that the government 'address institutional racism in the police force'. No dissenting voice was heard.⁴² The report was also given coverage on the *Today* programme.

On 18 April, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook went on the offensive, accusing the Tories of racism.⁴³ This story was featured on radio and television news. (It was covered by Tim Finch, a BBC reporter who later worked for the Refugee Council, became chair of Refugee Week and then joined the IPPR. He is

also a trustee of Asylum Aid and the Housing and Migration Network.)

A television report began: 'The Tory leadership's tough stance on asylum seekers has, according to the foreign secretary, helped to fuel racist attitudes. One Conservative MP recently warned that immigrants were threatening Britain's homogenous Anglo-Saxon society.' The BBC reporter warned that 'this most sensitive of issues will be dragged into the [election] campaign'.⁴⁴

BBC Online gave coverage both to Cook's claims that 'the British are not a race' and to Michael Ancram's defence, although the Tory chairman agreed that Britain had been multicultural 'right from the start of our history and we always will be'.⁴⁵ However, as in almost all BBC coverage of the affair, the final say was given to Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman, who attacked the Tories: 'It is true that William Hague's Harrogate speech gave a green light to more racist attitudes in the Tory party – and he is bright enough to have known it.'

The race row continued, with television coverage on 19 April featuring Ancram repeating 'we've always been a multicultural society' and a *News at One* bulletin with Cook stating: 'What is required is not just toleration; what is required is ... to welcome those people who have come to Britain.' Any suggestion that 'foreign doctors ... put lives at risk' was offensive. And Cook went on: 'the strength of our country is its diversity'. The foreign secretary was given an easy ride, with the interviewer saying of Anglo-Saxon society: 'speaking as a Welshman [it] is nonsense'.⁴⁶

The row was partly kept alive by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), which called on MPs to sign a pledge not to make race an election issue – a pledge that three Tories refused to sign. This fact featured in a BBC Online story, in which the Tories rejected Cook's claim that the Conservative leader was to blame for controversial statements on race by Tory members.⁴⁷ Once again the final word was

given to the Liberal Democrats. The television news report that evening covered the race row from South London: for the people there, 'living in a cultural melting pot ... is a fact of life ... People basically get on with it.'⁴⁸

The following day, Radio 4 reported that the three Conservative MPs had refused to sign the pledge because 'they feel the CRE is a ... proxy for the Labour Party'.⁴⁹ On the *Today* programme, John Gummer told presenter John Humphrys: 'You're trying to get this whole issue, as if signing or not signing [the pledge] has anything to do with whether you're racist or not racist.'⁵⁰

On 21 April 2001, BBC television news described 'Tory disarray' over the pledge, because some MPs had refused to sign.⁵¹ Another reporter suggested that other parties would be challenging the Tories to 'explain why, if their party has no room for racism, why they have a problem with a straightforward declaration stating so'.⁵² This reflects the party's 'ambivalent' attitude to race, he suggested.

The story dragged on. BBC television news reported that there was 'genuine bewilderment' in multi-ethnic Tottenham over why the Tories were refusing to sign. Three members of the public were shown criticising the Conservatives.⁵³ The Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy blamed the Tories for racism, with their 'highly irresponsible' talk of 'this country turning into a foreign land'. Cook accused Hague of causing racism. Ann Widdecombe was quoted, and then the final word went to Jack Straw, who said that 'Labour and Liberal Democrats ... are united on the issue of race'. The report featured or quoted six anti-Tory voices to one Tory.

The CRE pledge failed because of criticism from prominent Asians, such as businessman and philanthropist (and Labour supporter) Lord Paul. When a BBC reporter suggested to him that 'it is about the fear of inciting the majority community', he replied: 'People don't go and change their mind on the basis of pledges.'⁵⁴

In another news bulletin, Dr Raj Chandran, formerly of the Commission for Racial Equality, criticised the body for playing politics and for the 'cynical way they've chosen to make race an issue'.⁵⁵ He asked why Labour had to make the country out to be more racist than it was: 'I am safe ... We are British and we want to be safe, and be looked after by the majority whites.' He was, he said, the last Tory in the CRE, which 'has become a wing of the Labour Party'.

From that point, the government sought to draw back. By Monday, 23 April, BBC Online was reporting 'Government plays down race row'.⁵⁶ As was increasingly the case as the Blair/Campbell era wore on and as the public grew more and more cynical, the 'story' became more about the spinning of the story than about the issue itself.

But the row blew up again on television on 27 April, when John Townend opened his mouth once more and Lord Taylor of Warwick called on him to be expelled from the party. Townend said that multiculturalism was a bad idea, and called for English to be made the 'number one language' in Bradford.⁵⁷ On 30 April, Andrew Marr and a reporter were shown chasing the Tory MP, demanding an apology. When it came, the BBC reported, the apology 'closed the door on old skeletons. Voters of every shape and colour will hope so too.'⁵⁸

This was a nice narrative. The problem was that most people – even a very large proportion of Labour voters – had some sympathy for the tune Townend was playing, if perhaps not for the singers. The comfortable (rather Hollywood-style) narrative of the old bigot coming to see the error of his ways was all rather misleading.

That would have been the end of the story, except that a few days later another MP, Laurence Robertson, said that John Townend's comments were 'basically true'. Edward Heath was interviewed during the row, and the presenter asked incredulously: 'Really, you believe that your party is *not* in favour ... of helping to build a multicultural Britain?'⁵⁹

Norman Tebbit was interviewed on the *Today* programme:


It stemmed from the refusal to allow a rational debate on these issues. No one can speak about them without a combination of Alastair Campbell and the race relations industry and the government media accusing them of being racist ... With every respect to John Townend, he was muddled over race, over what constitutes ... a state ... muddled over whether we live in a multi-racial or a multi-ethnic society or a multicultural one ... And as soon as you begin to debate these things, you're accused of racism for merely mentioning it. It's quite absurd.⁶⁰

There is a difference between a multi-ethnic and a multicultural society, Tebbit pointed out: 'I don't know of any happy multicultural societies.'

But the story dragged on, featuring again and again on television news, Radio 4 and BBC Online.⁶¹ It culminated in Robertson being forced to walk past reporters after being humiliated by Hague.

The BBC's focus throughout this row, which even had its own infographic on the website, was on the political damage to William Hague and on the outrage it caused. The issue of whether the British are a 'race' was dealt with in a BBC Online feature on 20 April 2001, which pointed out our long history of immigration and concluded: 'Certainly then, the notion of racial purity among the British is a fallacy, and our multiculturalism dates back to the Dark Ages and beyond.'⁶² (It is *not* a fallacy; it is a straw man – no one suggested it!) The other contentious issue – Britain's homogeneity – was glossed over. Incidentally, Wiki Answers, for instance, has this to say: 'A homogeneous society is such a society where most of the people share the same type of cultures, values, language, ethnicity and religious system.'⁶³ In which case, England was clearly homogeneous until comparatively recently.

More importantly, there was little room for discussion of John Townend's comments on the

state policy of multiculturalism and the issue of the English language in places like Bradford. It would later be made crystal clear that this was an issue that should have been addressed. 

2

The Integration Debate: Labour's second term (2001–05)

In 2001, Labour won a second, historic landslide victory, although cynicism had set in and turn-out had fallen to below 60 per cent. Immigration was accelerating, and public opinion was already starting to turn hostile.

That summer there were riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, and the Cantle Report that followed in December would suggest that there was a growing problem with segregation in northern towns.⁶⁴ Following the riots, integration and Britishness would become key issues of concern to politicians. The debate opened on 13 July 2001, when Labour MP Ann Cryer called for English language tests for immigrants.⁶⁵ The story was picked up by the *Today* programme, which interviewed both Cryer and a Bradford Conservative, who argued that segregation was the problem, not language.^{66,67}

Cryer had been made aware of some of the abuse suffered by young Asian women in her constituency. As Chris Mullin later revealed in his diaries,⁶⁸ many Labour MPs had serious concerns about issues related to immigration, but were worried about being branded racist. But Cryer had decided to speak out. A disarming and honest woman, the media treated her as such (although the fact that she was a Labour MP may have made her criticism of multiculturalism more palatable).

David Goodhart, author of *The British Dream: Successes and failures of post-war immigration*, has this to say about BBC coverage of the subject:

There has undoubtedly been, if not a pro-immigration bias, certainly a hostility to anti-immigration feeling or scepticism about large-scale immigration. I was a great beneficiary of the BBC prejudice because as public opinion began to turn very hostile in the early 2000s – they realised they had to reflect the hostility but didn't like most of the Conservative opponents – as a centre-left sceptic I was a respectable critic and therefore much in demand.

Things have improved a lot in recent years, and there is much less liberal bias. I have made two *Analysis* programmes on the subject of both immigration and race, and there was no anxiety or squeamishness as I said some pretty un-PC things.⁶⁹

On 26 October 2001, it was announced that immigrants were to take citizenship classes, and on 9 December Radio 4 and BBC Online reported that immigrants 'should try to feel British'.⁷⁰ Home Secretary David Blunkett urged people from ethnic minorities to develop a 'sense of belonging' in Britain.

The BBC Online report treated Blunkett's comments harshly. Charles Kennedy was quoted as saying that, with the 'delicate situation of race relations in the country', his 'remarks ... can be taken, given the language he used ... in a way that is not at all helpful'. The piece also quoted Oldham's deputy mayor, Rhiad Ahmed, who said: 'I can visualise BNP putting up election literature at the next local elections, quoting these words from the home secretary.' Manawar Jan-Khan, a 'community leader' in Bradford, called Blunkett's comments a 'red herring', because more focus was needed on racism. No one was quoted speaking in Blunkett's support.

The accompanying television report was fairly balanced. It quoted David Blunkett ('building social cohesion is a two-way street') and a Home Office minister, Lord Rooker, who said that young people were coming for marriage purposes without a word of English.⁷¹ The *Today* programme also had balanced coverage, with Manawar Jan-Khan of the Manningham Residents' Association saying that the issue was 'exclusion and racism', and Ann Cryer echoing Blunkett's claim that diversity, not separation, was the way forward.^{72,73}

Early in February 2002, the Home Office announced a 'shake-up' of immigration: 'People applying to become British citizens will face much

tougher tests, under far-reaching new proposals.⁷⁴ Exams would be introduced to test applicants' English and they would have to swear an oath of allegiance at a formal ceremony. BBC television news included a response from Nick Hardwick of the Refugee Council and from Lord Dholakia of the Commission for Racial Equality. The latter was very critical: 'I don't think it is the job of the Home Office to try and interfere in the personal arrangements of individuals.'⁷⁵ There was no response from the right.

Gurbux Singh of the CRE also went on television,⁷⁶ and Blunkett appeared on *Today* to defend his comments. John Humphrys asked about Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test' – his now-famous question about the loyalty of second-generation immigrants that caused such outrage in liberal circles.⁷⁷ But Radio 4 also responded to Blunkett's plans by inviting along two independent voices – a spokesman for the UK Refugee Council and veteran Labour MP Tony Benn.

During his contribution, Benn said that the plans were a revival of nationalism and that this would destroy the diversity of the world. No opinion from the other side of the debate was offered.

Meanwhile BBC Online quoted criticism from Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Parliament, who accused the home secretary of 'racist language'.⁷⁸ There was criticism, too, from a human rights lawyer and a Labour peer, while support came from Ann Cryer and a Sikh spokesman.

On Radio 4, Sha Sood, a human rights lawyer, accused the government of 'superimposing views on communities'. On the subject of forced marriages, she said 'the figures are a handful'.⁷⁹ Incidentally, this last claim is questionable: in 2012, the new Forced Marriage Unit dealt with 1,485 cases, 80 of them involving children aged under 15 years.⁸⁰

What was lacking in this whole debate was the argument that *Britain* – rather than individuals or the representatives of minority communities – has the right to choose who enters the country.

Until Labour abolished the 'primary purpose rule' in 1997, it had been difficult to bring over spouses from certain countries; yet within just five years the argument in favour of such restrictions was no longer even being made. Just as with the Home Office's proposal for citizenship classes in October 2001, Conservative voices were totally absent from the debate about immigration and identity; Blunkett and Cryer were cast as the voices of the right.

Blunkett came in for heavy criticism again in April 2002 after he used the word 'swamping' in reference to the large number of asylum seekers in some areas. The BBC Online piece linked his comments to the success of the far right in France (Jean-Marie Le Pen had come second in the presidential race just three days previously). It also quoted from Diane Abbott's appearance on Radio 4's *World at One*, where she had described his use of the word as 'unfortunate': 'We are talking about children, not sewage.'⁸¹

A television report at the time opened with the phrase 'Faces of Britain, 2002' and went on to interview a teacher, who said that asylum seekers bring 'richness' to the community.⁸² 'Swamping is a provocative word with a history which angers some Labour MPs', Andrew Marr told viewers. Diane Abbott chipped in to say that Blunkett was 'appeasing white voters'. Marr went on: 'All parties are aware of the background of rising anti-immigrant extremism in Europe.' Also on the programme were the Conservative Oliver Letwin, who was vaguely supportive of Labour, and the Liberal Democrats' Simon Hughes, who said that anyone who thought we couldn't cope with immigration was 'misleading the public'.

The following day (25 April), the swamping remarks received further coverage, with CRE Chairman Gurbux Singh saying Blunkett's words were 'hugely emotive'.⁸³ On 26 April, Blunkett appeared on Radio 4's *Today* programme to defend himself, saying: 'I could have used "overwhelmed"

or “overburdened” because the dictionary definition is exactly the same.⁸⁴

One might say that he was being rather disingenuous, since three words can have the same definition, yet carry different tones. But Blunkett went on: ‘the idea that a word becomes unusable ... is ridiculous’. He also claimed that people had rung him up to say that they had given the BBC positive quotes about him, but these had all been cut from its coverage.

The Tories faced another race row in May, after backbencher Ann Winterton made a racist joke (one so old that it was probably told about the Huguenots!).⁸⁵ The drama unfolded on television news bulletins over two days, and the BBC website helpfully illustrated the story with a feature on ‘String of Tory race gaffes’ (alongside a picture of Enoch Powell).⁸⁶ Lord Taylor of Warwick, the Conservative Party’s first black peer, popped up on the *Today* programme to say: ‘Simply sacking Ann Winterton is like putting a sticking plaster over a wound.’⁸⁷

And on the *News at One*, the National Assembly Against Racism’s Kumar Murshid (who went on to become Ken Livingstone’s adviser on race, before joining the Respect Party) talked about ‘very successful migrant communities here’, but said that it was ‘a source of concern that such a level of demonisation of asylum seekers and refugees persists’. He spoke of a ‘new emerging anti-Muslim hysteria’ and added: ‘Britain does have a history of ... colonialism that was predicated on racism.’ No opposing viewpoint was offered.⁸⁸

On 20 May, BBC Online carried the reaction from the race relations industry: ‘Race groups are blaming government immigration policy for some of the negative perceptions highlighted in a BBC News Online survey. The survey showed that 47% of white people felt immigration had harmed British society.’⁸⁹

The BBC Online story quoted representatives of the National Union of Refugee Organisations,

Asylum Aid and the 1990 Trust (a race relations group), who claimed variously that politicians made refugees scapegoats and that healthcare would collapse without minorities. The piece also quoted Habib Rahman of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, who said that public support for government plans for English tests was ‘worrying’; he added that those unable to learn the language would be ‘deprived of their rights’ (the assumption being presumably that immigration is a right). No response was given to these four negative reactions.

What is noticeable about the coverage here is that the BBC did not even consider the possibility that the 47 per cent of white Britons who felt immigration had been detrimental could even have a legitimate view that should be considered. They were simply wrong.

At this time, BBC television news carried a highly personalised report about an Asian woman with a young family. She was quoted as saying that racism had got worse, and her view was backed up by two other women. Racism was shown to be a ‘one-way street’.⁹⁰

On 27 May, the results of an ICM poll for a major BBC News Online series on race relations in the UK were reported, with the claim that Labour ‘must do more on racism’. There were quotes from the Home Office and the CRE.⁹¹

On 19 June 2002, BBC Online carried a special feature on ‘migrant myths’:

In the second of a BBC News Online series on Europe and immigration, Sheila Barter looks at how the facts of the debate are being lost under a wave of misinformation.

Public concern about European immigration has found unprecedented expression in the ballot box, propelling right and far-right parties to success in country after country.

But now migration experts are warning that Europe is missing the point – with the reality of the continent’s migrant needs clouded by misinformation and fear.

Separating myth from reality is not easy, but the idea of the scrounging, bogus asylum seeker, is among the common misconceptions, say researchers ...

And as lessons go unlearned, the immigration debate is increasingly conducted in a climate of hysteria. Racism, political opportunism, misinformation, media mischief-making and sheer cowardice all play their part, along with genuine concern.

‘Immigration is an explosive issue, but politicians will simply not address the big taboos,’ says Jonas Widgren of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), an inter-governmental organisation with the task of investigating sustainable migration policies.

‘Number one is that immigration will continue, and is a fact of life, especially with the demographic changes ahead.

‘And number two is that migration will be very beneficial in the next 50–100 years, especially if we are going to keep Europe competitive.’⁹²

However laudable its intentions may be, a feature like this – which presents only one side of the argument – is propaganda. The views of the unanimously pro-migration interviewees blend seamlessly with the editorial, so that it is hard to see where the advocacy ends and the journalism begins. The arguments made for more immigration appear to be simply the voice of the BBC.

Migration Watch

A slight shift in the BBC’s coverage of immigration came with the launch of Migration Watch UK in late 2001. This think tank generated news stories that were critical of immigration, and, in the shape of its chairman, Sir Andrew Green, it offered the BBC a ‘go-to man’ who could be relied on to criticise mass immigration.

Sir Andrew would become a regular talking head on BBC radio and television, but by his own account he was initially not entirely welcomed by some BBC presenters, whose response he describes as ‘hostile’. ‘For the first five years the first question was “was it racist to talk about immigration?” Their approach to the whole subject was not to talk about it, which is still their approach.’ He describes how, on one occasion, a bad-tempered edition of the *Today* programme ended with presenter James Naughtie shouting: ‘I told you we shouldn’t have had that man on.’⁹³

The group’s first big splash came in August 2002, with a warning about an immigrant influx in the ‘next decade’.⁹⁴ Keith Best, chief executive of the Immigration Advisory Service, described this as ‘scaremongering’. ‘Migration Watch claims to be a responsible organisation ... but I’m afraid it’s a little naïve to think that the tabloid press won’t pick on these figures and use them to try to scare the population witless’, he told the *Today* programme, having been asked by the presenter whether Migration Watch’s figure was ‘an attempt to scare people’.⁹⁵

The BBC Online story featured criticism from Best and from Derek Betts, case work director for the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, who rejected Migration Watch’s findings, saying: ‘What this does is give the far right ammunition to propagate their own particular views.’ Also critical of Migration Watch were Rosie Winterton, parliamentary secretary in the Lord Chancellor’s Office, and a Home Office spokesman. In total, four different antagonistic views were offered in

the BBC Online piece.⁹⁶ This sort of ratio is quite common in BBC reporting of immigration stories.

On 10 February 2005, BBC Online covered a report by Migration Watch, which warned that 'White Britons are increasingly moving from London boroughs with large ethnic minority populations.'⁹⁷ Much of the article was devoted to two responses to the report – one from Keith Best, who called Migration Watch 'past masters at taking a few inadequate statistics from the Home Office and then extrapolating them into the stratosphere'; the other from Rhian Beynon of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, who said they 'are not helpful to a good climate of race relations and we question the analysis'.

In January 2003, BBC Online described Conservative asylum plans as 'drastic' and the 'most draconian peacetime asylum laws and some of the toughest in Europe' (the historical analogy is meaningless since, until air travel, the number of refugees would have been far smaller and so there would not have been a requirement for such 'drastic' legislation).⁹⁸

In November 2003, David Blunkett announced a shift in migration policy.⁹⁹ This led Jeremy Paxman to ask sarcastically on *Newsnight* whether the home secretary was worried that there weren't enough migrants in the country. Blunkett replied that current immigration was permanently sustainable.¹⁰⁰

Although immigration was about to rise even further, an important shift in the debate occurred in April 2004, when Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, suggested that 'multiculturalism' hinted at separateness and had ceased to be useful in modern Britain.

Multiculturalism had come to mean not just the existence of different religions, races and cultures in one country, but their official recognition – and in some ways state sponsorship of religion via community leaders. As the decade wore on, it became increasingly clear to many that it was a failure.

Something of the mindset of the BBC

establishment can be garnered from the panel that BBC Online chose to discuss Phillips' statement.¹⁰¹ It included Labour Party adviser Sir Bernard Crick, who said: 'Britishness does not mean a single culture. Integration is the co-existence of communities and unimpeded movement between them, it is not assimilation.' Also featured was Lord Parekh, author of *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, who suggested that 'Multiculturalism basically means that no culture is perfect or represents the best life and that it can therefore benefit from a critical dialogue with other cultures.' Meanwhile Karen Chouhan of the 1990 Trust raised the issue of 'social exclusion and racism'.

Only Ruth Lea of the Centre for Policy Studies offered the mildest deviation from orthodoxy, when she defined multiculturalism as 'diversity where people have their own cultural beliefs and they happily coexist', but where 'there is a common thread of Britishness or whatever you want to call it to hold society together'.

The 2005 election

On 23 January 2005, BBC Online led with the headline: 'Tories accused of "desperation"'.¹⁰² This came in response to a Conservative full-page advert in the *Daily Telegraph* outlining immigration restrictions. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Refugee Council and Ukip were all quoted criticising the Tory policy as either dangerous or ill thought out. The following day, the BBC gave coverage to Trevor Phillips' criticism of the plans. The head of the CRE suggested that 'Mr Howard has given enough space to racists to present Conservative policy as wanting to keep out people with dark skins.'¹⁰³

An accompanying BBC feature from 25 January claimed: 'Large-scale migration is not a new phenomenon to the UK. Over the centuries Britain has experienced waves of immigration from around the world.'¹⁰⁴ The article featured interviews with the chair of Black British Heritage and with Professor Nigel Harris of University College London, author

of *The Immigration Myth Exposed*. Their opinions were countered by Ruth Lea of the Centre for Policy Studies, who 'does not believe a shrinking workforce outweighs the disadvantages of employing migrant labour'.

BBC Online reported on 9 April 2005 that: 'The UN's refugee agency is asking British politicians to act responsibly and not spread "asylum myths" as they continue general election campaigning.'¹⁰⁵ The UNHCR had warned of 'xenophobia and political opportunism', and the article noted in the next paragraph that 'Immigration and asylum became important issues in the pre-election campaign after the Conservatives unveiled plans for quotas for asylum seekers.'

Having quoted the UN and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the article noted: 'The Liberal Democrats support a common EU asylum policy with fair sharing of asylum settlement and allowing asylum seekers to work so they do not have to rely on benefits.' All in all, the balance of voices against the Tories was 4:1.


And in the run-up to the election, the BBC website held a 'UK voters' panel', in which six members of the public gave their opinions.¹⁰⁶ Four of the six were very hostile to any party that even mentioned immigration. Among the comments were:

- 'I'm not surprised to hear the Conservatives trumpeting on about it yet again';
- 'Immigration is always hijacked by the party doing least well in the election, usually with outrageous remarks to stir up racial tension and play on people's fears';
- 'What I have got a problem with is the way the Conservatives have dealt with the issue not in a positive, constructive sense but with negative scaremongering'; and
- 'I really don't know why, as immigrants, we have suddenly become the target in this election. Sometimes I wonder what Michael Howard's own immigrant parents

would think of their son's aggressive policy on immigration. I personally would like to ask him to play a fairer game and not label immigrants.'

Thus there were four people who were extremely hostile to the Tories' view, because it was seen as racist; one person who did not regard the issue as important; and one who was mildly in favour of the Tory stance. Yet the general public's opinion on the subject was, on average, far more opposed to immigration than that of any of the six people chosen.

Perhaps the most dubious incident from the 2005 election was an outdoor broadcast on St George's Day, when presenter Carolyn Quinn interviewed a Tory politician and an anti-racist campaigner, Karen Chouhan, in front of a hugely partisan crowd in Leicester. Quinn put it to them: 'Do you think that there is a danger ... that a decision to make immigration and asylum a primary issue in this campaign could heighten tension or indeed simply disincite non-white voters to vote Conservative?'¹⁰⁷

When Karen Chouhan of the 1990 Trust said that segregation was 'largely to do with economic reasons' and that 'people live together here harmoniously' this went uncontested, even though by this stage Leicestershire had become a BNP heartland, and much of the party's support came from people leaving the town. Instead – to much cheering – Quinn told her: 'Clearly people are agreeing with what you are saying.' One could not listen to this without coming to the conclusion that the Tories were wildly out of touch with public opinion and that the governing party was the political wing of the British people. 

3

The BBC Mindset

The question of liberal media bias appears in every developed country. In the US, a 1972 poll found that 70 per cent of reporters said they would be voting for the Democrat George McGovern and just 25 per cent for Nixon, while a 1985 *Los Angeles Times* survey of 3,000 journalists found that 55 per cent identified as liberal (compared to 23 per cent of the public), and on all social issues they were significantly more liberal than the American people as a whole.¹⁰⁸ The perceived liberal bias of NBC, ABC and CBS is one of the reasons for the popularity of Fox News and talk radio, particularly after the ‘fairness doctrine’, which enforced impartiality rules, was abolished in 1987.

In a 2002 article for *Prospect*, the respected journalist John Lloyd wrote that ‘the reflexes of the BBC, and of most broadcasters, are culturally and politically on the liberal-left, reflecting the leanings of the humanities-educated intelligentsia in most advanced states’.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Conservatives no longer complained loudly about BBC bias only because they had given up: ‘This may partly reflect the lack of energy on the right in Britain: for the left bias in the broadcast media – dominated as it is by the BBC, with some 40 per cent of market share in television and a much higher share of radio – is perfectly clear.’

This can lead to the problem of ‘echo chambers’, with social circles becoming ‘polarisation machines’ and creating a small zone for acceptable views. Comments made by Michael Buerk, Peter Sissons and Andrew Marr on the BBC’s bias have been copied and pasted so often that they have entered folklore; but Buerk’s point that ‘most of the people working for the BBC are middle-class, well-educated, young metropolitan people’ is especially relevant.¹¹⁰ Buerk also suggested that the intake in terms of range of social category had narrowed and become more middle class – a trend that has been noted in other professions.

The choice of newspapers read at the BBC also reflects this bias: almost 60,000 copies of the *Guardian* were delivered to BBC offices within the M25 in an 11-month period, compared to

51,384 copies of *The Times*, 48,968 of the *Daily Telegraph* and 45,553 of the *Daily Mail*.¹¹¹ In 2010, the *Guardian*’s circulation averaged 302,285, well below that of the other two major quality papers, *The Times* (508,250) and the *Daily Telegraph* (691,128).

A 2003 report entitled *The Guardian of the Airwaves?* looked at the transcripts of every edition of BBC television’s *Panorama* over a five-year period from autumn 1998 to summer 2003. It concluded that:

Once an issue achieves salience in the pages of the *New Statesman* and the comment section of the *Guardian* then it is likely to appear as a story idea for *Panorama*. Yet if the *Spectator* and the *Telegraph* become preoccupied with a subject it is far less likely that *Panorama* will take it up.¹¹²

A case study compared how the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* covered a story about grammar schools, using eight or so themes that the two newspapers used to advance their agendas – the one anti-selection and the other pro-selection. The BBC’s coverage matched almost exactly that of the *Guardian*. As the report concluded: ‘A left-leaning culture seems now so deeply ingrained among many at the BBC that there is no awareness that a bias may exist.’

This was reflected in the 2007 Bridcut report, which concluded that:

The BBC has come late to several important stories in recent years – particularly awkward when they turn out to have been catalysts for cultural turning-points. It missed the early stages of monetarism, Euroscepticism, and recent immigration – all three, as it happens, ‘off limits’ in terms of a liberal-minded comfort zone.¹¹³

This comfort zone is motivated by basic decency and a wish to protect the underdog – a mindset

that is recognisably Reithian. The need to defend the minority from the majority explains why, for example, the BBC seems more concerned with white-on-black hostility than with its reverse. While *Newsnight* could ask in June 2000 whether there were enough black candidates in the Labour Party (with Oona King suggesting it ‘comes down to racism, pure and simple’),¹¹⁴ the BBC seemed to be less interested in the anti-Semitism that King suffered in losing her heavily Muslim East London seat in 2005. Nor does it evince any curiosity about how Tower Hamlets Labour cabinet is now entirely Asian,¹¹⁵ when the borough is over 50 per cent white, though eyebrows would undoubtedly be raised if the situation was reversed.

Perhaps the worst thing that can be said of this attitude is that it patronises minorities. When the BBC launched its new radio stations aimed at the Asian and the black communities, the advert for the Asian Network showed what looked like a typical middle-class Thames Valley extended family at play, while the advert for 1Xtra (targeting the black community) presented a grim urban scene, with scary young men giving the camera dirty looks. This is authentic blackness, as it was viewed from White City.

It perhaps reflects an inherent liberal thrill with all things young and exciting, the common cliché for multi-ethnic – vibrant – referring to the edgy, youthful feel of diversity. Diversity in the media tends to be portrayed as eye-opening, fun and colourful. Before the London Olympics, as part of the ‘London Calling’ season, BBC World Service had Brazilian musician Thomas Pappon look at Bangladeshi immigration as part of London’s history: ‘Like a microcosm of the city as a whole, the combination of vibrant migrant communities and intriguing history makes Whitechapel a place you just have to visit to get a real taste of the London experience.’¹¹⁶

Indeed, this was the complaint made about people of middle class and middle income by East

Londoners in the Young Foundation’s report, *The New East End* – that they saw ethnic diversity as something to add spice to their lives, to make them feel like they were on holiday, to *visit*, before moving on up the housing ladder. They did not appreciate that for locals it was their home.¹¹⁷

This BBC mindset is kind, generous and open; but it does not always appreciate that others do not necessarily feel the same way about things. Sir Andrew Green recalls how, on one occasion, he was explaining on *Newsnight* that immigration was leading to a situation where white Britons would become a minority in London. The presenter, Gavin Esler, asked him: ‘Does that matter?’ As Sir Andrew retorted at the time: ‘Only the BBC would ask that question.’ Virtually any human being, in any culture and in any period, would understand why people would wish not to become a minority in their own capital city. But not the BBC.

An insight into BBC thinking comes from a 1999 edition of *From Our Own Correspondent*, in which journalist Tabitha Morgan recalled:

The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Robertstown, in the mining valley where I was born, was that the church opposite my grandmother’s old house was being converted into a mosque ...

Robertstown church, and more importantly the hall next to it, played a vital role in my childhood. It was where I had most of my birthday parties, where I learnt emergency first aid, giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a foul-tasting rubber dummy ...

So, here was a Welsh-born, Pakistani entrepreneur, trying to revive the commercial and spiritual life of a dying mining town.

Clearly, the clichéd images of Wales are long gone ...

No more strong-armed miners emerging from a shift underground to thrash the English at rugby.

No more self-educated working men, debating the finer points of Marx and Hegel before breaking off for a quick ‘Gamanfa’ – a spot of spontaneous hymn-singing.

I suppose it was never really like that anyway, but in my five years of exile I sometimes thought it was, it was a fantasy that provided a crude sense of national identity, one that told us who we were.

In fact, the strength of Welsh identity has always been its diversity ...

There’s a long tradition of immigration to the South Wales Valleys ...

And now there’s a growing Moslem community ...

And the sign saying ‘mosque’ on the old church in Robertstown was I realised, a welcome sign of life in a country that’s finally throwing off its old clichéd image.¹¹⁸

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this outlook – a number of people share it – but it’s one that is WEIRD: ‘western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic’. It is very much a minority view, and most people across Europe would feel saddened to see their local church become a mosque – just as most people on the other side of the Mediterranean might shed a tear if their local mosque were to be taken over by another group. Most people would conclude that it showed not the strength of the community, but rather its decline – and that would in no way reflect any hatred of their new neighbours. What has gone wrong is that this WEIRD view has

come to be the only acceptable one, and the BBC has come to find it difficult to give space to others.

Incidentally, one of the very few vaguely pro-nativist articles on the BBC website from the early 2000s appeared in August 2003, with the news that ‘The archdruid of Wales has accused English people of “swamping” Welsh values when they move to Wales.’¹¹⁹ He claimed that English people wished to ‘colonise’ their neighbour, a claim not dismissed as outrageous or controversial. It appears that a native Briton has to be a druid for his concerns about demographic change to be taken seriously by the BBC.

A good example of the BBC mindset was the edition of BBC One’s *Question Time* that featured Nick Griffin of the BNP. Described by one critic as a ‘mass celebration (Latin *celebratus*, an event attended in great numbers) of hatred’,¹²⁰ the edition most unusually focused entirely on one member of the panel. Griffin is, of course, a highly controversial figure – rightly so on account of his views on the Holocaust and his party’s neo-Nazi origins. But previous editions of *Question Time* had included even unrepentant convicted terrorists...

This broadcast resembled a heresy trial (which is not to glorify Griffin: a heretic need be neither right nor pleasant). On trial was someone accused of failing to support the new state religion of diversity, even though opinion polls still show the public to be very divided and sceptical.

It was telling that Griffin was put in front of a heavily multi-racial London audience, when a hostile white one would have reduced his appeal among whites watching at home.

More bizarrely, on another occasion a *Question Time* audience in Lincoln was ‘leavened with black and Asian people bussed in from afar’.¹²¹

Diversity as morality

The BBC has always had its critics. As a nationalised corporation, by its very nature it must try to satisfy everyone – and therefore risks satisfying no one.

Its founder, Lord Reith, wrote:

One influence here was the Victorian reformer Matthew Arnold, for whom culture was conceived as a way of lessening social divisions and class hostilities. Culture, according to Arnold, ‘seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere’.¹²²

Reith saw the national broadcaster as a means of bringing together Britain’s classes and regions, reinforcing social integration.

Impartiality did not figure as a concept in the Wireless Broadcasting Licence of 1923. The BBC was only required ‘to transmit efficiently’ a daily programme ‘of broadcast matter to the reasonable satisfaction of the Postmaster-General’ and to rely on an approved list of news agencies to supply its news. From the beginning, the BBC could broadcast ‘controversial programmes’ only with the permission of the government, and political broadcasting was largely prohibited. The postmaster-general instructed the BBC not to broadcast its own opinions on matters of public policy, nor to broadcast matters of political, industrial or religious controversy.

The BBC’s coverage of the General Strike was hugely controversial, and a memorandum to staff set out that ‘nothing calculated to extend the area of the strike should be broadcast’. Reith wrote: ‘Since the BBC was a national institution, and since the government in this crisis were acting for the people ... the BBC was for the government in this crisis too.’ This caused ‘pain and indignation to many subscribers’, one Labour MP lamented.¹²³

More controversially, in the 1930s the BBC refused to give airtime to opponents of appeasement – a policy later called a ‘conspiracy of silence’. BBC programme makers had tried to make anti-appeasement programmes, but ‘these initiatives were constantly thwarted by the combined weight of government, Labour Party “opportunism” and

the “crass blindness of the Conservative listening public”.¹²⁴ In 1938, the BBC gave no coverage to critics of the newly signed Munich Agreement.

When not taking sides, the BBC has long had a restricted view of what is politically acceptable, avoiding contentious, eccentric or dangerous views. As far back as 1935, political scientist W.A. Robson said that the Corporation was too centralised and its ‘controversial’ programmes too cautious: ‘The BBC is almost overburdened with a sense of responsibility. One sometimes has the impression that because it is not answerable to one particular body it feels itself to be answerable to everyone for all its actions.’¹²⁵

And as Britain became increasingly multi-racial from the 1950s, the BBC began to see good race relations as part of its duty to national cohesion. It made a conscious effort to reflect the new diverse society – a policy that would come to influence its coverage. Being the voice of a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, the BBC now has a responsibility to safeguard race relations. Robin Aitken, author of *Can We Trust the BBC?* describes a set of core BBC beliefs, Number 1 being ‘anti-racist’; another is ‘pro-multiculturalism and ethnic minorities in general’.¹²⁶

One BBC producer ‘P’ (who prefers to remain anonymous) told me:

Up to 2005 there was a general feeling that if people talked about immigration as being an issue and problem it might have the effect of stimulating hooligans in the community to go around beating people up.

This influenced attitudes to politicians. Michael Howard said it’s not racist to talk about immigration, but there was still a tendency to say that ‘playing the race card’ is still a reckless thing for a politician to be doing. The default position was that the people who raised the issue were closet racists and that it had an underlying racial narrative. Or that it was impossible and

complicated to untangle the two issues, and so irresponsible.

Suddenly this evaporated when the issue of immigration and race were separated. Once the immigrants were white people from Poland then that didn't seem to be an issue. After that, everything about immigration was linked to European immigration and they started looking at the economic impact. It did start to be covered.

He also says 'there was a lack of sympathy' for working-class whites. One of the few exceptions was Vivian White's 2007 *Panorama* feature 'White Fright', which looked at segregation in Blackburn.¹²⁷

'P' talks about a mindset in which there is an idea of

diversity good, monoculture bad. That was almost a mantra: creativity was enhanced by diversity. The BBC put around a staff document saying diversity equals creative, monoculture equals not creative. Some bloke looking over my shoulder said, 'yeah that awful German monoculture that could only produce Beethoven, Bach ...'

BBC Online has countless articles celebrating diversity, such as a story about children marking the way Britain has been 'enriched by refugees',¹²⁸ or a feature entitled 'Britain's newcomers celebrated', about an event in Spitalfields where 'Somali children made diaries about the Irish exodus to this area following the potato famine, Bengali children wrote poems about recent refugee arrivals, while in a video children from a predominantly Moslem school act out a Russian Jewish folk tale.'¹²⁹

No one can complain about the media encouraging empathy between communities: were immigration not a current political issue, it would be unquestionably beneficial. But like all histories, the

'nation of immigrants' version has a contemporary agenda, within which Spitalfields in East London holds a semi-sacred place. This is the setting for Richard Bean's 2009 play *England People Very Nice*, about the waves of immigrants to the area. In a *Newsnight Review* discussion, the play was described by Labour MP Tristram Hunt as 'a very politically driven play', in which 'the agenda was to suggest Britain is a nation made up of wave after wave after wave of immigration, so we shouldn't really worry about the last ten years of mass migration in the globalised world, which I consider historically out of proportion to relative other periods of migration'. It was a 'state-sanctioned narrative of how we should see migration today ... we should all just be calm and not worry about jobs and social tensions or whatever'.¹³⁰

Michael Gove said the play was like something from North Korea, and he poked fun at the way that Brick Lane Mosque, formerly a chapel and synagogue, was repeatedly cited in order to stress the history of diversity. He called it 'the most famous building in London apart from the House of Commons'.

Yet this new Whig history, in which Britain develops from a racially hostile monoculture into today's flourishing, colourful society, is largely accepted by the BBC as our new 'island story'. The BBC's website is full of examples like this one, from September 2009: 'London is the story of a continuous influx of people. Ever since the Romans created a settlement here two thousand years ago, people of all colours and all faiths have sought voyage to this ancient city on the river.'¹³¹

It is almost a mantra at the BBC that Britain is a 'nation of immigrants', even though the country had seen relatively few newcomers in the thousand years up to the Second World War.

The Brick Lane Mosque featured in 'The new East End', the edition of Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* programme that dealt with the Young Foundation's book of the same name.¹³² Although the programme looked at how the white working class had lost its

sense of community, it concluded that this was 'part of the tradition of East End movement' – a version of history that the BBC deems to be official. The book is far bleaker, and gives much more of a voice to Cockney bitterness about middle-class hypocrisy on race, but this did not come over on the BBC.

This new Whig history is reflected in the BBC's coverage of things like the Brixton riots, which it referred to in one programme as 'a struggle for recognition by a younger generation'.¹³³ The episode of Radio 4's *The Reunion* that looked back at the events of 30 years before glossed over an almost voiceless section of the population – white South Londoners, many of whom still view the riots very differently from the way they are portrayed in the narrative adopted by the media.¹³⁴

This repackaging – if not indeed rewriting – of history is reflected in BBC drama, too. *The Hollow Crown*, BBC Two's 2012 Henriad production, went so far as to cast Geordie actors to play the Northumbrian Percy family – yet had black actors in the roles of the Duke of York and the Bishop of Carlisle, among others. Does this matter? Perhaps not, but in an age when historical filmmaking tries to be scrupulously accurate, including the appropriate facial hair for a particular decade and, in some cases, the original language, why cast people in racially inappropriate roles, except to make a political point about what English history should be? There has to be an argument for giving good black actors roles; but it is hard to avoid the obvious conclusion that the BBC is making a clumsy political statement about our nation of immigrants.

The most heavily criticised programme is *EastEnders* – 'significantly white', in the words of the BBC's controller of drama production.¹³⁵ The soap's fictional Walford is based in part on Walthamstow and Stratford, both of which have much larger ethnic minority populations than are reflected in the show's cast. On the Tube map of London in the programme, Walford appears in place of Bromley-by-Bow, which is now 40 per cent Bangladeshi.

While ITV's *Midsomer Murders* has been attacked for showing an unacceptably all-white part of England, the evenly balanced cast of *EastEnders* is now even more of a fantasy. The show is stuck in a 1980s demographic time warp: a realistic East London soap opera would have to show a white family moving out every year, to be replaced by Bangladeshis or Somalis, and much of the programme would need to be subtitled.

Internal race politics

The BBC's internal politics has also played a part in directing its view of multiculturalism. Following the establishment of the Annan Committee on the future of broadcasting in 1974, it was decided that the BBC must give voice to minorities and become a 'fount of diversity'.¹³⁶ The BBC adopted an equal opportunities employment policy in 1983 and set achievement targets in 1990. By the early 1990s, the Equal Opportunities Department was 'proactive, well funded and independent, with the direct backing of top management',¹³⁷ there were minority-training schemes, and academic research had been commissioned into the presentation of minorities on screen. An Equal Opportunities Unit was introduced into the personnel department, and by 1999 some 8.1 per cent of the BBC workforce was black and minority ethnic (BME). Director-General Greg Dyke further set a target of 8–10 per cent (and of between 2 and 4 per cent in management), famously declaring that 'the BBC is hideously white':¹³⁸

I want a BBC where diversity is seen as an asset ... a BBC open to talent from all communities and all cultures, a BBC which reflects the world in which we live today ... Young Britain buzzes with the energy of multiculturalism, yet most broadcast media do not reflect this.¹³⁹

The results were additional black and Asian characters in *EastEnders*, *Holby City* and *Mersey Beat* and various multicultural shows – but also

the extension of the diversity industry within the Corporation. Today the BBC's Diversity Strategy includes a 'Diversity Action Plan' in every division, a Diversity Champion, supported by a Diversity Action Group, to sit on the Diversity Board, which is chaired by the director-general.¹⁴⁰ Even people submitting screenplay ideas are told: 'The BBC is committed to embracing diversity and so your proposal should include a paragraph explaining how the programme would fulfil our diversity commitment to reflect fully the licence fee-paying public (either on or off-screen).'¹⁴¹ The BBC is quite keen on diversity...

The Bridcut report also suggested that:

The BBC's policy of ethnic diversity in employment was perhaps a factor in what [BBC editor Roger] Mosey describes as its 'fairly overt support' for multiculturalism. It irked the Business Editor at the time, Jeff Randall, though he concedes the policy has now changed.¹⁴²

And according to Jeff Randall:

When I was there, this was not up for grabs. Multiculturalism was 'a good thing'. The BBC supported it. Don't take my word for it because, when I complained to the BBC about our coverage of asylum-seekers, this is what I got back from a very senior BBC news executive: 'Jeff, the BBC internally is not neutral about multiculturalism. It believes in it, and it promotes diversity. Let's face up to that.' Now, does that sound like impartiality to you?

Diversity in hiring policy certainly influences the Corporation's editorial decision-making. As 'B', a small independent producer, told me:

Two years after a project, I got a form – they wanted to know the ethnicity of everyone who'd worked on that project. I have never asked anyone their ethnicity. If you're working

in a small business you don't have to. Casting a series, they'll say 'you can't put out a series without any black commentators'. It's the wrong criteria. One sort of thought that if you haven't employed the right mix you wouldn't be on the approved list.

The immigration issue is a *bête noire*, he says: 'No one person is guilty but there is a culture there. The BBC has an agenda, a set of values. Because of the way TV works, you need to use clichés because of lack of time.' And so it uses 'clichés of immigrants being beneficial to the country. Certain people – the underclass, people from the north, with string vests – it's okay to make fun of.'

My own feeling is that if someone said to me [make a critical programme on immigration], I would say, 'I don't want to do that, it would tar me.'

You must stick to the script; if not, you're wrong and you're probably racist. A great deal of work is pitched to the BBC as well as other channels ... So what the BBC thinks becomes pervasive through all broadcast media.

Television crews are quite international, and television is made by 'an elite of people who are not representative ... They live from airport to airport ... It changes the mindset.' This naturally gives television a cosmopolitan way of looking at the world: 'This is not limited to the BBC. It's a multicultural, multi-ethnic business because it's world class.'

Of those who oppose mass immigration, 'B' says people who work for the BBC

basically think they're bonkers, if they put them on TV they think everyone will agree they're mad, bonkers and wrong. Immigration in the media is tied up with race and multiculturalism. To call someone a racist it makes them

unemployable. This produces self-censorship on race.

He adds: 'Should they be reflecting public opinion or should they engineer it? I think they're engineering it. I have to toe the line, I can't face the risk.'

Rod Liddle, editor of the *Today* programme from 1998 to 2002 and now a *Sunday Times* columnist, says internal diversity monitoring groups had a 'baleful influence' on reporting:

On one occasion some panjandrum from the Community Affairs Unit wandered into my office and said 'I'd like to ask, what positive stories about Africa will you be reporting this week?'

And I said, 'probably none, because they're crap, aren't they really?' – or words to that effect, something quite flippant. We'll do something positive about Africa when we see something positive that's happened. The implication was that every week we should be telling something to contradict the negative stereotype people have of Africa, of some people in Nigeria who built an eco-well. That is a warping of the news agenda, and incredibly patronising. So I said we never will do that. But other people did. I assume in some cases people would have been inclined to listen to them.¹⁴³

Liddle says that the Community Affairs Unit has had a chilling effect:

It policed community affairs stories and if you did something that contravened the left-liberal line on community affairs they would come down on you. The time they came down on us the most hard was the reporting of the riots of 2001, and in particular reports of Muslim ghettos.

Barney Choudhury was the first person to use the word 'no-go areas'. He was effectively excluded, bitterly criticised by the Community Affairs Unit, subjected to howls of outrage from all the black and Asian people who worked in it. And he found it difficult to get shifts. He's now left the BBC. What he was doing was telling the truth.

Choudhury, an award-winning reporter, told me that following his reporting from the riot towns:

It was a torrid time, with threats from people in the community and the misunderstanding that because I'm a Hindu I had something against Muslims.

After my producer and I broke the Oldham no-go zone story, some BBC colleagues – and I don't know how many or who – briefed newspapers and other journalists. I know this second-hand. One BBC friend overheard another colleague talking about me to a journalist, saying that I was 'the most hated Asian in the BBC'. I was vilified ... on websites and was accused of making the whole thing up to get a story.

I remember one senior BBC correspondent took me to one side to say: 'Dear boy, come on, did you make the whole thing up?' It's strange, isn't it, that few want inconvenient truths. And Rod will tell you that he and I sat through two BBC editorial policy boards and one *Guardian* festival to defend the story. Rod and his colleague Iain Croft were brave to put this on *Today*.¹⁴⁴

As Liddle says:

I had a better representation on the *Today* programme of ethnic minority reporters and producers than any other programme, so it's

ironic why we got away with it [talking about no-go areas in Oldham]. By and large, the mindset at the BBC is that immigration is good.

People who oppose immigration, even if they do so from a left perspective – which is that ... it's basically just cheap labour for large corporations – you are racist. It's as simple as that. It's a left-liberal bias, but it's more a *bien pensant* non-thinking bias – but it's absolutist. There are no gradations of it. If you oppose immigration, you are racist.

It's not that people particularly came and stopped us doing things about immigration. It's not that people said 'that was a bit ripe'. It's just that the overwhelming majority of people working on these programmes, throwing in ideas, simply have that absolutist belief that multiculturalism is perfect, diversity is always a good thing and if you are against immigration you are a racist. It's just unarguable and there's nothing you can do about it. It's that absolutism that is in the BBC. There is a right; there is a wrong – that's it. But they should first start off from the position that they *might* have bias.

As a general rule, reports on the BBC do seem to assume a certain stance on immigration and diversity. For example, BBC Online reported in June 2001 that 'Public concerns about immigration and race relations in Britain have dramatically increased in the past five years, according to a survey just published.'¹⁴⁵ The poll, commissioned by the United Nations Population Fund, elicited a response from the National Assembly Against Racism, which attributed the rise to a negative portrayal of asylum seekers in the media. One might ask why a report on immigration concerns should merit only a response from the race relations industry. And why was there an assumption that concerns were rising because of media coverage, and not because

immigration was rising?

On 20 May 2002, it was reported that 'More than half of Britons believe they live in a racist society, a major survey on race relations has suggested.'¹⁴⁶ The poll, commissioned by BBC News Online, also found that 44 per cent of Britons believed that immigration had damaged Britain over the previous 50 years. Despite this, the television news report filed from Manchester (and embedded in the BBC Online piece) opened with the words 'Cheetham Hill ... is typical of our vibrant, mixed-race community'.¹⁴⁷ The reporter asked three locals – two black and one white – what they thought. Then Gurbux Singh of the Commission for Racial Equality was interviewed. He said there were 'small sections of our community – white, black and Asian – who have not adjusted, who still live in some form of time warp'.

In 2003, a survey found that 'Britain became a more racist place last year after almost two decades of falling levels.'¹⁴⁸ BBC Online's feature went on:

Media reports about immigration and a possible reaction to the 11 September attacks could be to blame, the 20th British Social Attitudes report said. It predicted a 'bumpy ride' in the immediate future, but greater tolerance in the long term as education improves ... According to the report, 2002's rise in racism followed a slow decline since 1987, when 39% of people admitted racial prejudice.

Another interpretation would be that levels of racism rise and fall alongside levels of immigration. In all these reports, there is an assumption that greater diversity is good, and that people can only think otherwise if they have been tricked by the media.

In another example, on 10 August 2005, BBC television and BBC Online both reported optimistically that 'UK majority back multiculturalism'.¹⁴⁹ However, the options given in the BBC poll that was being reported – 'Multiculturalism makes Britain a

better place to live' vs 'Multiculturalism threatens the British way of life' – are somewhat unbalanced, with one being more extreme. The same could be said of the question 'Which one ... comes closest to your view' – 'Encourage ethnic communities to integrate more with White British communities' or 'Encourage greater tolerance between different ethnic communities'. The latter sounds nicer, but the two things are not contradictory.¹⁵⁰ That the BBC phrased the questions in the way it did perhaps says something of the Corporation's own mindset.

Corporate culture

Robin Aitken told me that BBC coverage has changed following a shift from straight news reporting to greater analysis:

Under [Director-General John] Birt the emphasis changed so that current affairs and analysis became sexier. There was something bogus and didactic about the whole process which ran counter to traditional BBC ideas of impartiality. It did not sufficiently allow for different truths to emerge; the pretence was that our analyses were objective. In truth they were merely the ones we favoured, and analyses which ran counter to our own interpretation were discarded. Our scripts – BBC scripts – were just as opinionated as any commentary you might read in the *Guardian* or *Independent*.¹⁵¹

A corporate culture can also reinforce the 'echo chamber' effect. 'It becomes clear what is the party line', says Aitken. 'Against the weight of opinion within the organisation, opinions that don't feature are marginalised, and weighted against.'

Each morning, people from the main London news programmes – such as the *News at Ten* and *Today* – hold a meeting.

Everyone sits around and talks about news of the day. You can see the way this happens.

That's a very self-reinforcing mechanism. What you have is a bunch of people who talk to each other. There's an obvious problem with this. If you get people together, and get them to make collective decisions, in that way a consensus view emerges. It's what they term 'The Authorised Version'. A less experienced editor will naturally fall into line.

An awful lot of reinforcing goes on. If you're working in a newsroom where the majority of opinion is one-sided, this then has the effect of reinforcing their views. It becomes increasingly difficult ... especially for young producers, to speak their mind. If they take a different view on something like abortion you would find people looking askance at you. If the BBC was any other organisation it wouldn't matter, but the BBC is in the business of conducting the national debate. It is the gatekeeper of the debate. In an ideal world a public broadcaster gives equal access to each valid opinion and then allows the public to decide.

A river in which all fish can swim. That's the theory, but instead it acts like a lock gate or toll bridge. There are certain opinions that are not allowed to swim.

Racism is never a pretty thing. It is not wicked that the BBC leans over backward to promote good community relations. What is lost is some sort of critical perspective, which allows a well-founded critique to be heard. It doesn't happen because some people don't think it through; it's easy to dismiss any critique of the liberal-left as *a priori* racist.

But I do think the pack ice is breaking up. I genuinely think things have improved. 🌊

4

The BBC's Comfort Zone

In certain areas, the BBC has been unable to step outside its 'liberal comfort zone' – most particularly with regards to asylum, white racism, Islam, crime and disease. In another area – the economic arguments for and against immigration – the BBC has consistently given greater coverage to one side. And it came very late to the story of the scale of immigration in the 2000s.

Asylum

Media coverage in a liberal and humane society is (rightly) weighted towards the asylum seeker – for the simple reason that the modern media make it easier for us than for our ancestors to empathise with people from another culture.

On the other hand – human nature being what it is – pity can all too easily turn to disgust and even hatred. Any criticism of the BBC must accept that newspapers have sometimes gone too far in the opposite direction. That said, it is far too easy for television reporting to lapse into a simple narrative that emotionalises the debate.

Professionals who train journalists to appear as commentators on television teach them that it is vital for the audience to believe, like and trust them. (As so often with such training courses, an abbreviation has been spawned: BLT.) They teach that it is much easier to be liked if you appear more generous – and more moral – than your opponent. As Harriet Sergeant, a humane critic of the asylum system, wrote in her *Welcome to the Asylum*:

The advocates of immigration have also successfully seized the moral high ground. Kindness to strangers is always more attractive than concern for the majority. Their strictures inspire just a faint feeling of unease. Here is our modern day version of the Mediaeval priest – enjoying the reverence of the public while profiting from the sale of indulgences.¹⁵²

There is also an inbuilt bias, in that, as writer

Lionel Shriver explained on *Newsnight Review* in June 2009, the immigrant story fits a much better narrative.¹⁵³ 'Stranger comes to town' is one of the three oldest storylines, and on top of a politically correct bias, this helps to explain the media tilt towards talking of immigration from the point of view of the immigrant rather than of the native. 'Beguiling foreigner makes new friends' is a common theme in fiction, she pointed out, and 'we instinctively side with the underdog'.

Fiction takes the form of a quest, and immigrants by definition are on a quest: 'We've heard the immigrants' story often enough that it's almost become trite. The other side – assuming that there is one – remains virtually untold.' Asylum seekers, travelling from dangerous places and seeking only to become our fellow citizens, make natural protagonists for such narratives, and even help westerners achieve a level of self-actualisation.

This wish to be more generous may explain why the BBC seems on occasion to have strayed into advocacy. On 23 July 2003, BBC One held 'Asylum Day' – an evening devoted to asylum seekers, with three shows, including *Asylum: You the Judge*.¹⁵⁴

The programme featured four refugees, all with heart-rending stories, whose cases were debated by an invited studio panel/audience, with the public at home voting on whether each refugee could stay in Britain. The audience consisted of three groups – refugees, professionals and protestors – and there were adjudicators, who merely ruled on the legal rather than the moral arguments. The first two groups backed all the refugees, while the third group was against them all – a two-to-one bias that presumably did not strike the programme makers as strange.

This came on top of the in-built psychological imbalance against those opposed to the granting of asylum. After all, people arguing for an individual's right to asylum are granting a very big advantage (a better life, possibly life itself) to one visible human, at a small cost (the possible economic and social cost

of refugees) spread across millions of faceless fellow citizens. With enough people involved, those costs may become substantial (and societies have even collapsed under the weight of refugees, including in living memory Lebanon), but for the individual making the case, the cost will be tiny – at least in comparison to the moral kudos he or she gains in front of millions of viewers.

Furthermore, the protesters were (whether by accident or design) all older and more working class, while those supporting the refugees were younger and more articulate, among them the attractive and intelligent Iranian-British comedian Shappi Khorsandi.

The accounts of the asylum seekers were all very moving, especially that of the Zimbabwean, Clemence, who had been beaten up by ZANU-PF supporters before he escaped to Britain. It was highly personalised and sympathetic, and provided a powerful argument in favour of more generous asylum rules. Yet despite this, the public still voted to refuse him asylum, by 54 per cent to 46 per cent. The other three all lost by even larger margins.

On a similar theme, *Newsnight* held an Immigrant Song Contest in May 2009.¹⁵⁵ The contestants included an Afghan crooner, a Somali rapper and – most confusing for national stereotypes – floppy-haired Iranian rockers, who loved London because it was the home of Pink Floyd. Human nature and our ambivalent attitude to desperation being what it is, I have to admit they actually appeared more sympathetic than the four refugees from 2003.

The BBC's sympathy for asylum seekers seems to be a recognised fact. In his *Great Immigration Scandal*, Home Office whistle-blower Steve Moxon talks of a leaked 14-page Home Office Marketing and Media Strategy that was published by the *Sunday Times* in May 2004. Written jointly by David Blunkett's political advisers and civil servants, the document was designed to 'neutralise' the issue of asylum ahead of the 2005 general election: 'Giving a pat on the back to the BBC for its

attitude, it promises to give the corporation stories with "human faces" to show the positive impact of immigration.'¹⁵⁶ Clearly the Home Office believed the BBC had an agenda on asylum.

Asylum coverage on the BBC has also been affected by the proliferation of campaigning charities, several of which (unbeknown to many listeners) receive large amounts of money from the taxpayer. Britain has many such charities which originally cared for migrants, but which, as an inevitable extension of that care, have come to campaign on their behalf – and for more immigration generally. As the Bridcut report says, within the BBC 'there is sometimes too glib a scepticism about anything said by politicians which contrasts sharply with a simple (credulous, in [journalist] Janet Daley's view) acceptance of utterances by spokesmen/women for pressure groups or charities'.¹⁵⁷

Refugee groups generate numerous stories for the BBC, for example:

- A BBC Online story from February 1999 warned that asylum seekers could starve under 'outrageous' proposals to withdraw benefits from those who seek a judicial review of decisions against them.¹⁵⁸
- A report from 14 June 1999 was titled 'UK accused over child refugees'.¹⁵⁹
- Another story from the following day, 15 June 1999, was headlined 'Immigration Bill condemned'.¹⁶⁰
- A December 2001 article began: 'A new report is calling on the government to make it easier for asylum seekers to work in the UK.'¹⁶¹ That particular report was assisted by the Refugee Council, a campaigning charity that, as of 2010, was 88 per cent state funded. As in many such articles, not one dissenting voice was presented.

In accordance with Shriver's thesis, the BBC often uses very personalised accounts to accompany news stories. Take, for instance, a June 1999 report – 'UK

asylum system “degrading”, which told the story of ‘X’ who ‘fled to the UK from northern Kosovo eight months ago’.¹⁶² From October 2002 came the story of 19-year-old Gjovalin Perkola, who ‘escaped the bullets and bombs in his native Kosovo four years ago to join his brother in the UK’.¹⁶³ He believed that the ‘controversial’ bill would lead to trouble in Britain and ‘could mean refugees fleeing one form of persecution only to face another’ – hyperbole that went unchallenged in the article. It is hard to think of any other area where the BBC would publish such unsubstantiated claims without a response.

This personalised approach has been and remains a feature of immigration coverage. The government’s proposals to restrict ‘fetching marriages’¹⁶⁴ – a form of migration that has led to ghettoisation and honour killings – have been dealt with in such headlines as (from November 2012): ‘How UK immigration laws are splitting families apart’.¹⁶⁵

In June 2012, BBC One’s *This Week* featured a personal to-camera piece by author Sarfraz Manzoor.¹⁶⁶ Filmed in the Museum of Immigration and Diversity in Spitalfields (like the nearby mosque, a favourite of the BBC’s), the short piece featured Manzoor questioning the planned curbs on immigration for the spouses of people earning below a certain threshold:

I find it incredibly frightening, because under these rules my mum and I would never even have been allowed into this country. I think this is naked populism and there is something rather sickening about this Cabinet of millionaires punishing the poor. In one fell swoop they’re penalising every poor citizen who happens to fall in love with somebody from outside the EU.

As he talks, the slogan on the museum’s wall – ‘all of us are immigrants’ – is shown prominently. The author says that immigrants are ‘much less likely to be claiming state benefit than people who are born here’ (which, in the case of the low-skilled workers

this law would target, is untrue). He adds: ‘They shouldn’t be penalised, they should be emulated ... Why should marrying a Pole be easier than marrying a Pakistani? Is it something to do with race and religion?... The nasty party lives on.’

The rules do not actually discriminate on the grounds of race: non-whites from within the European Union are free to come to Britain to live with their spouses, just as whites from outside the EU are barred. There is a place for polemic on television, if someone has an interesting, personal narrative to tell. But in this case – where someone is using arguably hysterical rhetoric and simplifying a complex area of policy – why is an opposing point of view not given, too?

The economic arguments for immigration

As well as charities, the BBC has perhaps been too willing to listen uncritically to the interests of business arguing for the importation of cheaper labour from abroad. Radio and television have consistently given much airtime to business leaders who want more immigrants to ‘do the jobs Brits won’t’, and little to the economic arguments against a policy that will have very unpredictable long-term consequences.

A staple of BBC immigration coverage is the curry house or farm, both of which rely on immigrant labour. A May 2008 edition of the *PM* programme, for instance, highlighted the labour problem faced by strawberry farmers. The story was also covered by BBC Online, whose report featured first a farmer, then a Polish employee (in BBC reports Poles often feature as Stakhanovite heroes of capitalism), a Bulgarian worker, and then a representative from the National Farmers’ Union, who warned: ‘The Government seem intent on waiting for strawberries to rot in the field before they act.’ Four voices for; none against.¹⁶⁷

Although critics are occasionally given a hearing – a BBC Online report from February 2008 warning

that curry houses ‘need more migrants’ in order to ‘avert a crisis in the curry industry’ featured a Conservative MP who was opposed to any relaxation in the rules – this is by no means always the case.¹⁶⁸ BBC One’s *Look North* local news reported on 24 July 2008 that chefs were worried about new restrictions on non-EU immigrants, who would need to have better English.¹⁶⁹ The report featured a chef and restaurant owners. One man warned they would ‘probably need to start serving fish and chips’. No response was given, and the reporter signed off: ‘Without a change, it could be the case that there won’t be enough British workers to create what has become our national dish.’

A number of BBC reports have also suggested that there are strong economic arguments for having more immigration, but that only politics prevents it. An online story from August 2002 – ‘Why florists need foreigners’ – concluded: ‘Flower-growing may be a hard-nosed business, but compared with politics, it’s child’s-play.’¹⁷⁰ In the article, two business people were allowed to advance their demands for cheaper labour, but no opposing viewpoint was given. In what other area would this be the case?

There are plenty of economic reasons why farmers and restaurateurs should not be allowed to import cheap labour. As well as the potentially negative effect on the wages of British workers, mass immigration is a form of offshoring. The private firm gets all the profit, while the social costs – in terms of an immigrant’s potential housing, benefits, healthcare, his children’s schooling, not to mention the social costs of diversity and ghettoisation – are paid for by everyone else. There are also arguments about the need for welfare reform and, in the case of agriculture, for mechanisation. These are all legitimate arguments that could be made; yet the BBC has hardly given voice to anyone making them.

The argument about chefs assumes that British-born people cannot make such food, even though unemployment among Bangladeshi-Britons is high. And is it because British workers are too expensive,

or are they incapable of learning another culture – or might they change it? One of the arguments made for ‘diversity’ is that it involves cultural ‘fusion’, so presumably British-born chefs would be an advantage in creating the great cultural melange that the commentariat seem so keen on.

Another economic argument given wide coverage by the BBC is that immigrants are needed to make up for the shortfall in pensions, and to replace our falling population. A March 2000 United Nations report on immigration was covered by BBC Online with the claim that:

Most developed countries will have to open their doors to millions of immigrants because their populations are ageing so fast, according to a United Nations report. Declining birth rates mean increasing ranks of pensioners, with a diminishing work force to support them. Without mass immigration, the only alternative would be a big increase in the age of retirement, the UN report adds.¹⁷¹

No counter-argument is given.

In April 2000, BBC television reported on how one southern Italian city welcomed ‘young blood’ from Kurdistan, so desperate was its situation.¹⁷² ‘Could asylum seekers breathe new life into Italy’s dying cities?’ it asked. The Kurds were housed in an abandoned school in one empty village and, we were told, ‘every evening [were] bringing the piazza to life’. Although it mentioned that promised funds from central government had not materialised, at no point did the piece pause to ask what, given that all the young Italian people had left because of unemployment, the Kurds were going to do when the novelty of sitting around the piazza wore off.

The accompanying BBC Online story stated baldly:

The question of immigration in Europe is always controversial. However, what if immigration

were to be seen not as a problem to be solved, but as the solution to one of Europe's biggest dilemmas – how to replenish a shrinking population?¹⁷³

Another BBC Online article, this time from March 2001, reported:

Britain needs more immigrants to avoid a crisis caused by falling birth rates and an ageing population, a report suggests.

A study, called *Jewels in the Crown*, found that as life expectancy rises the need for a younger workforce will grow – and its author suggests immigration may be part of the solution.

Dr Vaughan Robinson, head of the Migration Unit at Swansea University, said: 'Britain's ethnic minorities provide us with an opportunity rather than a problem.'

Unless levels of immigration were increased by around 20%, the UK population would fall by three million by 2050, Dr Robinson's study into population trends suggested.¹⁷⁴

No response was given to this claim, and the article concluded:

The report was commissioned by international money transfer service, Moneygram.

Leon Isaacs of Moneygram welcomed the report as a long-needed contrast to the on-going political debate on immigration.

'Over the past 40 years ethnic minorities have established themselves as part of the fabric of British life.

'We should not under-estimate the vital role

they can play in helping to maintain the social infrastructure of the country in the 21st century,' he said.

It was very public-spirited of the second-largest money transfer company in the world, which earns a lot of money by allowing migrants to send \$19 billion around the world each year, to commission such a study. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the BBC's coverage of immigration has been its failure to investigate the interests behind immigration: why does big business, in both Britain and the United States, spend such money promoting 'immigration reform'?

BBC television and radio again reported, on 4 July 2001, that Germany 'needs more immigrants'. The television bulletin stated that 'Germany has been forced to face the facts – immigration is necessary, integration must follow ... Germany is an immigration country ... [Immigration] has to climb rapidly to avoid a population meltdown ... The new philosophy is simple: immigration brings prosperity and not just problems.'¹⁷⁵

Warning that the 'economy could stagnate', the report concluded: 'This could go down in history as the day Germany finally admitted to itself that it really was a multicultural society. But there are problems, too. The opposition Christian Democrats are far from impressed and yesterday Europe warned Germany against a rising tide of racial violence.' Nobody from the opposition was included.

To accompany this dire prediction, Danielle Joly of the University of Warwick was invited onto Radio 4 to say that the German government and the business world 'have come to the realisation that there is a dire shortage of labour'. 'For the last 15 years we have had the discourse that immigration was bad for European countries', she said, blaming the media, which had shown hostility but now understood that 'an immigration policy is needed'.¹⁷⁶

Yet the idea that immigrants can solve Europe's demographic problems and can pay for everyone's

old age is a contentious one, to put it kindly. The UN, for example, estimated that, for Europe to maintain its old-age support ratio, it would need 209 million immigrants by 2050,¹⁷⁷ by which time 40 per cent of the population would be post-1995 immigrants or their descendants. And these enormous numbers would have to be continually maintained, simply because replacements themselves age. Such levels of immigration would bring staggeringly high social costs. As an economic proposition, it is a non-starter, yet it has been regularly touted by the BBC.

America's undocumented immigrants

Justin Webb, the BBC's then chief Washington correspondent, was quoted in the 2007 *Bridcut* report as saying: 'We don't give America any kind of moral weight in our broadcasts.'¹⁷⁸ Certainly the foreign policy of the US comes under greater scrutiny, and this can be justified on the grounds that for some time it has been the dominant power. But while the BBC has been very critical of this area of American politics, perhaps the most one-sided area of coverage in the whole of BBC reporting is of America's immigration debate. While the economic benefits of immigration are played up and the social costs ignored, there is, at a deeper level, an assumption that American citizens have no exclusive right to their sovereignty, and that the boundary between citizen and non-citizen is blurred to a greater degree than in any other country.

The rationale behind this coverage is that America is a 'nation of immigrants', a proposition nation that has no real ethnic distinction and therefore belongs to the world. But it could also be argued that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the US had had 40 years of very limited immigration, during which time the country had absorbed the great pre-First World War wave of southern and eastern Europeans into a homogeneous whole. In recent years, the bulk of American immigration has come from Latin

America and Asia, and the great debate has focused on illegal immigrants – mostly Mexican – of whom there are an estimated 12 million or so. As previous amnesties have led to more immigrants crossing the border, a 'pathway to citizenship' is a contentious issue, particularly since the largely low-skilled Mexican immigrants tend to vote Democrat.

Yet these complex arguments have rarely appeared in the BBC's coverage, which is inclined to focus on the plight of migrants. It also emphasises their economic usefulness. Absent are any arguments that immigration is potentially bad for the middle and working class or that people have the right to secure their borders.

One of the main issues with the BBC's coverage is the extent to which it emotionalises the debate. A report on a rally from May 2007, for example, was illustrated with a photo of a young girl holding a placard that read: 'I am American. Please don't take my daddy away.'¹⁷⁹

Again, there is nothing illegitimate about the view that illegal immigrants should automatically gain citizenship; but where are the voices of those Americans who are opposed to this – the majority?¹⁸⁰ In October 2011, BBC World ran a puff piece for a short film by actor Gael Garcia Bernal on the perils facing people crossing the border.¹⁸¹ The handsome actor was shown sympathising with some pitiful migrants sweltering in the heat. His film was made for Amnesty International to campaign for 'immigration reform' – reform, we were told, which would only happen if the immigration debate were not 'simplified in such an abrupt and grotesque manner as it mainly is, which is electoral'. The short but highly personalised film showed pathetic, sad migrants crossing the desert. The accompanying music was sad. The film concluded with a voiceover telling us that it is 'probably too much to expect a dispassionate debate' on this subject.

The BBC emotionalises the debate, but there is also a question mark over the terminology: 'immigration reform' is a phrase adopted by campaign

groups as a term for 'amnesty', so media outlets that adopt the language of one side of the debate are hinting at their own views.

Once we emotionalise and personalise the debate, then opinion is formed on the basis of anecdote. The BBC's website and BBC World regularly feature stories about Jamaicans who set up successful patty restaurants in New York¹⁸² or Chinese-Canadians who have bucked their family's wishes and become policemen.¹⁸³ Even when, on the very rare occasion that the BBC focuses on law-breakers, it views them sympathetically. Take the April 2012 *From Our Own Correspondent* piece on 'A Cambodian American who can never "go home"' – a sad account of a young man deported from the US to Cambodia who could be 'condemned to a life of permanent exile' because of America's strict laws. Towards the end we are told: 'He had a stint in juvenile detention for refusing to help a police investigation and a couple of other short stays in prison, including one for stealing a car radio and speakers.'¹⁸⁴

Why would America *not* want such a dynamic individual?

But such stories are very much the exception. BBC Online features on America focus heavily on the message that immigrants enrich cities. Take the 2010 report on Baltimore's Spanishtown and how 'today it is a different immigrant community which thrives here';¹⁸⁵ or the April 2011 BBC World story with its Online feature entitled 'Immigrants offer US cities scope for new growth';¹⁸⁶ or, from May 2011, 'Immigrants key to US prosperity'.¹⁸⁷ On 15 August 2012, it reported of Baltimore that Latinos 'have spread out, opening shops, restaurants and stores ... The authorities hope that businesses such as these will bring back vigour into the city and revitalise the economy.'¹⁸⁸

The potential economic costs of restricting immigration are also covered extensively, while the strong economic arguments in favour are almost totally absent. A January 2012 BBC News Magazine

video report warned that a Latino immigrant exodus was hurting the South Carolina economy.¹⁸⁹

The BBC's coverage of laws designed to combat illegal immigration also reflects a particular standpoint: the restrictions are generally referred to as 'tough', 'stringent' or 'controversial'. A BBC World report from December 2011 was carried online under the headline: 'Alabama's immigration law: for youth, life is on hold'.¹⁹⁰ It featured a likeable, articulate young man who was 'undocumented', as the BBC almost routinely refers to illegal immigrants in the US (but not in Asia).

Another report on the Alabama law featured three critics – one of whom said it was 'written with a lot of hate and a lot of fear' – and just one defender.¹⁹¹ A further story from December 2011 reported on the 'tough' Alabama law, which the Southern Poverty Law Center called 'devastating'. No contrasting opinion was offered.¹⁹² A Radio 4 report from the same month warned that the Alabama law was 'sweeping' Latinos from the state and that 'some farmers have to leave the fruit to rot on the vine'.¹⁹³ The local man interviewed in favour of the law sounds like an imbecile. (Details of the law can be found on Wikipedia.)¹⁹⁴

In contrast to the sympathetic, articulate undocumented immigrants, white Americans opposed to further immigration tend (whether by accident or design) to fit with the London stereotype of 'hicks'. A BBC World report from May 2010 about protests for and against a law in Arizona restricting illegal immigration featured just one anti-immigration voice – a fat man, standing by a Confederate flag, who talked of 'tsunamis of non-white hostile crowds' and said that 'we'll be voted into the cooking pot' one day.¹⁹⁵ In contrast, the coverage of immigrants is, almost without exception, sympathetic. On World News America a couple of weeks later, the BBC ran another personalised account of 'America's forgotten migrant workers' who were unnerved by the 'controversial' law passed in Arizona. The piece signed off: 'as politicians

continue to argue about immigration, the migrant workers toil away'.¹⁹⁶

On the most controversial issue of all – an immigration amnesty that could lead to another 12 million people becoming US citizens – the BBC makes no pretence of neutrality. When, in June 2012, the US president employed a legally dubious method to allow large numbers of illegals to stay, BBC Online reported: 'President Obama's decision to halt the deportation of young undocumented immigrants has generated a wave of positive reactions from the Latino community in the US and from advocates of immigration reform.' The story featured three reactions in favour of the move, one against, and one neutral.¹⁹⁷

It is worth contrasting the extensive critical coverage of American immigration policies with the coverage of other countries' policies. The US, for obvious reasons, attracts more attention; yet there is almost no coverage of – and no controversy surrounding – the far stricter immigration policies of Japan, China or Korea. Nor, for that matter, has the BBC bothered much (if at all) with the high wire fence (known as the 'wall of death') that India has built on its border with Bangladesh.

The White Scare

One especially delicate topic is the relationship between immigrants and the settled populations of Europe, as is the extent of anti-immigrant sentiment and the potential for populist politicians to whip up violence. Such fears haunt multi-racial societies. This is why far-right parties have always had a *cordon sanitaire* erected around them (in a way that the far left has not); and it is also why centre-right parties are heavily criticised for going anywhere near the subject.

Matters are complicated by the fact that, from the mid-1990s, a number of parties sprang up around Europe which, though they emerged from the centre-right tradition, were hostile to mass immigration and multiculturalism. They included the Danish

People's Party (DPP) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP), and later Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV).

Although Wikipedia variously describes the DPP as 'conservative', 'national conservative', 'right-wing' or 'right-wing populist', and its political position as 'Right-wing to Far-right',¹⁹⁸ the BBC has consistently referred to it as 'extreme right-wing', as in a March 1998 report, which warned that 'Somalis in Denmark allege persecution' and that 'the extreme right-wing Danish People's Party has been campaigning for tough restrictions on immigration, and has advocated repatriating some of the Somali community'.¹⁹⁹ Likewise, the BBC calls the SVP 'far-right', even though it is an economically liberal, 'national conservative' party.²⁰⁰

There is an underlying message in the BBC's coverage of Europe that any party addressing immigration is appealing to the far right and is therefore to blame for racial tension. In September 1998, BBC Online reported that Turkish residents are 'a useful target for vote-hungry politicians eager to wave the German flag';²⁰¹ and, on the subject of extreme nationalists, 'critics of Chancellor Kohl's government say it must itself bear part of the blame for their rise'.²⁰²

There is a moral in the BBC's reporting: intemperate language by centre-right politicians will strengthen the extreme right, which will lead to violence. A BBC Online report from October 2010 about a series of shootings in Malmo linked the crimes to the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats – even though the perpetrator had not been identified.²⁰³ The article featured two immigrants and one pro-immigration writer praising Sweden's new society; yet one has only to venture outside the protective walls of the BBC to find that Malmo is a dangerous city with numerous social problems, many of them linked to immigration.

Sweden also featured in the February 2011 Radio 4 series *Driving on the Right*. But the series began in Denmark, with its 'politics changed ...

driven by populists'.²⁰⁴ It spoke of anti-immigrant voices 'shouting from the sides' and 'fears about globalisation ... fears about immigration ... and in particular fears about Islam'. A mixed Danish-Mexican married couple were heard voicing their anger that, in the wake of new immigration rules, they could not acquire a permanent residence permit for the pregnant Mexican wife. They may have to emigrate.

It was clear with whom the intelligent, discerning listener should side, yet the law was presented as purely a consequence of the rising popularity of the DPP – there was nothing about any benefits of the law (which has successfully reduced the number of forced marriages and slowed down ghettoisation).

The programme team also travelled to Malmö in Sweden, and the reporter went to the town's mosque, which locals are afraid of. He visited the school within the mosque complex, which turned out to be more integrated than he had been led to believe. This may illustrate the point that people's fears often outstrip the reality, yet no mention was made of anti-Semitic violence in the city, or of the 2009 attack on a synagogue. Anyone ignorant of Scandinavian politics (as many listeners would be) would perceive hostility to immigration as totally irrational and baseless.

It is a similar story in the Netherlands – a small, densely populated and traditionally liberal country, which has experienced very high levels of immigration over a very short time. Here the BBC repeatedly makes the argument that it is populist parties, not immigration, which has (in the words of one report from June 2010) made 'the Netherlands ... a different place'.²⁰⁵

Pym Fortuyn, the relatively moderate opponent of multiculturalism, was one of those who featured in *Preachers of Hate*, a book by Angus Roxburgh, the BBC's Brussels-based Europe correspondent.²⁰⁶ In a conversation with me, Rod Liddle was especially critical of the fact that someone in Roxburgh's position could write such a book: 'No one [at

the BBC] said, "you're meant to be an unbiased correspondent". And this was about to my mind a perfectly reasonable politician.'

Fortuyn's spiritual successor, Geert Wilders, was the subject of a February 2011 BBC documentary entitled *Europe's Most Dangerous Man?* It suggested that Muslims in Holland were being scapegoated, like Jews in 1930s Germany. The programme was made by a radical left-wing filmmaker and presented far-left activists and radical Muslims as moderates. The BBC 'partly upheld' a complaint that it had given a 'misleading impression' about one of its main interviewees.²⁰⁷

Fears of the 'white terror' seemed to be justified by the 22 July 2011 massacre in Norway by Anders Breivik. On the following Monday's *Today* programme, two experts on right-wing extremism were interviewed: Norwegian academic Lars Gule, a former programme director at the Center for Multicultural and International Work at Oslo University, and Matthew Goodwin, author of *New British Fascism*. Gule talked about the far right being fed by a wider 'discourse where hatred is the norm'.

Extremists talked about no-go areas for non-Muslims, he said. *Today* presenter John Humphrys asked: 'No-go areas, he clearly believed all that stuff.' Gule: 'Yes ... this is standard belief among the xenophobes and the Islamophobes.'

Goodwin said that he was 'struck ... by the similarity in narratives' about a clash of civilisations between Breivik's manifesto and some far-right parties in Britain. 'Even if it [the far right] doesn't endorse open violence it contributes to a culture of violence.' He went on: 'There are also large sections of the public ... who are very concerned over some of these same issues – the role of Islam in European society, immigration, multiculturalism ... They might not endorse violence, but I think there is a pool of wider potential there for some of these ideas to take root.'

Gule added that 'you have a climate where ... they

have still contributed to legitimising the violence and this is the challenge, not just for the conservatives and reactionaries themselves but for all society'.²⁰⁸

Judging by these statements – these definitions – the majority of people in Britain are potential Anders Breiviks! The idea that being concerned about immigration or about Islam creates a climate of violence is politically suffocating. And yet, in the last year for which records are available before the Norway attacks, left-wing terrorist incidents in Europe outnumbered right-wing ones 10:1.²⁰⁹ Are the numerous opponents of government spending cuts who are given a voice on Radio 4 therefore creating a 'climate' of violence?

The irony is that Lars Gule himself is a convicted terrorist. In 1977, he was sentenced to six months in prison in Lebanon for illegal possession of explosives, after having become involved with a radical Palestinian terrorist group that was intent on attacking Israel.²¹⁰ Isn't there something odd about having a convicted terrorist telling the British public they were all potential terrorists if they did not sign up to multiculturalism?

Islam

In contrast to violence perpetrated by white-skinned extremists, the BBC tends to downplay any violent activities on the part of Islamists. Producer 'P' told me: 'The BBC has a set of anxieties about Islam. Islam – they think it's quaint. They see minority religions as cultural expressions where people wear funny clothes, and they're all as valid as each other.'

Within this comfort zone was the Asian Network's coverage in February 2013 of 'World Hijab Day'. A white student tried wearing a headscarf for a month and found that 'I'd be happy to wear it'.²¹¹ Headscarves are laden with political meaning. To Westerners, wearing one can be an act of anti-racist solidarity; meanwhile many women in the Middle East see them as symbolising the erosion of their rights. In a famous incident, a group of Egyptian women returning home from Europe in 1923 threw

off their headscarves at Cairo railway station to symbolise their emancipation. The trend that their actions kick-started has been largely reversed in Egypt recently. But that storyline – like much of the Islamification of Arab life in recent years – is absent from the airwaves.

British schoolchildren learning about religion through the BBC schools website are given an uncritical view of Islam, a religion where men and women are 'equal' and in which 'the Prophet Muhammad stressed the importance of women'.²¹² Meanwhile on Christianity they are informed: 'Many people think that the Christian Church is sexist. It does not treat men and women equally'; 'St Paul believed that the role of women was different to that of men, and secondary to it'.²¹³ Until the passage was removed, the BBC's GCSE Religious Studies revision website stated: 'In South Africa, for many years the Dutch Reformed Church supported apartheid, the system which meant that black people were separated from white people and treated as inferior.'

The UK Muslim population grew from 1.65 million in 2001 to 2.87 million in 2011 – a significant increase that has led to the rise of such social problems as female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings and cousin marriage. Whether these are 'Islamic' or a product of the national cultures is a question that is worth exploring – but it has not been. Of the BBC, 'P' says:

The underlying stuff comes as a bit of a shock. They can stretch their cultural relativism quite far – not quite as far as female genital mutilation, but almost. They're soft on honour killings and FGM, frankly.

The BBC thinks 'it's wrong to say a culture is backward; they think of it as being risk free'. Of terrorism, 'P' says: 'They're more worried that any coverage of the subject would excite Islamophobia.' After a plot to kidnap and murder a Muslim British soldier in Birmingham, 'The whole of the BBC's

coverage was of the community upset by raids, rather than that someone might have got beheaded.'

Soon after the 9/11 atrocities, the *News at Ten* on 20 September 2001 reported on Britain's Muslims condemning the lunatic fringe: 'Among the vast majority of British Muslims, there is outrage that their faith should be distorted to justify atrocity.'²¹⁴ This has always been the line used by the BBC, yet strictly speaking it is not really true: while most British Muslims were outraged by 9/11, a Pew Global Attitudes poll found that only 17 per cent of British Muslims believed that Arabs were involved in the 9/11 attacks.²¹⁵

The BBC has understandable reasons for downplaying this aspect of public opinion; yet it could also be argued that the BBC has failed to perform a necessary function – that of bridging the understanding gap between majority and minority.

Just 12 days after the 7/7 bombings of 2005, the BBC followed a meeting between Tony Blair and Muslim leaders with its own panel, including a representative from Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain and Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain.²¹⁶ Albeit to varying degrees, all six members of the panel laid the blame on the non-Muslim community. There was no voice suggesting that there may be a violence problem in Islam; that alienation could be a product of immigration; or that Muslims should not have a veto on British foreign policy, however wrongheaded it may be. Only one of the panel addressed majority concerns about Islam in Britain – concerns that, by this stage, were being felt across the political spectrum.

It seems highly unlikely that a similar *far-right* terrorist attack would have the BBC quoting a spokesman from a right-wing organisation as saying 'what is required is for the whole of society to accept responsibility'.

After a massive terrorist attempt to blow up several aeroplanes was uncovered in August 2006, *Newsnight* tackled the issue of whether profiling was 'racist'. It invited Ali Dizaei, the now disgraced

Metropolitan policeman, to debate the issue. Rebutting a point made by another speaker, Dizaei stated: 'What you are suggesting is that we should have a new offence in this country called "travelling whilst Asian".'²¹⁷

The BBC feels uncomfortable tackling Islamic extremism or aggression by minorities; it feels more at ease to see Muslims as victims of racism and Islamophobia – as in reports from the US about the difficulties Muslims faced in the wake of new post-9/11 laws;²¹⁸ from France on Islamophobia;²¹⁹ or from the Netherlands about young Muslims feeling 'a chill wind of intolerance'.²²⁰ This last report claimed that Moroccans in Holland are 'part and parcel of a vibrant and essentially secular youth culture'. Reporting on a young female Muslim rapper, the feature did not even entertain the possibility that this was not a sign of positive integration into western society, but rather integration into an underclass, ghetto culture.

A BBC Online report from April 2009 stated that Islam was a political target in Norway.²²¹ It quoted one Pakistani-born MP saying that Muslims are the Jews of our times, 'stigmatised, generalised and presented as a threat to society'. This is especially ironic, considering that in Britain, France and elsewhere Jews are now the biggest target for religiously motivated violence, and in Britain around half of all perpetrators of anti-Semitic violence are of Middle Eastern or south Asian appearance.²²²

The coverage given to Islamophobia dwarfs that devoted to the extreme and frequent religiously motivated violence against Christians in Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan and now Syria. Leaders of the Christian communities in those countries have encountered difficulty in raising this issue in the British media: the news outlets are anxious not to appear anti-Muslim.

On the issue of demography and the growing Muslim population – of huge concern to the general population and the subject of a number of popular books in the 2000s – one of the few mentions the BBC has ever made was in an edition of Radio 4's

statistics programme *More or Less* from August 2009. The subject was the veracity of a YouTube hit that had made startling predictions about the Islamification of Europe over the next few decades.²²³

The seven-and-a-half-minute YouTube video, 'Muslim Demographics', uses slick graphics, is punctuated with dramatic music, and asserts that much of Europe will be majority Muslim in just a few decades.²²⁴ It claims that 50 per cent of new-born Dutch children are Muslim and that French Muslim fertility is 8.1 children per woman.

If it is gaining currency (and the film had been viewed 10 million times by this point), such wild distortion ought to be debunked – and that is exactly the thing that public service broadcasting is for. But one has to wonder why the BBC has never covered the subject of real Islamic demography. The highly respected Pew Research Center estimates that Muslims will account for over 8 per cent of the British population by 2030.²²⁵ This is, for good or ill, going to mean huge changes in British society. Should the BBC not find space somewhere to discuss this?

Crime

Perhaps the most sensitive topic of all in a multi-racial society – even more so than religious extremism – is inter-racial crime. This is a subject that is as far outside the liberal comfort zone as it is possible to get.

At the 1999 Macpherson inquiry into the police handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder, wrote sociologist Norman Dennis: 'No evidence was produced to indicate that the police would have handled the investigation differently had the victim been white.'²²⁶ Contrary to widespread reporting, Macpherson made no attempt 'to show that the Metropolitan Police Service was racist ... nor was any evidence produced that individual officers ... had displayed racism'. Nevertheless 'the Macpherson report has been received with almost uncritical approval by pundits, politicians and academics. It is still routinely described as having "proved" that the

police and British society are racist.'

Someone who acquired their news solely from the BBC would be surprised by these statements, and would most likely have little idea why the police behave as they do. As far as I have been able to determine, the BBC has never presented the reasons for the Metropolitan Police's policy on stop and search.

The BBC's coverage of crime closely resembles that of the *Guardian*. It, for example, in its reports on 'excessive', 'racist', 'stereotyping' and 'discriminatory' stop-and-search tactics (e.g. from 17 October 2010;²²⁷ 8 July 2011;²²⁸ 12 January,²²⁹ 14 January²³⁰ and 12 June 2012;²³¹ and 22 April 2013²³²) makes no mention of the salient facts that some groups are more likely to commit the crimes that the police are investigating, and that the racial disparity in police stop-and-search activities was due to information from third parties.²³³ Failing to report even the motivation of one side is not bias: it is propaganda. But while the *Guardian* is an independent newspaper and is free to produce propaganda, the national broadcaster has a wider responsibility.

That is not to say that there are not police excesses and injustices; but where these occur, the underlying logic must still be explained. This is an unpleasant subject, but failure to address it can have horrendous consequences. As Dennis found, the Macpherson report led to a substantial decline in the number of stop and searches – and subsequently to a steep rise in street robbery in London and Birmingham. This resulted in more serious violence, too: two men were murdered at the Notting Hill Carnival in 2000 and 19 were stabbed after police were told not to carry out stop and searches.²³⁴

Racist murder is a very sensitive issue, and Fran Unsworth, head of BBC newsgathering, appeared on a December 2005 edition of *Newswatch* in Scotland to address viewers' concerns about the weight of coverage given to different inter-racial killings.²³⁵ Asked why the murder of black teenager Anthony

Walker was given more prominence than those of either Christopher Yates or Kris Donald (both white victims of racial attacks), she argued that this was because of the ‘absolutely horrific’ manner of the death of Anthony Walker and ‘also the fact that ... the kind of person that he was too came to the fore in this story. Here was a boy with enormous promise. Now I’m not saying that other people don’t have promise, [but] this was an element of the story.’

Anthony Walker’s funeral was covered live on BBC television, and his murder was mentioned on national news on 36 separate occasions. Kris Donald’s killing merited just three mentions, and on the day his murderer was convicted, BBC news preferred to find time for a report on a new arts centre in Gateshead. Unsworth conceded that space to report the verdict should have been found.

Yates’ murder attracted even less attention. A ‘quiet, harmless man’ from Barking, he had ‘wandered into the university where he had been a student, after hearing music’. The court heard that after the attack by an Asian gang, one of his murderers shouted, in Urdu: ‘We have killed the white man. That will teach an Englishman to interfere in Paki business.’²³⁶

The BBC website gives some indication of the weight that is attached to each crime: ‘Stephen Lawrence murder’ has 1,023 matches, ‘Anthony Walker murder’ has 130 and ‘Christopher Yates murder’ has just six.

In the same week that Walker was murdered by white men, Richard Whelan was stabbed and killed on a bus in London. This murder received little coverage – an imbalance the BBC’s TV editor, BBC Newsgathering, put down to the fact that there was ‘no suggestion that the attack was racially motivated. Indeed, the police made the point that the victim could have been “any one of us on a night out”.’²³⁷

That only raises the question of why the BBC is so much more interested in racist murders than in random attacks on innocent people, whether or not the perpetrator and the victim come from different

racess. Whelan’s murder – he was stabbed to death after standing up to a stranger who was acting aggressively towards his girlfriend – had a shocking quality that, in a more colour-blind and perhaps less brutalised society, would have been burned into the public imagination.

Even the murder of PC Stephen Oake in January 2003 received little subsequent coverage on the BBC.²³⁸ In the course of a police operation, the father of three was stabbed by a suspected terrorist who was living in Britain illegally. Following this crime, numerous newspapers called for an inquiry into the asylum system, yet neither the *Guardian* nor the BBC in its news bulletins even raised the issue. The BBC only asked why the suspected terrorist had not been handcuffed at the time of the attack and why the police officers had not been wearing body armour.

The imbalance in the BBC’s coverage can partly be attributed to the large numbers of anti-racism groups. Criticism by them of any institution will be covered by the BBC – whether it is the Society of Black Lawyers and the Association of Black Probation Officers criticising Metropolitan Police Chief Sir Paul Condon,²³⁹ or the Muslim Parliament denouncing ‘institutionalised racism’.

When such groups are used in counterpoint to a Labour initiative, or to proposals by a government-linked think tank, the true centre of political gravity is further distorted. Back in February 1999, when the *Today* programme and BBC Online ran a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research urging ministers to set up a ‘rebuttal team’ to combat ‘misinformation’ in media reporting of race and immigration issues, the BBC sought a response from groups even further to the left.²⁴⁰

According to BBC Online, the IPPR report argued that ‘more needs to be done [sic] to challenge stereotypes and negative portrayals of ethnic minorities and immigrants’ and called for ‘more black and Asian Britons to be appointed in government jobs, such as ambassadors, press officers and ministerial special

advisers’. Yet responses were sought from the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Sir Herman Ouseley, and Kumar Moushid, chairman of the pressure group the National Assembly Against Racism.

Such a way of reporting can only convey the idea that the IPPR proposals were the mainstream – not a contentious proposal for quotas. That is an idea that some might say is fundamentally undemocratic (and not very successful).

During the height of the post-Macpherson coverage, in August 2000, Radio 4 and BBC One both gave coverage to claims made by British anti-racist groups in a report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination that there were ‘no-go areas’ for ethnic minorities in Britain, and that the government’s asylum seeker policy had created this atmosphere.

Radio 4 interviewed Dele Ogen of the African Caribbean and Asian Lawyers group, who maintained that racism was due to the Empire.²⁴¹ The television report stated that: ‘Some inner city areas, they say, have been turned into no-go areas for ethnic minorities, who are increasingly vulnerable to abuse by far-right extremist organisations. They also blame the government’s restrictive immigration and asylum policies for stoking a climate of racial tension.’²⁴²

This sort of speculation could be seen as scaremongering, and it was illustrative of the era – one of mild hysteria about the dangers of racism and its violent consequences, of pressure groups and of a media that seemed to question neither.

It is also questionable how large or representative some of these groups are. The National Assembly Against Racism, quoted on numerous occasions by BBC Online, is described by Wikipedia as ‘is or was a British anti-racist group’.²⁴³ This would suggest that it is by no means a mass movement.

But a large part of it is sensitivity. And while the BBC has a duty not to stereotype groups or incite people against one another, it also has a

responsibility not to stereotype the police and make it harder for officers to protect law-abiding people of all colours.

As author Robin Aitken told me:

A well-meaning person of the mainstream left will avoid stories like that in the mistaken belief that it will cause harm. The BBC is instinctively wary of stories like this; if it can, it avoids them. It sees its primary task in this area to promote good community relations. It avoids subjects that make it uncomfortable.

He recalls:

I once pointed out to a senior person in news – when the BBC was leading on stop and search, and there were a lot of civil rights groups [on BBC programmes] because there were a lot of black men being targeted for stop and search – that at the same time there was information available that a disproportionate amount of street crime was committed by black men.

Aitken got an ‘encouraging response’ from his head of news, who said ‘yes, you’re right’ and ‘we should find a way to reflect that’. But nothing was ever done.

It comes from a decent impulse of not blaming minorities for problems, and we don’t want to point a finger. This is not what the BBC should do, it should not be in the business of suppressing news, but that’s what it does. It effectively suppresses news that it finds uncomfortable.

Tuberculosis, HIV and malaria

Another sensitive topic is disease, and in particular three infectious illnesses – tuberculosis, HIV and malaria. TB has never been entirely eradicated in Britain – the disease thrives in overcrowded

conditions, and in recent times it has predominantly been linked to immigration.

Yet the BBC appears to find this difficult to discuss. Back in March 2002, BBC Online reported on a TB awareness campaign that was being launched. It mentioned immigration only in the seventeenth paragraph (and then hedged: 'by no means the only issue').²⁴⁴ In a later report, in May 2008, it warned: 'Drug resistant tuberculosis is posing a growing threat in the UK, probably fuelled by immigration, say experts.'²⁴⁵ However, more recently TB has been the subject of three prominent radio slots. Two of these downplayed the role of immigration: a 12 December 2012 edition of *The World at One* (where the presenter seemed to steer a doctor away from the subject of immigration)²⁴⁶ and a report from the *Today* programme of 23 March 2012, which warned of vulnerable people, such as drug users and the homeless, picking up the disease; there was just one mention of immigration in a six-minute package.²⁴⁷

The only frank discussion came in the *Today* programme on 21 April 2011, when an Asian-British doctor urged people to have screening. He pointed out that 75 per cent of TB sufferers in Britain are immigrants, and that 30 per cent of African immigrants and 20 per cent of Indians carry TB bacteria.²⁴⁸ He urged people to get checked. 'We can de-link immigration and TB', so that 'imported TB is no longer an inevitable cost of immigration into the UK'. Many listeners might not have been aware of the fact in the first place.

This can be compared to the way that malaria is covered. A news report, for example, warned in no uncertain terms that Britain faces a 'tropical disease threat'.²⁴⁹ TB kills 32 times as many people in Britain as malaria, but while both are now diseases of globalisation, malaria is caught by travellers abroad, whereas TB is brought in by immigrants.^{250, 251}

Being a sexually transmitted disease, HIV is even more sensitive. Former *Observer* health

correspondent Anthony Browne wrote about a rise in HIV rates in 2000. This was picked up by the BBC, but his interview with the *Today* programme was cancelled, and instead a government minister explained how the rise in heterosexual HIV cases was proof that British teenagers needed to wear condoms. But 'the increase in HIV had virtually nothing to do with British people practising unsafe sex – it was almost all the result of HIV positive people (mainly Africans) coming to the UK, and being diagnosed with HIV once here'.²⁵²

He wrote in *The Retreat of Reason* that:

Even when the truth became intellectually commonly accepted, media outlets such as the *Guardian* and BBC carried on reporting dishonest accounts, presumably because they had such deeply held emotional beliefs in the issue that they couldn't bring themselves to write honestly about it.

When, on 4 August 2003, the Tories proposed screening immigrants for HIV, a BBC Online report featured four negative responses, including from two charity representatives. The arguments were that it would be 'spreading fear in people and scape-goating', that the immigrants 'may well bring skills that we particularly need' and that it is 'unnecessary, extremist, unethical and unworkable'.²⁵³ No positive responses were given, even though HIV had become an immigration problem by then: whereas in 1995 four times as many whites as Africans were diagnosed with HIV in Britain, by 2000 more Africans were being diagnosed than whites. That year a total of 4,000 new cases were uncovered.²⁵⁴

A BBC Online story from 28 February 2012 on the subject of 'Free HIV treatment on NHS for foreign nationals' featured three people in favour of free treatment. The only opposing view came in the form of a fleeting reference to 'critics' (though reader comments below the article were almost universally outraged).²⁵⁵

Numbers

The BBC has also arguably been late in its coverage of demographic change. Stories appeared on BBC Online in September 2001²⁵⁶ and in June 2004, with a report that 'One in 12 people in the UK was born overseas'.²⁵⁷ BBC Online ran another story in September 2004 – 'Almost 140,000 immigrants settled in the UK last year, a fifth up on 2002'²⁵⁸ – and again on 30 June 2005, when newly released figures showed that 570,000 illegal immigrants were now in Britain.²⁵⁹ (By sheer coincidence the IPPR published a report that day, warning that 'advances in race relations over the last 20 years are being put in jeopardy by the public's attitude to asylum seekers' and that 'the most negative views are based on wildly inaccurate beliefs'.²⁶⁰) But the subject received little attention before Labour's third term.

Immigration figures did make an appearance on the *Today* programme in September 2005, when the IPPR raised the subject.²⁶¹ Less coverage, however, was given to the statistics revealed the following month, which showed that a record 582,000 people had come to live in Britain in 2004. The story did appear on BBC Online, as did a report the same month that the numbers of foreign nationals in British prisons had increased by 75 per cent over the previous five years.^{262, 263}

Likewise BBC Online reported in December 2005 on the growing numbers of women from overseas 'travelling to Britain to give birth in NHS hospitals'.²⁶⁴ The website also covered, on 5 January 2006, a Migration Watch report that foreign births had hit the 'core culture', although this was countered by the IPPR and the Commission for Racial Equality.²⁶⁵

5

The Polish Wave

BBC coverage of immigration during the last of New Labour's terms in office was noticeably more critical. A number of reasons have been cited for this, including the persistence of Migration Watch, the 7/7 bombings, Trevor Phillips' criticism of divisive multiculturalism, growing support for the British National Party – and the huge increase in Polish migration, which deracialised the topic.

Sceptical voices started occasionally to be given space. In April 2006, former Labour MP Brian Walden spoke on Radio 4's *A Point of View* in defence of Margaret Hodge MP, who had warned that large numbers of her Barking constituents were considering voting for the far-right BNP. He echoed her words that the 'political class' was frightened of the issue:

I can illustrate what I mean by quoting something once said by Lord Elton. He said: 'One archbishop in a village was welcome, five began to be a bit much, 50 became intolerable' ...

Well-meaning people, who rightly want to stand up for immigrants, sometimes say that we mustn't play the numbers game. But that's unrealistic, because neither Mrs Hodge nor anybody else can say to the people of Barking: 'Now don't be selfish, ignore the numbers and get used to the changes.'²⁶⁶

Recalling a conversation with Enoch Powell, he added: 'To refuse to accept the evidence of one's own eyes does no service to the cause of tolerance. Better to tell the truth and offer remedies where they exist.'

In November 2007, BBC Two's *Newsnight* and Radio 4 held an 'Immigration Special', along with Radio 5 Live. They commissioned a poll to discover people's views, and found that two-thirds of the 1,026 adults questioned felt that Britain would lose its unique identity if immigration continued at its current rate.²⁶⁷

In another indication of how the debate had

changed, in January 2008 television news reported on how immigration was adversely affecting NHS maternity services: 'almost a quarter of new babies in England are now delivered to a mother born overseas'.²⁶⁸ In Slough the figure was half. As the accompanying BBC Online article stated: 'The NHS is spending £350m a year to provide maternity services for foreign-born mothers, £200m more than a decade ago, the BBC has found.' The television report featured a British man and his South African wife who had suffered because a maternity unit could not cope – possibly the first time BBC news had shown a sympathetic, personalised account of a native losing out because of immigration.

But this was unusual. And while BBC reporting on numbers has grown more open in recent years, there is still a tendency to downplay the impact of immigration on other areas:

- An article on how English migration to Wales was threatening the Welsh language (May 2007) ignored the reasons why people were leaving English cities.²⁶⁹
- Reports on fertility rates – such as the June 2007 announcement that it was 'at [a] 26-year high'²⁷⁰ – which attribute the rise to older women having children, ignore the role that immigration is certainly playing (immigrants tend to have higher fertility, even when the home country has low fertility, as in the case of Polish immigrants).²⁷¹
- A report on the *Today* programme in June 2009 about the growing pressure on school places alluded to immigration only towards the end, though in London at least it is the driving force. A television news report (embedded in the online story) did not even mention immigration, instead linking the pressure to economic reasons, with parents abandoning private education and the 'bottom falling out of the housing market'.²⁷²

The subject of school places is consistently raised in BBC Online reports²⁷³ without any mention of immigration, even though the proportion of babies born to a foreign mother had increased from 15 per cent in 2001 to 24 per cent in 2011.²⁷⁴

April 2008 saw another turning point, with a House of Lords report finding that immigration had 'little or no impact' on the economic well-being of Britons (and indeed a negative impact on poor and young Britons).²⁷⁵ BBC television's *News at One* covered Phillips' address on 20 April 2008, the fortieth anniversary of Enoch Powell's Birmingham speech.²⁷⁶ While there was much that immigration sceptics could argue with in what the CRE chairman told the BBC – he claimed that it's all about economics and 'lack of investment in public services' – many would applaud his suggestion that: 'We can talk about this ... the public is now rather irritated with the political classes for trying to avoid talking about an issue that most ordinary people are talking about ... let us have an open debate.' He added: 'We're trying to give everybody else ... permission to talk sensibly and rationally about this [issue].'

There are a number of reasons why the issue became easier to discuss, but one of the main ones was spelled out by Mark Easton, the BBC News home affairs editor, who wrote on BBC Online that week on 'Why [the issue of] immigration is no longer a taboo' when it comes to the new immigrants. He concluded: 'Perhaps most crucially, they are white.'²⁷⁷

Indeed. There has been a noticeable and clear difference between the way the BBC has reported the arrival of Eastern Europeans and its treatment of Asian and African immigration. The former has been analytical, taboo-free and focused on economic rather than social issues. Poles have been the subject of several *Newsnight* reports, including one from August 2006, when the IPPR's Nick Pearce and Fiona Mactaggart MP debated with Nigel Farage and Polly Toynbee.²⁷⁸ Toynbee criticised mass immigration from the perspective of the left, pointing out that: 'It's helped the well-off ... Wages

at the bottom have really been pegged down ... It also prevents as much pressure on training people up.'

On 22 August 2006, the flagship television programme once again debated Polish immigration after the leaking of a Home Office report – 'Migration from Eastern Europe, Impact on Public Service and Community Cohesion' – which found that there were 427,095 registered immigrants from the eight new EU member countries.²⁷⁹ And Poles were the subject of *Newsnight* again on 3 January 2007, with Andrew Green debating economist Philippe Legrain on the impact of Eastern European immigration.²⁸⁰

On 4 September 2006, the BBC reported a poll it had commissioned from ICM for a series of special reports called the 'Changing Face of Britain'.²⁸¹ The survey found that almost half of those questioned thought Britain was a worse place than 20 years ago, and only around a quarter thought it was better. Immigration was the fourth biggest area of concern (equal with terrorism). The BBC looked at a number of issues relating to immigration, including the 'focus on the increasing numbers of elderly people staying in the workforce; the effect of European immigration on existing ethnic minority communities; city dwellers moving out to rural areas and the ambitions of young people in old industrial areas'.

Indeed the impact of European migration on black Britons is a worthwhile subject. A former American slave, Frederick Douglass, opposed mass immigration to the US in the nineteenth century because he thought it would squeeze out African-Americans, and the post-1965 immigration boom in the UK seems to bear out his fears. Low-skilled immigration probably does harm black Britons, too; but it is perhaps a sign of the BBC mindset that it only feels comfortable criticising immigration when black people are *demonstrably* its victims.

The House of Lords report and the Phillips speech happened to come in the same month as the BBC ran a 'White Season', which looked at working-class reaction to immigration. This included a sympathetic

feature on people from Barking and a documentary about Enoch Powell's controversial 'Rivers of Blood' speech.²⁸² The BBC Four controller, Richard Klein, told the *Daily Mail* he thought the white working class – of which he was one – had been overlooked.²⁸³

As immigration became more unpopular, and cohesion a topic of greater concern, many Labour MPs began to use language that only a few years earlier would have landed Conservatives in trouble.

BBC Online reported on 24 September 2007 on Immigration Minister Liam Byrne's response to Liberal Democrat calls for an amnesty on illegal migrants. Byrne had said that illegal immigrants 'should go home – not go to the front of the queue for jobs and benefits'. But although this was criticised by his Labour colleague Jon Cruddas, the story was swiftly forgotten.²⁸⁴ The Tories made no political capital out of the comments, which perhaps illustrates one of the problems with impartial reporting on immigration (and also why they lost some PR battles to New Labour). Fake outrage works, in that it generates a story; accusing one's opponent of racism works, but there is a danger of 'outrage inflation' in the longer term.

Two 2009 BBC reports – on *Newsnight* in May²⁸⁵ and on *File on 4* in June²⁸⁶ – featured personalised accounts of native Britons whose wages had been pushed down by immigration. These came after Gordon Brown's 'notorious' use of the phrase 'British jobs for British workers', which was routinely condemned by the BBC.²⁸⁷ *Newsnight* reported on agricultural workers and *File on 4* on IT contractors laid off because Indian workers cost half as much.

The 'White Season' also included a programme entitled *The Poles Are Coming*, which looked at the £7-per-hour jobs that local Britons don't want,²⁸⁸ and the strain that this immigration puts on public services. Yet an alien watching the BBC coverage would think that Eastern European immigration dwarfed migration from the developing world. In fact, of the 538,000 people who moved to Britain in 2008, just 178,000 came from countries of the

EU.²⁸⁹ Although not a 'visible minority', Poles are more visible to the British population, and especially its middle class, because they are evenly dispersed around the country, and because they come into regular contact with Britons by working in the service industry and doing semi-skilled jobs. By contrast, 'fetching brides'²⁹⁰ are likely to have little contact with the white British population. But that is no reason for the BBC to ignore such issues and the problems they beget.

There was so much coverage of Poles that, on 4 June 2008, the BBC was forced to reject claims by an MP that its coverage of immigration had led to an increase in attacks on Poles living in Britain. Daniel Kawczynski said the BBC's 'liberal elite' was using 'white Christian' Poles as a proxy to avoid covering the issue of 'more controversial' immigrants, and that this was leading to violence.²⁹¹ It is hard to see where the MP's claims of violence came from, as there has not been much research into anti-Polish hate crime (although perhaps it is only a matter of time before this is taken up by the race industry). Yet ironically this is a similar argument to the one used by the BBC about immigration and race hate generally.

One could compare the BBC's frank analysis of Polish immigration with its coverage of migration from outside the liberal comfort zone, such as from Somalia. There are fewer Somalis in Britain than there are Poles, yet in many parts of the country Somali settlement is of concern and does affect people's lives: there is a problem with gangs, and some 80 per cent of Somali immigrants live in social housing.²⁹²

Yet a search of the BBC archive using the words 'Somali gangs Britain' produces the merest handful of hits.

And the imbalance of voices has continued, too. When BBC Online covered a September 2007 report into new immigration figures (also reported on *Today*), Andrew Green and Damian Green were 'balanced' by four supporters of mass migration.²⁹³

Between 1997 and 2013, of the hundreds of immigration news reports that I have personally watched, listened to and read, in literally just a *handful* have anti-immigration voices not been outnumbered. One, from 23 October 2007, warned that the population was to hit 65 million by 2016 and featured two pro-restriction voices (Andrew Green and Jonathan Porritt) against one spokesman from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants;²⁹⁴ another was an edition of the *Today* programme from 5 July 2006 that followed a YouGov poll which found 72 per cent of people opposed to amnesties for illegal immigrants.²⁹⁵

And when, on 8 September 2008, BBC Online reported a call from a new all-party group of MPs for 'balanced migration', its angle was:

The government has rejected demands for strict limits on the number of workers from outside the European Economic Area allowed to settle in Britain.

Immigration Minister Liam Byrne said a new points system based on skills and labour shortages was a better policy.²⁹⁶

Starting the story with the word 'reject' casts a negative light on the original statement of the group of MPs. By contrast, the *Daily Mirror* reported the story (headlined 'Most voters want cut in immigrants') thus: 'There is massive support for cuts in immigration among voters of all persuasions, a poll out last night showed.'²⁹⁷ Two of the MPs – Frank Field and Nicholas Soames – featured on the *Today* programme of 8 September.²⁹⁸

By the time of the 2010 election, the BBC certainly seemed to be reflecting a more diverse set of voices. Andrew Neather's revelations in the *London Evening Standard* on 23 October 2009 (in which he talked about Labour's motives for encouraging immigration),²⁹⁹ were initially only covered by the BBC's World Service. But in February 2010 they


became the subject of a Radio 4 documentary by David Goodhart.³⁰⁰ That month the BBC also looked at the issue in BBC One's *The Day the Immigrants Left*.³⁰¹ Some viewers were unhappy about the underlying message of the documentary (which highlighted the poor employability skills of the natives featured), but a serious attempt was made to look at the processes involved, and the programme makers do appear to have tried hard to find suitable locals.

And the *Today* programme even aired a frank conversation about racial tension in the East End.³⁰² Regret was expressed about the scale of immigration, and the elected mayor of Newham said 'the more you expose things to public debate the less bad it is and the more chance you've got of getting a sensible way forward'.

But there remains a BBC mindset that is noticeably different from that of most British people. Contentious claims made by the anti-immigration lobby are treated, unusually, as threats to the social order that need to be disproved. When the *Today* programme held a discussion on social housing in July 2009 after an Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report claimed that social housing discrimination against Britons 'is a myth', it first had a BNP spokesman claiming that immigrants were getting ahead.³⁰³ The rest of the piece seemed to be taken up with refuting that claim – with a Barking Labour councillor and Andrea Murray of the EHRC (who seemed to contradict herself, stating that people have to be here for five years to qualify for social housing, but also that 11 per cent of recently arrived people are in social housing, since asylum seekers and residents of the European Economic Area are entitled to it upon arrival).

Shortly before that, *Today* had discussed proposals to give local people priority in housing.³⁰⁴ It invited on only Keith Best of the Immigration Advisory Service, who said: 'lo and behold we're getting close to a general election'. Immigration is an issue 'because politicians themselves make it an

issue'. He went on: 'I think this is more a reaction to some of the things that have been perpetrated by the far right ... by claiming that they're losing out their housing to immigrants.'

Nowhere in either of these discussions was there any suggestion that the housing system should actively discriminate in favour of native-born people – an idea that would not have seemed even remotely controversial to the socialist founders of Britain's welfare state. 

6

The Coalition

Under the Coalition, the BBC has devoted huge amounts of critical coverage to the government's cap on immigration, even though the policy has overwhelming public support.³⁰⁵

Within six weeks of the Conservative-led Coalition coming to power, various interested parties were lining up to protest at plans for an immigration cap. On 26 June 2010, the *Today* programme warned that a cap 'will hit higher education' and had Conservative MP Peter Bottomley debating Tim Finch, head of migration research at the IPPR.³⁰⁶ BBC Two's *Daily Politics* featured Stephen Alambritis from the Federation of Small Businesses warning that an 'artificial immigration cap' would be bad for business.³⁰⁷

The *Today* programme of 26 August 2010 asked whether Britain should 'rethink its immigration cap'.³⁰⁸ On the other hand, on 6 September the programme featured Damian Green defending the government's policy of reducing the number of foreign students.³⁰⁹ On 22 September *Today* warned: 'There is growing unease within the business community about the government cap on immigration.'³¹⁰ The report featured Jo Valentine of the lobbying group London First, who claimed that businesses are suffering as a result of the Coalition's cap on the number of permits for workers from outside the EU. Baroness Valentine said that the country needed foreign workers' skills to get out of the recession, and that the restrictions would lead to a drift away from Britain. No opposing view was offered.

In October 2010, *Today* reported that, in a letter to *The Times*, a group of Nobel scientists had attacked the government's policy on immigration.³¹¹ One of the signatories to the letter, Sir Harry Kroto, who won the 1996 Nobel Prize for chemistry, spoke of his concerns that 'the UK loses out'. He also said that, as the child of refugees, he was in favour of a generous immigration policy.

BBC Online on 3 November 2010 featured a video report with David Frost, director-general of

the British Chamber of Commerce, who warned that the immigration cap could 'harm business'.³¹² Television news reported that MPs were concerned that the cap would not work.³¹³ The report showed some medical staff and nurses, and warned that the policy could 'cut the numbers of operations'. We need more nurses, a private healthcare professional explained. Labour's Keith Vaz was featured voicing his opposition to the cap, and a 'leading cancer research institute' was also quoted in pessimistic mood. The only balance was an excerpt from a statement by Damian Green, the immigration minister.

Newsnight warned that the immigration cap could harm economic recovery by restricting the number of scientists who can enter the UK.³¹⁴ A report claimed that science has 'got caught up in the immigration numbers game'. Representatives from scientific research institutions were interviewed, but there was no explanation of why the cap was needed and no mention was made of the fact that science is immigrant-heavy because it is largely state dominated.

On 18 November, *Today* warned that a rigid migration cap 'will not help [the] economy'.³¹⁵ The report featured the head of global immigration at the law firm PwC Legal saying that any cap needed to be flexible and 'responsive to economic circumstances'. No opposing view was advanced, although a subsequent report (on 23 November) did include representatives from both sides of the debate.³¹⁶

The following June, *Newsnight* included an immensely hostile report, in which it stated that the 'government [is] under pressure' to reduce immigrant numbers and 'students are the obvious target'. Critics warned that it would create a two-tier system, and Tony Millns of the education pressure group English UK called it 'discriminatory' and 'anti-competitive'. The report concluded that 'targeting students ... is far more controversial' than other restrictions.³¹⁷

On 28 November 2011, Mark Easton of BBC News

signed off by warning that ‘some fear [restrictions] will damage our economy or our way of life’.³¹⁸ And the following March, on the *Today* programme, there was a warning that a ‘negative’ message about universities was putting off students. Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, told presenter Sarah Montague that her organisation was concerned that a negative message was being put out that international students were not welcome in the UK.³¹⁹

Newsnight of 23 January 2013, on possible immigration from Bulgaria and Romania, looked at a Portsmouth school where 90 per cent of children in the reception class speak another language at home.³²⁰ As the teacher observed: ‘It’s very much a challenge, but it’s also enriching for our whole school community. It’s a diverse world in which we live, so the school reflects that diverse world.’ Two Romanians were interviewed saying that their compatriots would not come in large numbers, and the council leader was quoted as saying that it is a ‘small price to pay’ for European Union membership. The programme featured three Britons in favour of Eastern European migration, and one against – the customary reverse-proportion of public opinion used by the BBC.

On the 27 August 2011 edition of Radio 4’s *Any Questions?*, the four panellists had a suitably diverse range of views on immigration.³²¹

Wendy Hall of Southampton University said:

our country has been hugely enhanced by all the different cultures and races and people from all over the world that come here and contribute to what we do. I see that at Southampton University ... We actually are a very multicultural society, and you know we talked about the riots earlier, they could so easily have spilled over and you [heard earlier] how somebody had stopped that happening, and it’s so wonderful to live in a country like that, like we do.

Jehangir Malik of Islamic Relief said his parents ‘worked very, very hard in helping to rebuild Britain’; he said we should emphasise the ‘positive aspects of immigration ... and we can’t shut the door on genuine asylum seekers’. Community cohesion is not about numbers: ‘It’s going to have to deal with a variety of social issues in our communities, social exclusion, deprivation, rights ... aspirations and a whole plethora of different factors.’

Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Theatre, added:

I am the great-granddaughter of Irish and German migrants, and most of the people I know actually can quite easily trace back a point when relatives, distant or otherwise, arrived in the country to make a new life. I agree with everyone on the panel ... you go to the Edinburgh Festival ... and it is absolutely teeming ... like no nation I’ve ever come across in the world with creativity ... of all kinds from so many different kinds of people ... It’s important to talk about migration and immigration because of people in this country who feel that their lives are not encouraged and not given opportunity and they land that on the role of the immigrant, and that’s not necessarily the answer.

Margaret Doyle, a Tory member of Westminster council, concluded: ‘Too much immigration is a good problem ... It’s a good thing to live in a country that lots of people want to come and live in.’ She added that ‘concern about immigration reflects some underlying problems – one is that ... our education system is not good enough ... I think it’s fair to expect immigrants ... to learn to speak English.’

The BBC’s enormous website also shows great hostility to government policy on restricting immigration. On 6 September 2010, BBC Online featured a video in which two foreign students, an employer and a university official (though not

identified as such) offered their opinions.³²² All four were highly critical of caps; all suggested that Britain would be losing out by imposing restrictions; and none accepted the evidence that some ‘students’ may be below par and be using the system to work rather than study. Only in the comments section below the line does one Moldovan contributor suggest that student visas are a scam for many people.

Later that month, the BBC’s business pages warned that the ‘offshore energy industry’ had ‘joined criticism of a cap on non-EU migrant workers’.³²³ The report featured a quote from an oil leader and one from the Liberal Democrat Vince Cable. They were in agreement with each other in their criticism of the cap. In June 2011, the BBC News Education and Family page warned that ‘Student migration curbs could cost UK £2.4bn’,³²⁴ and in February 2012 it reported that ‘Universities warn on overseas students income loss’.³²⁵

Migration Watch has calculated that on the *Today* programme, in the period from the start of the Coalition government up to 16 October 2012, 13 minutes and 38 seconds were given over to arguments against mass immigration or to explaining why the numbers should come down; while 39 minutes and 3 seconds were devoted to arguments against the policies that aim to reduce net migration. On top of this, 20 minutes and 44 seconds were given over to the highly emotive (though worthy) issue of child detention.

More generally, the BBC mindset remains pro-migration. In April 2011, the *Today* programme reported David Cameron’s speech on immigration by opening with a clip of Nick Griffin saying that the Tories had adopted BNP policies.³²⁶ The prime minister had said that ‘real communities are bound by common experiences’ and had gone on to add that ‘communities are forged by friendship and conversation, knitted together by all the rituals of the neighbourhood, from the school run to the chat down the pub. All these bonds can take time. So real integration takes time.’ Immigration Minister

Damian Green was then asked to defend the prime minister’s ‘anti-immigrant statement’.

The Census

On 11 December 2012, the results of the previous year’s Census were released. These showed a rate of change that, to many people, was shocking – even alarming. In 1951, just 3 per cent of UK residents had been born abroad; up until the Second World War, the country had experienced very little in the way of major immigration since the Norman Conquest. Though London had long been home to people from overseas, until fairly recently – even within living memory – they were a relatively small minority.

The Census showed a truly historic transformation, and yet the results were presented on *Newsnight* as a change of little consequence. A panel of four ‘talking heads’ included Daniel Knowles of the *Economist*, philosopher A.C. Grayling and playwright Bonnie Greer – all well-known supporters of more immigration and diversity.³²⁷

Greer said: ‘I don’t think it matters to anyone at all.’ Professor Grayling opined that ‘on the whole it’s a very positive thing, a thing to be celebrated ... we’ve got even greater consciousness of the diversity of the world ... and a very good thing it is, too ... London has always been a great centre for all sorts of ... cultural traditions.’

Only the fourth panellist, Douglas Murray of the Henry Jackson Society, expressed reservations. It is almost axiomatic that if a panel consists of three people in agreement against one sceptic, the viewer is bound to conclude that the latter is a maverick, rather than someone who represents the overwhelming majority of licence fee-payers.

At least three-quarters of the population want immigration considerably reduced.³²⁸ In a 2011 poll, the public were divided over whether immigration had been a good thing – a scepticism shared by a large minority of British Asians (a very British self-deprecating attitude).³²⁹ Even in the face of this

weight of anxiety and disillusionment, the BBC continues to look at immigration from the point of view of that small minority of humanity that sees globalisation through the prism of the airport business lounge. Greer, as she explained, lived near Oxford Street, in the centre of London – an area that would be far too costly for the vast majority of Britons; Grayling meanwhile works at the pinnacle of academia, where he is surrounded by a necessarily international cognitive elite.

On 31 December 2012, just a couple of weeks after the Census showed the greatest change in British history, *Today's* Mark Easton reported on change in an East End borough where just 16 per cent of the population is now white British. After interviewing a positive member of an ethnic minority, Easton suggested: 'If it can work here, then maybe multiculturalism actually works rather better than people give it credit for.'³³⁰ A happy white man seemed to confirm this view.

A woman told him: 'I feel like a foreigner now ... We have to keep moving further and further and further afield ... I've moved away because I don't feel particularly safe for my children to grow up in this area. I've never been to another country so accommodating to everybody apart from their own people.' Easton suggested: 'A little bit resentful, actually?'

The reporter then visited 19 Princelet Street, Spitalfields, the Museum of Immigration and Diversity – at least the seventh time BBC radio and television had visited the museum in seven years. A museum official explained:

Whether it's the French Huguenots ... or the Asians coming from Uganda, whatever group you're looking at, you find the same patterns – people being extremely fearful of change ... fearful that they might be marrying their children. And yet within a generation or two you also see that people recognise and enjoy and delight in the wealth of new ideas ...

We're in a multicultural world, and if we didn't have a multicultural capital and society we would not still be the seventh or eighth richest economy in the world.

Easton concluded: 'It is ... a specific story of poverty, of crime and of people struggling to survive. It's not really multiculturalism that's being tested here, it's the human spirit.'

Starting from the 1680s, some 50–60,000 French Protestants moved to Britain in the course of over a century. At most they comprised 1 per cent of the British population. The Eastern European Jews who arrived between 1880 and 1910 accounted for a slightly smaller proportion. To compare those relatively light migrations with today's influx – with up to a third of the next generation of residents descended from recent immigration – is (to put it very mildly) stretching a historical analogy.

In February 2013, the *Today* programme looked at 'white flight' in London – a term that presenter James Naughtie called 'loaded'. Mark Easton spoke to white Britons who had left East London and concluded that they were leaving because of the housing boom and a desire to move on and up in the world: 'It's about a white working-class population that escaped from the slums ... often having prospered from the housing boom ... bought themselves that little cottage by the sea.'

He signed off: 'It's a story of aspiration, it's a story of success.'³³¹

Conclusion

A BBC World advert in 1997 featured a series of children and adults from around the world. As they spoke, their voices switched about in a disconcerting way. The punch line: 'But truth speaks with one voice.'

As Georgina Born wrote:

The implication is clear and the message emotional and powerful; the BBC's global services – and BBC World – speak truth, and it's a truth that all can understand, whatever their colour, age or ethnicity. The BBC avows for itself a global role of truth-speaking. The ad is electrifying; I am utterly slain. But perhaps the message is too powerful, too propagandistic. Should the BBC use such Orwellian language? Should it dare to propose for itself such a universal role?³³²

This rather mirrors the way the BBC's critics see it. Among them is *Daily Mail* editor Paul Dacre, who has called it 'a closed thought-system, operating a kind of Orwellian newspeak ... perverting political discourse, and disenfranchising countless millions, who don't subscribe to the BBC's world view'.³³³

And what makes the BBC's bias more pervasive is that it is not intentional. The BBC takes an angle on an issue not because it has an agenda, but because, in an organisation as prone to the 'echo chamber' effect as any other, it has not suitably addressed the 'what if' of another voice. The BBC journalist does not have to accept that immigration sceptics are right and that immigration inevitably brings more costs than it does benefits; but he must ask himself: 'What if they are right?' The immigration debate is particularly susceptible to this problem because, more than any other topic, it is hedged about by taboos and by people's fears of being seen as unpleasant.

The BBC is incredibly powerful, but it continues to be in some senses the voice rather than the voices of Britain.

The Corporation has covered many areas of immigration well – among them its report on shed slum dwellers in Southall.³³⁴ And when the BBC does choose to cover certain subjects – *Panorama* episodes on segregation (7 May 2007) and people-smuggling (21 January 2013) being good examples – it does so sensitively and accurately. In the case of the Southall story, or the February 2000 *Today* report on Ukrainians forced into prostitution,³³⁵ the BBC led the rest of the media. This makes it all the more important that the most respected news source in the world should address the most serious issues. But BBC coverage does appear to be more detailed and panoramic when it is dealing with simple matters of policy that do not break an unspoken, politically correct rule: immigrants should not be portrayed as aggressors or wrongdoers.

Since 1997 (at least) the national broadcaster has consistently downplayed or ignored major immigration stories; has failed to give critics of immigration enough airtime; and has occasionally presented opposition to mass immigration as a deviant, extremist viewpoint. It has also failed to provide a balanced account of delicate areas relating to immigration. In reporting shortages of school places, lack of housing and disease control, the BBC has similarly underplayed the role of immigration. And the more likely a subject is to extend outside the 'comfort zone' and to create an awkward silence at a dinner party, the less likely it is to appear on the BBC. Perhaps the most sensitive subjects are violent crime and issues like cousin-marriage.

Some of the criticisms made of the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s still stand today: it is too geared towards London and its elite and what it sees as the national interest; and too scared to tackle controversial issues, of which immigration throws up hundreds of examples. The BBC wishes to be sensitive, but it is arguably impossible to debate politics in a multi-ethnic society – where people wear identities like badges – without being insensitive; the alternative is political quietism or

even a mildly authoritarian system along the lines of the Singapore model, where community leaders can censor ‘offensive’ broadcasts.

It would be no exaggeration to say that a foreigner who subscribed only to the BBC might visit this country and be blissfully unaware of many of the social problems associated with immigration. These have never appeared in the national conversation and are instead whispered of in the shadows. This cannot be healthy.

In its news coverage and analysis – on television, radio and the internet – the BBC has given more airtime and more space to those in favour of immigration. In particular, far greater emphasis has been placed on the need for foreign workers in the NHS than on the strain that immigration may be placing on the health service. Stories putting the latter point of view did not appear until late on in the last decade. Employers arguing for a relaxation of immigration are still given a far easier ride than they would be in any other sphere; in contrast, little time has been devoted to the substantial economic and social costs of such cheap labour. More worryingly, the argument that immigrants are needed to maintain the age ratio has several times gone unchallenged, even though it has been largely discredited. By contrast, very little time was given to articulate, sympathetic, working-class Britons who lose out from foreign competition – at least in the early years of the 2000s.

The BBC’s coverage of American immigration, in particular, has been one-sided – perhaps the most skewed of all its reporting. It is quite clear that the BBC has little sympathy for Republicans, and in particular for opponents of illegal immigration.

The BBC has given almost uncritical coverage to pro-immigration charities and campaigning groups, some of which have no mandate (and are so small that Wikipedia is not even sure they exist!). Many of the charities quoted are heavily funded by the taxpayer – a fact that is salient, but that is never mentioned in coverage.

The immigration debate is indeed extremely

complex. But there are certain valid arguments to which the BBC does not ascribe sufficient moral legitimacy. Perhaps the prime example is the argument that people might just not want their neighbourhoods to become alien to them; rather than making them morally repugnant racists, this perhaps just makes them human. Many people see high-mindedness on this issue as naked hypocrisy, since middle-class critics of racism are protected by high housing costs, which limit the extent to which an area can change ethnically.

In reporting on highly contentious subjects, it has been common practice for the BBC to present two or three people with much the same opinion – but no dissenting voice. In news reports in which more than two people are quoted, the anti-immigration voice is almost always in the minority: out of the hundreds of television, radio and internet reports over the past 15 years that are available in the BBC archives, I have been able to find only a tiny handful of stories where it has not been. Sometimes a BBC Online article has even featured four pro-immigration voices and not a single opposing viewpoint.

This imbalance has improved in recent years, largely thanks to the appearance of Migration Watch. But there is still a tendency to allow claims by pro-migration groups to go unchallenged – a privilege not accorded to the other side.

BBC coverage has become more balanced. But in light of the sweeping and irreversible social changes wrought by the Labour government, the Corporation deserves to be criticised for allowing this to happen and for its lack of scrutiny. It is not British to put out a news story about government policy which employs heavily emotionalised arguments about those individuals likely to benefit, yet ignores any critics. That is a style of broadcasting more often found in authoritarian regimes.

In its coverage, the BBC has relied too much on personalised, emotive accounts of immigration – whether the focus is on nurses we need or on

sympathetic, needy refugees. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this – the BBC does have a responsibility to promote peace between nations and communities – but the Corporation has failed to give enough coverage of the views of working-class natives in particular; and those individuals it does include have been largely unsympathetic. Sir Andrew Green of Migration Watch argues that this is ‘not an accident’, although that would be difficult to demonstrate. And while BBC programme makers may reasonably argue that they have trouble in finding more sympathetic and articulate people, it is an issue that could be investigated further.

When the BBC made its ‘White Season’ in 2008, it found in a poll that ‘a majority of white working class Britons feel nobody speaks for people like them’.³³⁶ The White Season had many redeeming qualities and it did open up the subject; but by and large it is the exception that proves the rule.

The reason the BBC acts in this way is no doubt its desire to protect vulnerable groups; and that is laudable. It goes a long way to explain why the Corporation has given such extensive (and balanced) coverage to Eastern European immigration, but very little to the large influx of people from the developing world – people who are more likely to be demonised in the popular press. In a sense, this also reflects the media’s outlook bias: media folk are more likely to meet Polish plumbers than Kashmiri brides.

Like much of British society, the BBC required ‘permission’ from a respected black public figure – the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, no less – in 2004 before it could discuss the problems associated with diversity. And while the debate has since featured numerous people telling us ‘it’s not racist to discuss immigration’ – indeed to such an extent that it has become almost wearying – some of that neurosis was itself the BBC’s doing.


The BBC has a remit to encourage community relations and a Reithian duty towards social integration and racial harmony. But in a globalised

world there are added pressures. By celebrating the diversity of Britain, the BBC believes it is bringing the country together; but such a mindset also implicitly (or explicitly) justifies liberal immigration policies, which could have quite the opposite effect. By repeatedly calling Britain a ‘nation of immigrants’, it is more likely to become so; but how much can the social solidarity cherished by Reith in the uncertain inter-war years stand continued high levels of immigration?

So long as the Corporation acts as a cheerleader for diversity but avoids awkward questions about the integration process, public faith in its integrity will continue to decline. A YouGov poll from November 2012 found that the trust BBC journalists enjoy had declined from 81 to 44 per cent between 2003 and 2012.³³⁷ The largest fall occurred in the mid-2000s (and was followed by a more obviously explicable drop after the Jimmy Savile affair). There are a number of reasons behind it, but the decline certainly points to a society whose trust in public institutions generally is shrinking.

As a society becomes more diverse, its people become more tolerant; but tolerance is a double-edged sword – it is the other side of apathy, atomisation and the avoidance of politics. The danger is that, as British society faces more awkward questions, the Corporation will continue to gloss over real, entrenched problems and present it all as a ‘success story’.

Atomisation also affects the way in which we view public goods, of which the BBC is one. This makes it increasingly difficult to justify such an expensive institution. To cap the lot, we are moving beyond a television era: the use of computers as entertainment centres presents a psychological break from television for those raised on Auntie’s licence fee.

British society is built on its institutions. The BBC must count as among the most cherished of those institutions. But the British people are the most important one of all. Without a strong, shared sense of Britishness, the others will continue to weaken. 

Recommendations


What, realistically, can be done to ensure that the BBC better reflects public opinion on immigration? ‘Echo chambers’ develop when groups of like-minded people work and live together, and there is no known way of turning around an institutional mindset once it has developed. While many people in the BBC would like to give all the spokes of the wagon wheel a share of coverage, perhaps the time has come to put in place some institutional checks and balances.

- The BBC should try to scale back the level of analysis on television and the internet. It is extremely hard to produce analysis that does not in some way distort, and certainly no newspaper achieves this.
- For major news and current affairs programmes (such as *Today*) the BBC website should list all those who have appeared, together with potted biographies detailing their interests. The BBC should not present a spokesperson from a campaigning charity (especially from one that receives a public subsidy for its work) as a disinterested individual.
- The BBC should consider devoting airtime to discussions about whether a particular programme or a ‘piece’ was impartial.
- The Corporation should have a high-profile official dedicated to monitoring political impartiality, the use of language and the choice of stories by producers. That official must be accountable to the public, and should respond to the licence fee-payers.
- A media organisation cannot be expected to represent completely the public it serves – it will always be younger, more cosmopolitan and more liberal than the population as a

whole. Most likely it will contain a higher proportion of some minorities, and a lower proportion of others; and these will be unevenly distributed. The BBC’s previous attempts to socially engineer itself are one of the many factors driving its political bias, and it should seriously consider what impact this is having on freedom of speech. Diversity of opinion is more important than diversity of protected characteristics.

- If there are groups that are under-represented at the BBC, it is older people and those living in rural areas and far away from London. The BBC should be less concerned with representing multicultural urban Britain, which is comparatively well represented.
- Just as a Christian television channel cannot cover religion impartially, so the BBC’s commitment to multiculturalism and to celebrating diversity in Britain is incompatible with its duty to report issues impartially. Multiculturalism and diversity are highly controversial subjects that provoke scepticism and even hostility among a large proportion of the population. The BBC needs to maintain certain basic journalistic standards – of avoiding incitement or hatred or racism, and of treating individuals fairly – but avoid turning multiculturalism into a faith.

The BBC has a duty to give a voice to Britain: not just to ethnic and religious minorities, but also to the elderly and to rural communities. By the same token, it also has a duty to give a voice to the overwhelming majority of people who want tight restrictions on immigration, and to the large number of people who are sceptical of multiculturalism, diversity and the metropolitan view of globalism.

More than any other policy, immigration has changed – and continues to change – British society. And unlike almost any other, this is a change that decent, liberal-minded opponents cannot reverse. For that reason, the issue of immigration must be treated sceptically, argued fairly and aired honestly as part of the national conversation. This is a conversation that can only happen if the BBC takes the lead. 

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