

Nationality, ethnicity and culture: Guardian hosts the racist ideas of David Goodhart

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The following is the first part of a three-part comment.

In February, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published a banal and thoroughly reactionary article by the editor of *Prospect* magazine, David Goodhart, who questioned whether an ethnically diverse society and a welfare state are any longer compatible.

In a two-page spread, Goodhart suggests that it is impossible to maintain a welfare state in a heterogeneous society. People, he argues, are only willing to share material resources with those with whom they share a common culture and values. That common culture is being eroded, he asserts, because, “We not only live among stranger citizens but we must share with them. We must share public services and parts of our income in the welfare state, we share public spaces in towns and cities where we are squashed together on buses, trains and tubes”

This he identifies as the “progressive dilemma”: whether one can any longer reconcile a commitment to progressive welfare policies with opposition to strictly enforced immigration controls. After all, he writes, “To put it bluntly, most of us prefer our own kind.”

For a paper synonymous with liberal values, the decision of the *Guardian* to give prominence to such views must be seen as a deliberate attempt by its editors to shift the political debate amongst its readers to the right. This is confirmed by the generally positive response by prominent journalists and liberal intellectuals to Goodhart that has been published in its pages. Far from condemning Goodhart’s views, most solicited replies have been positive, while criticism has been directed at those who have challenged him.

Many within Britain’s liberal elite have been quite prepared to admit that they too prefer their own kind and also object to rubbing shoulders on trains and tubes and buses with people from other ethnic and cultural groups.

Goodhart hotly denies that he is a racist and is careful to balance every remark that might be interpreted as racist with an affirmation of liberal sentiment about the merits of diversity, but in his reply to the debate in the latest edition of *Prospect* he explicitly identifies his critics in ethnic terms.

His reply is headlined, “Opinion on my diversity essay divided, in part, on ethnic lines.” The qualification “in part” is characteristic of his style, but if there was any doubt about the general direction of his argument, he continues:

“Before publishing it I showed the essay in draft to a representative cross-section of the liberal intelligentsia, mainly but not exclusively white, and got a broadly positive reaction. After publication, most white readers, whether they agreed with the general drift or not, accepted it as a perfectly legitimate argument.”

The very fact that Goodhart feels free to identify his readers by the colour of their skin, rather than as moral philosophers, journalists or economists, indicates how an intellectually and morally compromised liberalism has accepted ethnicity as a legitimate means of assessing the validity and character of a person’s views.

Goodhart may not think he is a racist, but it is difficult to put any other

interpretation on an argument that depends so heavily on biological and genetic criteria.

In his original article to back up his warning that the future support for of welfare policies is under threat, he notes that 9 percent of the population of the United Kingdom “is from an ethnic minority.” Goodhart then admits that the figure in Sweden, with a more extensive welfare state, is 12 percent. Nevertheless, “On current trends,” Goodhart warns portentously, “one fifth of the population will come from an ethnic minority by 2050, albeit many of them fourth or fifth generation.”

Such scaremongering over a supposed problem created by ethnic diversity has intellectual precedents only on the far right. There is little to differentiate Goodhart from Margaret Thatcher, who also warned that Britain was in danger of being “swamped” as a result of excessive immigration, other than that he tries to quantify the process.

What is Goodhart saying? That in half a century, one person in 20 may have a great-great-great-grandparent who was from an ethnic minority. Since very few people can trace their families further than three generations back, it is difficult to see a problem here. When we consider that since every individual has two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, 16 great-great-grandparents and 32 great-great-great-grandparents, the most remarkable thing is that only one fifth of the population could claim an ancestor from an ethnic minority among these 62 people.

If Goodhart’s criteria for problem-free citizenship were enforced, scarcely a person in the UK would be regarded as truly British. Goodhart protests that the citizenship he is talking about is “not an ethnic blood-and-soil concept,” but that is precisely what he is advocating in this generational scenario. The only other occasion on which citizens were asked to prove their ancestral status in this way was in Nazi Germany, and even the Nazis only demanded three generations before they issued an *Ariernachweis*, the certificate of ethnic purity that was essential for receiving an education or getting a job.

Goodhart’s underlying racism is expressed in his comments on US welfare policies. He claims that the United States lacks a welfare state because it is ethnically diverse. “Too many people at the bottom of the pile in the US are black or Hispanic,” he claims.

He cites the figures for ethnic diversity as though this made the connection with welfare provision or its absence a sociological fact. But the African-Americans he classifies as “stranger citizens” have an American ancestry going back more than 300 years—12 generations or more. But it seems that 12 generations is not enough to make you a truly integrated American citizen, according to Goodhart. Hispanic-Americans probably have an even lengthier New World ancestry, but by Goodhart’s criteria they will always be Mexicans or Puerto Ricans, and neither they nor their white neighbours will presumably be willing to jointly fund schools and hospitals with their tax dollars.

Goodhart’s arguments are emotive and designed to inspire fear. “Is there,” he asks ominously, “a ‘tipping point’ somewhere between

Britain's 9 percent ethnic minority population and America's 30 percent, which creates a wholly different US-style society—with sharp ethnic divisions, a weak welfare and low political participation? No one knows but it is a plausible assumption.”

He leaves the reader in no doubt of his opinion that the welfare state is in danger not from inadequate government spending, staff shortages and privatisation, but from the growth of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality Trevor Phillips identified the political character of Goodhart's article in his reply: “The xenophobes should come clean.”

Phillips wrote, “They are liberal Powellites; what really bothers them is race and culture.”

He was referring to Enoch Powell's notorious “rivers of blood” speech in 1968, in which he said, “In this country, in 15 or 20 years time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.”

The *Economist* also noted the true antecedents of Goodhart's argument and the significance of its embrace by the *Guardian*, commenting, “[T]he interesting thing is that connections between immigration and social dislocation have been made, and not just by men in jackboots.”

Phillips evokes a legitimate comparison, but there are important differences. Powell was a right-wing Tory MP; Goodhart's article appeared in a liberal magazine and was given a two-page spread in Britain's foremost liberal and pro-Labour Party newspaper. Nor has the response been comparable. Powell's speech provoked mass demonstrations on the left opposing his racism. Edward Heath sacked him from the shadow cabinet, and his career in British politics was marginalised, although he remained a behind-the-scenes mentor to Margaret Thatcher.

In contrast, the bulk of responses to Goodhart from established journalists and intellectuals have been favourable, while Phillips himself has been subjected to a blistering attack for stating the obvious. Former *Guardian* journalist Melanie Phillips, who now writes for the right-wing *Daily Mail*, demanded to know, “How on earth have we got to such a pass, where a patently decent person is smeared as a racist for wishing to preserve a national identity?”

Julian Baggini, editor of *Philosophers' Magazine*, accused Trevor Phillips of tarring Goodhart with the “Powellite brush.”

According to Goodhart, the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality is now having second thoughts. At a recent Home Office seminar on race where the two men were speakers, Phillips assured Goodhart that he did not call him a racist.

Goodhart's presence at a Home Office seminar and the consistency of the support for Goodhart's views suggest that we are looking at more than one individual or even one journal floating an idea here. There is a certain agenda involved.

Prospect magazine functions as a think tank for new Labour policy development. Both Prime Minister Tony Blair and his leading adviser Peter Mandelson have written for it. But it draws in and seeks to make palatable ideas from other sources, including those on the right. Goodhart himself traces the central thesis of his article to the remarks of Tory politician David Willets, who defined the “progressive dilemma” at a roundtable conference that *Prospect* hosted on welfare policies.

In essence, both *Prospect* and the *Guardian* are attempting to provide legitimacy to a racist campaign that finds final expression in the anti-immigrant and asylum policies of the Blair government.

Asylum seekers have been a longstanding target of racism in the tabloid press, but last August the *Sun* newspaper of Rupert Murdoch, the *Daily Express* and others began a hysterical campaign to exclude migrants from the east European countries that are due to become European Union members this year. The Roma population was singled out for special vilification in the British press in a manner reminiscent of Nazi propaganda.

On February 14, Goodhart appeared in the *Guardian* of the debating the issue of east European immigration with Khalid Koser, a lecturer in human geography at University College London. Goodhart voiced the fear that if immigration is allowed to continue, “we will wake up in 20 years and find we have become a US-style society with sharp ethnic tension and a weak welfare state.”

A few days later, Goodhart was in the *Guardian* again, urging, “Close the door before it's too late.” He deplored the liberal reluctance to discuss immigration, but was grateful that, “thanks in part to the lead given by [Home Secretary] David Blunkett, we now have a much more open and robust public argument than even 10 years ago.”

When the government decided to restrict migration from the new EU countries, the *Guardian* responded with an editorial praising the wisdom of this policy. In a comment piece, *Guardian* journalist Martin Kettle even welcomed the decision as an “intensely practical exercise in Goodhartism.”

Goodhart is an opinion former who is close to the government. In recent months, the government has introduced a series of measures attacking the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers. New EU citizens will be denied the same right as other EU citizens to social security benefits. The benefits that other EU citizens can receive are in fact very limited—after a period of six months residence, they can claim means-tested income support and housing benefit. By introducing this distinction, the government has created second-class citizens who—denied access to even this minimal level of benefit—will be open to the most ruthless forms of exploitation.

Asylum seekers have come under attack from the new Asylum and Immigration Bill, which will deny them the right to appeal to the courts. In a recent report, *Get It Right: How Home Office Decision Making Fails Refugees*, Amnesty International UK has shown that, according to the Home Office's own figures, 16,070 initial decisions were overturned on appeal in 2003, compared to only 13,875 in 2002—an increase of 2,195 or 16 percent (one in six). The report reveals that decisions are based on “inaccurate and out-of-date country information, unreasoned decisions about people's credibility and a failure to properly consider complex torture cases.”

Clause Seven of the same bill will deny social security benefits to failed asylum seekers, even children. The Refugee Children's Consortium (RCC) has warned that it will lead to children living rough on the streets and has condemned the bill as “dangerous and immoral.” British Association of Social Workers director Ian Johnston called the legislation “a blunt instrument of coercion—many children will drop out of sight and be exposed to greater harm.” Jacqui McCluskey of the children's charity NCH said, “It is unbelievable that the government is even proposing to make children destitute in this day and age.”

Government plans do not stop there. Earlier this year, Blair admitted that he was considering sending asylum seekers to camps in Tanzania. The British government has reportedly offered Tanzania £4 million in aid to accept the scheme, which resembles the plan broached by Blunkett last year to send asylum seekers to camps in Albania. These schemes, with their truly chilling echoes of Nazi deportations, have thus far only foundered because the host governments have been unwilling to cooperate.

To be continued



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