

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

Part two

Ann Talbot
7 April 2004

In February the Guardian published an article by the editor of Prospect magazine, David Goodhart, who questioned whether an ethnically diverse society and a welfare state are any longer compatible. The decision by the Guardian to give a platform to such racist views is a deliberate attempt by its editors to shift the political debate amongst its readers to the right.

This is part two of a three-part comment. The first part appeared April 6.

Goodhart's ruminations have been met with near total prostration on the liberal and social democratic left. The most left-wing amongst the *Guardian's* regular columnists, George Monbiot the anti-globalisation campaigner, and Paul Foot, a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, have remained silent on the issue. They are apparently unconcerned that someone expressing views comparable to those of Enoch Powell should be given such prominence in a paper for which they write.

Other radical intellectuals with a background in left politics expressed their approval in *Prospect*. Kenan Malik, who has argued against biological theories of racism in his *The Meaning of Race*, welcomed Goodhart's article. Nigel Harris, author of *The New Untouchables*, which opposed immigration controls, praised it as "a sensitive account of some of the fears of the effect of sustained immigration."

Bob Rowthorn, once a leading intellectual of the British Communist Party who has himself written of the dangers of a loss of social cohesion as a result of immigration, thought that Goodhart was underestimating the threat. He warned of "a huge cumulative transformation" of British society if immigration was allowed to continue unchecked.

This contrasts sharply with the generally hostile response to Goodhart from *Guardian* readers. Dr Duncan Hall of Skipton noted, "The internationalist strain of labourism—the idea that a worker in Iraq and a worker in Britain are united more strongly than a worker and a capitalist in Britain—is one of the greatest achievements of humankind." Mary Cooper of Stockton-on-Tees pointed out that Goodhart was "justifying the further reduction of the role of government and curbing of the welfare state." Simon Fairlie of Somerset wrote, "nowhere in this article does he acknowledge that the wealth which draws economic migrants to this country was acquired through centuries of colonial plunder."

To all intents and purposes these *Guardian* readers and others like them have been made political orphans, given that the paper they have long supported now makes itself a platform for racism and many leading liberal or left-wing intellectuals and political groups are keeping quiet or, worse, actively agreeing with Goodhart. They are in effect being marginalised and disenfranchised from the democratic political process.

Underlying this polarised political response is the dramatic *social* polarisation that has taken place over the last decades—one that has

produced a highly privileged layer that no longer identifies its interests with those of the majority of the population, of which the personnel of Blair's government is an archetypal representative.

An ideological gulf has opened up between *Guardian* readers and *Guardian* writers, which reflects the proletarianisation of wide strata of professionals from whom the newspapers readers are drawn.

As the latest social trends survey shows, the 1980s were characterised by a large increase in inequality not just at the highest and lowest levels but between the richest and those on middle incomes. In 1976 the poorest 75 percent of the UK population owned 27 percent of the wealth. By 2000 their share had been more than halved, falling to 12 percent.

One indication of this widening gulf is in top executive pay packages, which over the last decade have increased by an average of 288 percent, while the average pay increase over the same period has been only 45 percent. To give but one example of what this means, the average income in Britain is £21,000 a year, but Matthew Barrett, chief executive of Barclays bank doubled his pay to £3.1 million last year thanks to a cash bonus of £1.9 million.

These layers are venomously opposed to paying any of their fabulous wealth over to be used to fund social programmes. A study by Professor Paul Johnson of the London School of Economics shows that the proportion of their income these high earners pay in tax is lower than at any point since the 1950s. Someone earning ten times the national average would have paid 47 percent of their total income in tax in the 1950s; they now pay about 38 percent. Striking though these figures are, they nevertheless underestimate the extent to which there has been a transfer of wealth to the richest members of society, since so much corporate wealth is hidden in offshore accounts.

Not only has there been an increase in poverty, but also the division between the manual working class and the professional middle class has increasingly been eroded while the top layers have increasingly detached themselves from the rest of society and effectively formed an exclusive group.

Anthony Sampson comments in his recent book *Who Runs this Place?*

"Today the elite looks much more unified, as a small number of familiar names keep reappearing in different disguises—whether as tycoons, trustees or patrons of public funds. Visiting Americans are surprised that most people they want to see can be found at a few clubs, dinner parties or gatherings in a few central London postal districts."

Goodhart's article expresses the authentic voice of those "few central London postal districts." The super rich insist that universal welfare entitlement is done away with as an unacceptable drain on corporate profits. And the privileged few immediately beneath them—the Blairs and

the Goodharts—serve both their betters and themselves by translating this demand into right-wing government initiatives and the theoretical justification for such policies.

Welfare policies can be founded on enlightened principles of universal rights or they can be founded on narrow, sectional interests that divide society and degrade the recipients. Goodhart's version of the welfare state is definitely of the latter kind.

For Goodhart, like the government, welfare policy cannot be based on universal right to provision, because it involves a division of a supposedly fixed national cake. But this is not the real issue—the size of the national cake, the wealth of society, is in fact growing. What is shrinking is the willingness of the rich to allow their own “share” to be touched. And they ensure that this is the case by slashing welfare whenever possible and shifting the tax burden away from themselves.

Of course this real concern of the wealthy few that they do not have to pay is routinely dressed up as concern for the rights of “ordinary Britons” and opposition to freeloading and “welfare tourism” by immigrants, but once the principle of general entitlement and a certain equality is challenged this becomes the basis for excluding ever broader categories of people from care.

“It is one thing,” Goodhart writes, “to welcome smart aspiring Indians or east Asians. However, it is not clear to many people why it is such a good idea to welcome people from poor parts of the developing world who have little experience of urbanisation, secularism or western values.”

Goodhart speaks of shared cultural values, but the same distinction that he applies to ethnic groups could be applied to a mentally ill person, a criminal, a drug addict, an alcoholic, an underage mother, or a delinquent child. All these people could be said to offend against cultural norms and be accused of in some way failing to share the values of the rest of society.

There is in fact a welfare model that fits Goodhart's criteria of ethnic purity and social cohesion exactly. It was the system that existed in Nazi Germany. The Nazis certainly introduced welfare measures. They raised family allowances and maternity benefits as part of their policy of racial purity and eugenics. But the corollary was that the mentally ill, the disabled, the socially dysfunctional, ethnic and religious minorities were systematically murdered.

It is still the case that, though the government is desperately trying to change this, any sick person who turns up at a National Health Service hospital would be treated on the basis of need no matter where they came from. This is partly because the hospital has no means of billing them, but also because it would be unthinkable for the staff to turn them away. Goodhart now advocates a two-tier welfare state in which an Asian shopkeeper with citizenship would have access to all its services, but a Slovenian worker on a temporary work-permit would not. How exactly this would work he does not say. If both were involved in a road traffic accident would the ambulance pick up the shopkeeper but leave the Slovenian worker bleeding in the street?

Goodhart's rejection of universal rights is made explicit by his embrace of the philosophical outlook of Edmund Burke. He writes, “The traditional Burkean view is that our affinities ripple out from our families and localities to the nation, and not very far beyond. That view is pitted against a liberal universalistic one that sees us in some sense equally obligated to all human beings, from Bolton to Burundi—an idea that is associated with the universalist aspects of Christianity and Islam, with Kantian universalism and with left-wing internationalism.”

Burke does not often figure in the *Guardian* since he is regarded as one of the premier philosophers of Conservatism. His natural home would be in the *Daily Telegraph*. But even in the Tory press this particular interpretation of Burke would be unusual. He is most often cited as an advocate of gradual constitutional change. Citing Burke in this context and on the question of universal rights is something to set the political

antennae twitching.

Let us refresh our minds about who Burke was, for there are some interesting parallels to be made regarding his own evolution and that of the petty bourgeois liberal intelligentsia today.

Edmund Burke was an eighteenth century Whig politician and political propagandist. His was not an original mind and the widely recognised eloquence of his pen and tongue exceeded the profundity of his thought, which moved along well-worn and conventional lines.

It is not so much Burke's ideas in themselves as the conjuncture of his ideas with the times in which he lived that gives him a lasting historical significance. Burke lived through three revolutions: the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the industrial revolution. He spent most of his political life on what would be thought of in modern terms as the left of politics. If he had died at 60, history would have remembered him as something of a radical who supported enfranchising Catholics and dissenters, wanted home rule for Ireland, opposed slavery, impeached Warren Hastings for plundering India, favoured parliamentary reform, attacked governmental corruption, tried to curb the power of the monarchy and backed the American revolution. He was a friend of Tom Paine and moved among dissenting intellectuals with advanced social and scientific ideas.

But in the course of his sixty-first year Burke wrote *Reflections on the French Revolution*, the book on which his reputation rests and in which he denounced every principle of the revolution and the Enlightenment—especially any profession of social equality and internationalism. He would he said, “abandon his best friends and join with his worst enemies,” to prevent the contagion of French ideas spreading to Britain. And this was exactly what he did. He split the Whigs and broke with the friends of a lifetime. On May 6, 1791 Charles James Fox rose weeping to his feet in the House Commons and begged Burke to continue their friendship, but refused to change his opinion of the events in France. Burke was adamant and “Thus ended the friendship between Mr. Burke and Mr. Fox—a friendship which had lasted for more than the fourth part of a century.” [1]

What had appeared initially as a personal quarrel was a political turning point that realigned British politics. Burke recognised that Whig politics as they had grown out of resistance to the Stuarts in the seventeenth century were at an end. From the English Civil War onwards it had been possible to maintain an alliance between artisans and labourers on the one hand, and landed aristocrats and City oligarchs on the other. Even in the course of the eighteenth century Whig magnates had felt able to use the economic grievances of the labouring classes in extra-parliamentary protests for their own political purposes. The French Revolution, and perhaps more fundamentally, the industrial revolution brought that period to a close. The industrial revolution had created a working class and the French Revolution had shown what the urban masses could do. It is Burke's distinction to have been first to recognise this political shift. With Burke's *Reflections* we enter the world of modern British class politics.

The last seven years of Burke's life were spent in campaigning to redirect British foreign and domestic policy. He succeeded in doing so. William Pitt “the Younger”, himself once a radical, publicly aligned himself with Burke and waged a relentless war against France while mercilessly repressing any sign of resistance at home. This turn of events was the more remarkable since as Eric Hobsbawm has observed there was not a single person of talent and enlightenment who did not sympathise with the revolution. [2] Poets, scientists, industrialists and politicians were among its most illustrious supporters, but there were besides masses of ordinary people who formed political societies throughout Britain in solidarity with the French Revolution. Burke's *Reflections* sold 19,000 copies, but *The Rights of Man*, Paine's reply to it, sold 200,000. No pamphlet war like it had been seen since the 1640s.

To be continued



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact