

Freeing Histories and Future Flowerings

Narrative, lies and truth in multi-ethnic Britain



'Children will be told lies'

The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, also known as the Parekh Report, was published on Wednesday 11 October 2000. 'Children will be told lies,' said an influential journalist two days later, referring to the deplorable consequences which would ensue, he believed, if the report's recommendations and proposals were adopted.¹ Several other journalists issued similar dire warnings. The report called for aspects of Britain's national story to be rethought and reimagined. This could only be done, said another journalist, 'by inserting bias and dogma, propaganda and downright lies' into, for example, the teaching of history in schools.²

The commission's report was said by national newspapers to be 'sub-Marxist gibberish'³ and 'an insult to history and our intelligence'⁴. Its authors were 'worthy idiots'⁵, a 'second-rate, unrepresentative clique'⁶ and 'a crack-brained think-tank' whose members 'genuinely hate Britain'⁷. Other phrases in the media that week to sum up the authors of the report included 'middle-class twits'⁸, 'left-wing wafflers'⁹ and 'disconnected, whingeing liberals'¹⁰. Of the report's parent body, the Runnymede Trust, it was said that 'whether black or white,

born in Britain or not, the Trust is united by a hatred of this country and its people ... So why don't its members all go and live somewhere else?'¹¹

The terms and ideas in such press coverage were also used in hundreds of offensive and threatening emails and phone calls, which staff began to receive at the Runnymede office within hours of the media coverage starting. The idea that the commissioners should 'all go and live somewhere else' was particularly popular. Mainly, it was recommended that they go 'back' to Africa or India (though incidentally only a third of the commissioners had family origins in these places). Some correspondents, however, were content for them simply to go to France, and they pointed out that it was now easy to get a train that would take them out of the country through the channel tunnel. 'To show you what I think of your report,' said an anonymous caller on the day of publication, his voice choking with fury, 'I'm going to go out of my house right now, and I'm going to slit the throat of the first Paki I meet.'

Such phone-calls and emails were clearly based on the abusive and inaccurate media coverage of the report, not on reading the report itself. They were deeply distressing for the members of staff who were at the receiving end of them. Their abusive nature has already been signalled by the quotations above from the coverage. The principal inaccuracies and distortions in them are outlined below. But first, for readers of this essay who are not familiar with the report, there is a brief summary of its structure and content.

Structure and Content

The report¹² had three parts. The first of these, entitled 'A Vision for Britain', outlined fundamental beliefs that, as Bhikhu Parekh expressed in his personal preface, 'are, or deserve to be, shared by most people in Britain':

All individuals have equal worth ... Citizens are not only individuals but also members of particular religious, ethnic, cultural and regional communities ... Britain is both a community of individuals and a community of communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society, and needs to reconcile their sometimes conflicting requirements ... Every society needs to be cohesive as well as respectful of diversity, and must find ways of nurturing diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and shared identity among its members.'¹³

The report argued that building and maintaining such a society entails six large tasks. These were named as rethinking the national story and the national identity to make them more open and inclusive; recognizing that all identities are developing and overlapping; maintaining a balance of cohesion, equality and difference; dealing with all forms of racism, including not only those which are based on physical appearance but also those which, like antisemitism and Islamophobia, are based on culture and religion; reducing economic inequalities; and establishing a human rights culture.

The second part of the report applied these six tasks in turn to various areas of social policy. The topics covered in this section included policing, education, employment, health, politics, and religion.

Third, the report was concerned with strategies of change. Two of the chapters in this third segment involved the role of government and concerned respectively: a) structures; and b) legislation.

The chapters in the second and third parts of the report led to the formulation of about 130 practical recommendations. Most of these were in due course implemented, though not necessarily as a direct consequence of the report, and not as wholeheartedly as the commissioners hoped. The recommendations included the proposal that there should be a single Equality Act; that equality legislation should be combined with human rights legislation and that all public bodies should have a positive, proactive duty to eliminate discrimination and foster good relations.

Distortions and falsehoods in media coverage

The misrepresentation of the report began on Tuesday 9 October 2000, the day before it became publicly available in bookshops. It had been embargoed until the day of publication, but this did not prevent the *Daily Telegraph* from publishing substantial, but selective and inaccurate, quotations from it. A front-page headline referred to the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw: 'Straw wants to rewrite our history'. The sub-headline was: "'British" is a racist word, says report'. The article beneath the headline and sub-headline, written by the paper's home affairs editor, claimed that the commission 'defines the UK as "a community of communities" rather than a nation. It says the description of its inhabitants as British "will never do on its own", largely because the term has racist connotations'. (In fact, as emphasised later in this essay, the report referred to *racial* connotations, not racist ones.) The *Telegraph's* headline and sub-headlines influenced coverage of the commission's report by other papers, particularly the *Daily Mail*. For example, the *Mail* changed its second edition of 10 October in order to include an item headlined 'British is racist, says peer trying to rewrite our history'. The first paragraph of this item said: 'An explosive new report being considered by Jack Straw calls for Britain's history to be rewritten and labels British a racist word.' Similarly, late editions of *The Sun* on that day contained the headline "'British" is race slur'.

The false statements in the *Telegraph*, *Mail* and *Sun* misinformed their own readers. They also misinformed the journalist who wrote the editorial in the *Guardian* on 11 October, headlined 'Prescription for harmony, but race report is spoilt by a bad idea'. Further, they misinformed the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, and his staff. On the basis of their false statements, Mr Straw distanced himself from the report when he made his official response to it at the launch event on 11 October. He referred in his response to the *Guardian's* coverage and said correctly that he and the *Guardian* editorial were in agreement. However, he did not say, and presumably had not been told by his staff and therefore did not

know, that the *Guardian* editorial was seriously misleading overall, and in places downright false.

Sometimes, factual errors or distortions in media coverage are of slight significance. In this instance, however, they were arguably extremely damaging. Not only did they prevent serious discussion of what the report did in fact say, and prevent the government from responding appropriately to it. But, even worse, they were emotive and alarmist. They inevitably provoked and strengthened, therefore, the very anxieties about the nature of multi-ethnic Britain which obstruct the kind of rational debate for which the commission called.

The most serious single falsehood in the *Telegraph's* story was the claim that the commission had stated that the term British has 'racist' [sic] connotations. What the report in fact said, at the end of two long chapters in which there was substantial discussion of concepts of personal, cultural and national identity, was that 'Britishness ... has *racial* connotations' (Paragraph 3.30 on page 38, emphasis added). The difference between the words 'racist' (used by the *Telegraph* and then in direct consequence by many other papers) and 'racial' (used by the report) is well known. Also, it is commonly held that the term 'racist' is an insult, whereas the term 'racial' is widely used in discourse about anti-discrimination legislation. The *Telegraph's* misquotation put a false spin not only on its front page story, but also on an article inside the paper by its home affairs editor and on its editorial. It was a spur not only to inaccuracy, but also to abuse.

The commission's report explained at length what it meant by 'racial' as distinct from 'racist'. There was also an explanation of 'racial' in the *Daily Express*, which at that time was essentially supportive of the values which animated the Runnymede Trust.¹⁴ Its anonymous editorial on the morning of Thursday 12 October observed 'that a single phrase in a 400-page report into the future of a multiracial Britain has been pounced upon by those determined to suggest that the Government is undermining the identity of this country with mad political correctness'. It continued:

All the Runnymede-sponsored report actually points out is that when most of us hear the word 'British' we assume that means a white person when it could refer to someone of Chinese, Asian or Afro-Caribbean extraction. To react to that with tub-thumping demands to protect our national identity is to miss the point. Britain today is a multicultural society. The question is how to adapt the traditional image so that it embraces everyone. That is a worthy and patently achievable aim. ... Of course there is still a long way to go. But ending prejudice will certainly not be achieved by damning a report which highlights the problems. Much better to start by acknowledging Britain has come a long way from the days when it was a white, imperialist power.

A second serious falsehood in the *Telegraph's* coverage was its assertion that the commission's report says the description of the UK's inhabitants as British 'will

never do on its own'. The report did, it is true, recall the wholly obvious point that the word British cannot be used to describe all inhabitants of the British Isles, since the isles include Ireland. This was twisted by the *Telegraph*, and by all papers which based their coverage on reading the *Telegraph* rather than the report itself, into the absurd notion that the report recommended that the word British should no longer be used to describe the inhabitants of the United Kingdom.

A third serious falsehood in the *Telegraph's* front page story was the statement that the commission 'defines the UK as a "community of communities" rather than a nation'. The commission's report simply reflected the widespread, official and unexceptionable view that the UK is not and never has been a single unified nation. It argued at length that Britain should not be pictured as consisting of one large homogeneous majority plus various small minorities who have more in common with each other than with the so-called majority. Therefore it proposed that the expression 'community of communities and citizens' is a more helpful way of picturing Britain than to use the discourse of majority and minorities.

An influential TV chat show host declared that the commission wanted to rewrite Henry V's speech at Harfleur, as imagined by Shakespeare: 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends ... or close the wall with our community of communities dead.'¹⁵ (No matter that *Britain* was not at war in 1415 when Henry was imagined by Shakespeare to have made this speech, and indeed did not even exist as a political or military entity. In any case, Shakespeare had the king speak of 'our English dead', not of 'our British dead'.) The commission's concern, to repeat, was to get away from the mental picture of Britain as a 90/10 society: 90 per cent a homogeneous mass of white people among whom there are few if any significant differences in their interests, values and life experiences; and ten per cent so-called minorities, imagined to have more in common with each other than with members of the majority. The report suggested that the term 'community of communities and citizens' is in this respect a helpful way of picturing the United Kingdom. It did not—of course!—suggest that it should be the UK's new official name. Rather, it was an attempt to introduce the well-known concept of nation states as imagined communities, and therefore the concern that the national story, from the past through the present into the future, should be far more inclusive than it has been hitherto.

The behaviour of the *Guardian*, Britain's leading left-liberal daily paper, was particularly disappointing and irresponsible. Some of its journalists, certainly, wrote accurate and supportive accounts of the report. The leader-writer, however, based their comments not on the report itself but on what they had read in the *Telegraph*. So did the senior editorial staff who chose headlines for some of the news reports. The consequence was that many people professionally concerned with race equality issues were seriously misinformed. They turned to the *Guardian*, believing and expecting it to be a trustworthy source. It was most regrettable that their trust on this occasion was misplaced. At least, though, one *Guardian* journalist, Gary Younge, did bother to read the report itself and to compare it with what the *Telegraph* falsely claimed:

It is no accident that the *Telegraph* refers to the past while the report refers to the future. For the paper's reaction is concerned not with culture that is live, evolving and complex, but heritage that is frozen, atrophied and mythologized. It cannot fathom the report's suggestion that "people must be treated equally ... with due regard to differences in experience, background and perception" because it cannot understand the difference between discriminating between people and discriminating against them. It wants to tolerate minorities, the authors of the report want to celebrate them ... The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain is a report with valuable signposts about where we have to go to become a country built on equality and mutual respect; the initial reactions provide valuable indications of the kind of barriers that will have to be overcome to get there.¹⁶

These words were, alas, two days too late to undermine and replace the falsehoods which the *Telegraph* had published 48 hours earlier, and which had been widely recycled by other papers. A lie travels halfway round the world, it has been said, before the truth has got its boots on.

Context

At the time of the report's publication, there had been a Labour government for just over three years, and it was widely expected that there would be another general election within the next six months or so. It was to the electoral advantage of the Conservative Party if the Labour government could be portrayed as un-British or anti-British. Also it was to the advantage of right-wing factions within the Conservative Party to put pressure on the party's leadership to move to the right in foreign policy matters, and to elect a new leader from the right of the party rather than from the centre.

A journalist who is also an academic happened to acknowledge shortly before the publication of the Parekh report that he and his colleagues are rarely able to obtain all the facts about any story. Some of our informants mislead us, even when protecting themselves with off-the-record briefings. Some people who could correct our interpretations of events refuse to talk to us. From hints, partial truths and concealed agendas, we try to grasp the whole and, naturally enough, there is a tendency to embellish, to stretch the facts which suit the scenario we imagine to be true. Sometimes we simply misunderstand. It is in the nature of our business that we are bound to make mistakes. However hard we strive to eliminate them they occur.¹⁷

The scenarios into which journalists fit the facts are often established by newspaper owners and senior editorial staff, and there is always an imperative to sell, which means not being upstaged or wrong-footed by the scoops and potential scoops of rivals. A favourite scenario, it is relevant to recall, is one which excites a frisson of fear. Readers like scare stories, and newspaper owners print them not only to intrigue and reassure their readers but also, on occasion, to put pressure on politicians by encouraging a sense of moral panic.¹⁸

In terms of ethnicity, religion or nationality, about half of the commissioners were from minority backgrounds, including Jewish and Irish. This appeared to alarm the readers of the right-wing press. 'One might have thought,' said someone in the *Telegraph*, 'that Lord Parekh's 40-year connection with this country would at least have taught him that presuming to tell your hosts what to call themselves is an act of atrocious bad manners'.¹⁹ A journalist for the *Mail* wrote: 'The sheer bad manners of those involved is startling. Here are people who, for the most part, have achieved utterly disproportionate gains from living in Britain. Yet they insult the host population.'²⁰ Indignation occasioned by the 'bad manners' of the minority members of the commission was complemented and amplified, in the view of the right-wing press, by the disloyalty and untrustworthiness of the members who were white, a sort of *trahison des clerics*, a treachery of intellectuals.

Learning points

What learning points may be drawn from these recollections? Tentatively and hesitantly, the following broad generalisations seem worth considering.

- 1) Reports on ethnicity, religion and belief raise issues of national identity that are both controversial and sensitive, for they are not only bound up with competing political philosophies and programmes but also with deeply held emotions and loyalties. If a newspaper is determined to classify as rubbish a report dealing with issues of national and personal identity, there is relatively little that the report's authors can do to prevent this. The report's sponsoring body can, however, budget for a carefully and sensitively designed public relations exercise in advance of publication, focused narrowly in the first instance on friendly allies and supporters.
- 2) There also needs to be a contingency budget for a rapid-response programme if, as happened in the case recalled in this essay, a report is treated unethically and dishonestly by certain newspapers.
- 3) The old and rather world-weary adage that 'There's no such thing as bad publicity', since (so it is believed) all publicity is valuable, is often an uncertain and unhelpful guide to practical action. There needs to be judicious balancing of a) the need for positive publicity and b) the need to avoid the kind of negative publicity that, if used as a pawn in political manoeuvres, prevents serious and sustained deliberation.
- 4) Reports dealing with controversial and sensitive subjects should try to avoid using terms and phrases which are not readily and widely understood by people who are not academic specialists. Phrases such as 'post-nation' and 'racial coding', used in the Parekh report were in retrospect unfortunate. 'There is an obvious tension,' noted Bhikhu Parekh after the publication of his report, 'between academic and political discourse. The former is playful, inventive, unconcerned with practical consequences; the latter is tied up with deepest passions and fears.' 'Language needs to be found', he remarked, that is 'easily intelligible to ordinary citizens and that yet retains the power to challenge common sense, and to persuade readers to see familiar realities in fresh and novel ways'.²¹

Concluding Note

As a way of poetically its hopes and intentions the Parekh Report quoted at one stage some words by Ben Okri about the nature and significance of narrative, both in the life of individuals and in the life of nations. 'Stories,' Okri has said, 'are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.' He continued: 'Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.'²²

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Parekh Report, there was a major lecture by Professor Lord Parekh at the London School of Economics in 2011. It can be viewed at

[The+Parekh+reort+lecture+by+Bhikhu+Paraekh&type=E210GB885G0#id=1&vid=1dfd62615409dd1a6599a255541588a1&action=click.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dfd62615409dd1a6599a255541588a1&action=click)

¹ Richard Littlejohn, *The Sun*, 13 October 2000.

² Paul Johnson, *Daily Mail*, 11 October 2000.

³ Editorial, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2000.

⁴ Editorial, *Daily Mail*, 11 October 2000.

⁵ Article in *The Times*, 12 October 2000.

⁶ *Daily Mail*, 11 October 2000.

⁷ Article in *Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 2000.

⁸ Dawn Neesom, *Daily Star*, 12 October 2000.

⁹ Anonymous editorial, *Evening Standard*, 12 October 2000.

¹⁰ Simon Heffer, *Daily Mail*, 14 October 2000.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bhikhu Parekh and Runnymede Trust Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh report*. London: Profile Books, 2000 (frequently referred to as the Parekh report).

¹³ For a substantial discussion of Parekh's thinking on national identity over the last 30 years, see Varun Uberoi, 'The Parekh Report: national identities without nations and nationalism', *Ethnicities* 15.4 (2015), 509–526.

¹⁴ The wife of the then owner of the *Daily Express* was an active member of the Commission. The owner himself had been raised to the peerage by the Labour government that came to power in 1997.

¹⁵ Robert Kilroy-Silk, *Kilroy*, BBC Television, 18 October 2000.

¹⁶ Gary Younge, 10 October 2000.

¹⁷ Roy Greenslade, 'The prince and the apology', *Guardian*, 30 October 2000.

¹⁸ Stanley Cohen (1972): *Folk Devils and Moral Panic: the creation of mods and rockers*, London: Routledge.

¹⁹ Letter from Stephen Bush in the *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 2000.

²⁰ Andrew Alexander, *Daily Mail*, 13 October 2000.

²¹ Bhikhu Parekh, 'Reporting on a report', *Runnymede Bulletin* 326, June 2001.

²² Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, quoted in the Parekh report in chapter 8, 'Summary of the Vision', p. 103.