

The “White Season”: The British Broadcasting Corporation’s Pim Fortuyn moment

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Last week, the BBC ran its “White Season”—a series as puerile as it was offensive.

Billed as an exploration of “what it means to be white and working-class in 21st century Britain,” the trailer summed up the central message. A close-up facial shot of a white, bald and obviously working class male was shown. As the hymn “Jerusalem” played, brown hands appeared, writing one after another in foreign languages in black pen across his face. Eventually his entire face—bar the whites of his eyes—was coloured black. As he closed his eyes, the words “Is white working-class Britain becoming invisible?” appeared.

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, under the heading “White and working class...the one ethnic group the BBC has ignored,” Richard Klein, the broadcaster’s Head of Independent Commissioning for Knowledge asserted that “Over the past two decades, Britain has been through a revolution.”

“Globalisation, mass immigration and economic upheaval have helped to transform the fabric of our nation,” he continued. “These changes have been the subject of noisy debate within the media, politics and academia, yet it is a curious irony that, in all the heated discussion about the consequences of this revolution, one voice has been largely absent: that of the white working class.”

Whereas once “the white working class were seen as an integral and respected part of our national life,” now, “The voice of the white working-class is barely allowed to intrude into British politics or culture. In metropolitan circles, where sneering at any minority ethnic group would be regarded as an outrage, this white working-class opinion is all too often treated with suspicion or contempt.”

With its “White Season,” Klein went on, the BBC was “determined to redress the balance by commissioning a new season of programmes looking at the attitudes of the white working class.”

Klein’s claims are an invention. Just when was it that the working class was considered the “backbone” of the country and treated with “respect”? Britain is a country in which every social advance—from healthcare, education, trade union rights and universal suffrage—had to be fought for tooth and nail in the face of fierce hostility from the ruling establishment. And once the working class had established these gains, over the past 30 years or so the ruling elite has done its utmost to dismantle them one after the other.

But it is the prefix “white” that really counts here. In preparation for the series, BBC “Newsnight” commissioned a survey amongst 1,000 or so “white” people. Blacks and Asians were excluded. So presumably were all non-British “whites.

And what of the results of this survey? It found that those designated as “white working class” were slightly more pessimistic about the future than those designated as the “white middle class.”

To anyone outside the rarefied environs of BBC executives and their political paymasters, this will hardly come as a revelation. Britain has indeed been through a “revolution” over the last decades. It is one in which the expunging of “class”—or more particularly, the interests and concerns of the working class—from every aspect of social and political life has been the central concern of the ruling establishment, and most especially the Labour Party, as it sought to implement a massive transfer of wealth away from working people to the super-rich and major corporations, making Britain one of the most socially unequal countries in the world.

Globalisation, job insecurity, crime and political marginalisation all featured strongly in the listed concerns of “white workers” and only slightly less-so amongst those decreed to be “white middle class.” Had the BBC not engaged in its own brand of racial profiling, one would have found that similar concerns find equal expression amongst black and Asian working people.

But none of these were explored in the BBC’s “White Season.” Its sole concern was to assert that the sense of political alienation and insecurity amongst white workers was bound up with race, and the economic and social impact of immigration and the sense of betrayal produced by the “liberal nostrums” of multiculturalism and “political correctness.”

From the Wibsey Working Men’s Club, just outside Bradford, where “With high unemployment and a perception that recent Asian immigrants receive the lion’s share of Government benefits, members feel that their very community is under threat and that racial tensions could erupt at any time,” to Peterborough where an influx of Polish immigrants is said to have raised tensions, to Barking in east London, the message was the same: “White, working class Britain” is being submerged beneath a sea of blacks and foreigners.

The great significance given to the small percentage points revealed in the survey between the views of working class and middle class people to the “loaded” questions they were asked was meant to hammer home the message.

In the same article, Klein insinuated that immigration was wholly for the “middle classes” who benefited from a “Polish plumber or a Ukrainian nanny.”

Others were still more explicit in deriding the “middle class” and their “liberal” values for being oblivious to the real cost of immigration. Caitlin Moran in the *Times* railed that immigration was “very useful” for the “liberal left-wing” who could use the “Ukrainian carpenters on £2 an hour.” Meanwhile, Moran continued with a palpable sense of horror, it was the working classes “who are actually living this multicultural life, and sharing their shops, schools, hospitals, pubs and streets with dozens of different nationalities, cultures and beliefs.”

Author Tim Lott, in an article entitled “White, working class—and

threatened with extinction,” also claimed that “it’s the do-gooding liberal middle classes that have betrayed those ‘beneath’ them.” This “betrayal” apparently consists of the abolition of selective grammar schools, implementing policies of “multiculturalism” while deriding “the host white indigenous culture,” suppressing English nationalism and building council houses—in that order.

Lott at least acknowledged that “there is also a large liberal working class” that is, “rarely mentioned by the WLMC [white liberal middle class] who like to keep a monopoly on morals.” But it is not the views of this “white, working class” that concerns him and others. As Lott explained, their fascination is rather with those layers of the “white working class” who are “wilfully ignorant, hedonistic, angry, often racist,” and even “verging on the crooked,” tending “toward the philistine” and mistrustful of “education.”

Not that the BBC’s programme makers and its supporters claim to represent this working class. Klein remarked somewhat loftily, “Most people at the BBC don’t live lives like this, but these are our licence payers,” while Lott, answering his own rhetorical question as to whether he looks down on the white working class “now that I am middle class myself? Probably.”

The BBC claimed that its aim was to allow the “authentic voice of the traditional white working class” to be heard. Given the parameters set, this “voice” turned out almost universally to consist of right-wing commentators, overt racists and even fascists.

The BBC’s series of programmes were obsessed with the British National Party. Two of the areas chosen are where the BNP had scored small successes in local council elections. In Wibsey, a young white male—a Union Jack flag disfigured by a swastika hanging behind him—boasted, “If I saw a young Paki getting kicked and knocked over, I would not blink an eyelid, I hate them so much.” In Barking, the documentary focused on the campaigning activities of a local BNP officer.

Initiating the series, BBC “Newsnight” invited BNP leader Nick Griffin on to a roundtable discussion where he blamed “Islam and particularly Pakistani immigration” for the hard drugs trade in Britain.

Many have noted that such a programme could not have been shown 10 or even 5 years ago. For the programme makers and their supporters it is evidence of a refreshing air of openness, “objectivity” and “impartiality.”

The BBC’s supposed “liberal” bias has long been the focus of attacks by media opponents, such as Rupert Murdoch, and those with a political axe to grind—from the Conservative Party (which views the BBC as Britain’s last “nationalised” institution), to the Blair government for its coverage of the Iraq war and its aftermath, and Zionists over its very occasional critical treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But over the last period, these complaints have also been raised from within the BBC.

Klein himself made a speech in 2006 in which he said that the BBC was “out of touch” and ignoring “mainstream” opinion.

His remarks followed an “impartiality” summit involving BBC executives and leading presenters where, according to the right-wing *Daily Mail*’s gloating report, “BBC executives admitted the corporation is dominated by homosexuals and people from ethnic minorities, deliberately promotes multiculturalism, is anti-American, anti-countryside and more sensitive to the feelings of Muslims than Christians.”

In June 2007, a BBC-commissioned report found that the corporation existed in a “left-leaning comfort zone,” and that it had an “innate liberal bias.” The 80-page summary found that its broadcasting output was dominated by a liberal consensus that failed to give voice to a wide range of views.

Commenting favourably on the “White Season” in the *Financial Times* under the headline “White men unburdened,” John Lloyd noted that “A cultural movement is happening within liberal opinion. It no longer greets immigrants with open arms. They are welcome—but with tighter

conditions, aimed at encouraging, even mandating, integration.... All these orotund concepts—assimilation, cultural diversity and mutual tolerance—are now in contest....

“This political shift has now spilled into Britain’s most important cultural institution, the BBC.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has commented previously on the social and political evolution of a significant layer of the former liberal intelligentsia. From the Labour Party’s role as the chief ally of the Bush administration in the US and its doctrine of pre-emptive war, to the campaign by supporters of the *New Statesman* and the Euston Manifesto group against the “appeasement” of Islamic fundamentalism, former pacifists and leftists have become transformed into political apologists for free market capitalism and so-called liberal imperialism.

Domestically, faced with growing social inequality, a global economic recession and competition between rival nation states for control of vital markets and resources, the former liberals argue that it is no longer possible to sustain universal provision of health, education, housing and democratic rights. Rather these rights should be afforded, in general, to those born in Britain who have paid into the system. David Goodhart, editor of the pro-Blair *Prospect* magazine (for which Lloyd also writes), most famously propounded this view in the pages of the *Guardian* in 2004, accompanied by measures to “close the door” on immigration “before it’s too late.” “To put it bluntly, most of us prefer our own kind,” he declared.

Far from being “impartial,” the BBC’s “White Season” is a major attempt to encourage and legitimise this embrace of racial and ethnic politics as a justification for all manner of right-wing social and political nostrums.

The highlight of the BBC’s efforts and by far the most politically revealing of the various programmes was Denys Blakeway’s revisiting of Conservative politician Enoch Powell’s infamous speech on immigration in 1968. Speaking before an audience of Conservative businessmen in Birmingham, Powell had warned of the dangers of racial integration in apocalyptic terms. Citing an unnamed Wolverhampton constituent, who was harassed by “wide-grinning piccaninnies” and “excreta pushed through her letterbox,” Powell—paraphrasing the Roman poet Virgil—foretold an imminent race war and “the Tiber foaming with much blood.”

In the documentary, Powell was portrayed as a “maverick” who “outraged the political establishment,” but “struck a chord with the public who wrote to him in their thousands, and London’s dockers came out on strike in support.” Its underlying thrust was that Powell’s sacking from the shadow cabinet the day after his speech meant that it was no longer possible to openly debate the dangers of unchecked immigration. Forty years on, the documentary suggested, Powell had been proven correct. Immigration and the policies of “multiculturalism” were jointly responsible directly for everything from the inner-city riots of the 1980s and 1990s to the July 7 London bombings.

A monetarist and free marketer when it was still considered socially inadvisable, Powell was in all essentials a forerunner of the Thatcherite Conservative Party. His economic prescriptions combined with his hostility to Britain joining the European Economic Community meant that he was a political opponent of then Conservative leader Edward Heath.

His speech was intended as a challenge to Heath by the Tory right. Deliberately inflammatory, it was directed against the Labour government’s planned introduction of the Race Relations Act prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of race in matters such as jobs and housing allocation—the notorious “no blacks, no Irish, no dogs” signs. Powell’s little white lady—whose existence was never proven—was a landlord who, he suggested, should be free to discriminate as she pleased.

Powell went on to leave the Conservative Party and joined the Ulster Unionist Party in 1974. By the end of Thatcher’s leadership, however, he

was largely reconciled with the party.

None of this dealt with in the documentary. Nor was there any mention of inner-city poverty and police racism and harassment that actually sparked the riots in 1980 and 1990, much less the Iraq war that has done so much to fuel the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Diehard reactionaries such as Powell's biographer and champion of a specifically English nationalism, Simon Heffer, and philosopher Conservative Roger Scruton were featured in the documentary, which began by stating that "in the wake of riots and terror attacks, many are now asking, was Enoch Powell right to predict disaster in his 'Rivers of Blood' speech?" Juxtaposing negative comments on "multiculturalism" with scenes of the London bombings, it concluded, "ten years after his death, many believe that Powell's arguments were often prescient."

Here it is worth noting Blakeway's remarks on television's treatment of history at the Imperial War Museum in London in October 2004, in which he highlighted the importance of "revisionist" historians, able to put "the past in a different light, and whose views have often changed the way the past is perceived."

The "reinterpretation"—or rather rehabilitation—of Powell is only the latest *mea culpa* offered by former liberals who have now embraced the ideas of the right. Following on from their support for pre-emptive war and the "war on terror," they have now ditched their old policies of multiculturalism in favour of a repackaging of the neoconservative theory of the "Clash of Civilisations"—masquerading as a defence of the "white, working class."



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