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A nicer country than Attlee's Britain, but not as nice as we could be

Trevor Phillips' Equalities Review published on 28 February 2007 is pioneering in confronting the most persistent social inequalities in Britain today, but also in recognising that in order to move forwards it is necessary to look back. Government often pays lip service to the concept of learning from past successes and failures, but the Equalities Review, unusually, commissioned me to lead a team of historians to do just that. The results are in the report *Equalities in Great Britain, 1946-2006* to be published shortly.

Most forms of inequality have long histories. Roman Catholics, non-conformists and Jews suffered centuries of exclusion. Buggery became a hanging offence in 1533 and by the early 19th century more men were hanged for homosexual offences than for murder. Gypsies have been simultaneously romanticised and marginalised throughout recorded history. The elderly have always been one of the poorest groups in society and women of all ages have tended to be poorer, with more limited opportunities in all spheres of life than men.

Over the past 60 years there has been more progress towards equality than at any other time in British history. In 1945, inequalities relating to age, race and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and disability were deep-rooted, taken for granted and rarely challenged. Women had campaigned for gender equality for at least 100 years, but many inequalities remained. Now, victims of all these inequalities have legal rights, social respect and cultural recognition to a degree unimaginable in 1945, though not all groups have gained equally and none has achieved everything they aspire to.

When Attlee's Labour government was elected in 1945 it prioritised economic inequality because the facts of mass poverty were so stark. It believed that when historic socio-economic inequalities were removed in the new Welfare State other inequalities would follow.

By the 1960s it was obvious that this had not happened. Some inequalities, particularly those faced by Britain's new immigrant communities, were more evident than before. But one effect of post-war prosperity and improved health and education was a more confident, less deferential and, in some respects, more open-minded nation.

In the 1960s groups who were traditionally, at most, objects of philanthropic concern began organising and speaking up for themselves as never before. The Homosexual Law Reform Society, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, the Disablement Income group, the Gypsy Council — formed in a pub displaying a 'No Gypsies' sign — were all new and vocal. They challenged political and social complacency about issues that had long been cloaked in silence: gay men blackmailed and driven to suicide, the 'colour bar' in the provision of jobs and services, mistreatment of older and disabled people in institutions, discrimination against disabled people in jobs and access to services, local authorities' refusal to accommodate travelling communities, and the appalling consequences of illegal abortions, rape and domestic violence.

These campaigns attracted media interest and influenced the legislation of Wilson's Labour governments. In the late 1960s Race Relations Acts outlawed overt racism, 'homosexual acts' were partially decriminalised, local authorities were required to provide Gypsy and Traveller sites, equal pay was introduced, community-based care for the sick and disabled expanded and access to divorce and abortion became easier.

This legislation acknowledged and began to address fundamental inequalities, but it did not eradicate them. Rather they stimulated larger-scale, more colourful campaigning during the 1970s. Low-key lobbying by 'respectable' groups for limited legislative change was superseded by assertive, demonstrative campaigning about the whole range of inequalities, in a spirit epitomised for all of them by the slogan of the gay lobby: we're Good As You. The campaigns of the 1970s fostered communities of organisation and politicisation in and among previously marginalized groups that has never been reversed.

In the unsympathetic political environment of the 1980s and early 1990s, Europe became a new force for equality. Campaigning groups increasingly used the European Courts to challenge UK legislation, for example, forcing the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Scotland and Northern Ireland and the reduction of the age of consent for gay men to 18.

Alongside experienced campaigners, new, previously silent groups used their new-found confidence and anger at the discrimination they experienced to demand equality, often in the courts. These ranged from the large number of competent older people thrown out of work by businesses 'downsizing', to the small, but articulate and well-educated community of Transsexuals. Gypsies and Travellers, still among the least educated and most excluded groups, also used the courts, and with the support of the CRE, gained ethnic minority status and protection under race relations legislation in 1988. Irish Travellers attained the same independently in 2000.

Since 1997 we have witnessed a succession of legislative reforms comparable with that of the late 1960s. Workplace age discrimination is now illegal. There are unprecedented safeguards against racial and religious hatred. Parents and carers can request flexible working. Civil partnerships and transsexual marriages are commonplace. Public bodies have duties to enable disabled people to live independently, to promote good race relations, to accommodate travelling as well as settled communities. These changes have been achieved, above all, by the campaigns of the people affected, although these campaigns have clearly gained more sympathy from some governments than others.

But the Equalities Review has shown that the protection of the law does not translate neatly into social, cultural or political equality. Mothers of young children, particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, fair badly in the employment market. Age discrimination remains pervasive. Religion, more than race, has become a fault-line since 9/11 and the recent debates over the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill exposed the sensitivities in trying to address this.

Gypsies and Travellers still have the worst social outcomes of any ethnic group. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people continue to experience prejudice and bullying. Aspects of the current Mental Health Bill are depressingly reminiscent of historical, stigmatising approaches to mental illness. One of the key inhibitors of equality revealed by our historical research was the persistence of hostility and prejudice, reinforced and reflected by some sections of the media.

Blair's Britain is undoubtedly more equal than Attlee's Britain, but it is not equal for all people, all of the time. Understanding how inequalities came about and the history of struggles against them, what worked, what didn't and why, will help overcome the remaining obstacles to equality.

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