

# Report

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## Post-war Liberalism and the politics of race and immigration

Evening meeting, July 2001, with Lord Dholakia and Dr Shamit Saggar  
Report by Sue Simmonds

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Liberal Democrats regularly congratulate themselves on their party's honourable record of opposing or mitigating the worst of the government's policies on race. How far that feeling could or should be justified by a historical view of Liberal policy and race relations is a fascinating question, one thoroughly explored in this History Group meeting. It is especially interesting in that this period of history reflects a lack of Liberal influence through elected representation – although we have come to claim the work of Labour ministers such as Roy Jenkins as our own.

Interestingly both speakers, Dr Saggar (Reader in Electoral Politics at Queen Mary College, University of London and author of *Race and Politics in Britain*; he spoke in his personal capacity) and Lord Dholakia (President of the Liberal Democrats), had arrived in the UK in the 1950s and '60s, and their historical and political perspectives were clearly shaped by this experience.

Dr Saggar delivered a well-constructed analysis of the 'liberal hour' of the 1960s, in which race relations policy was formed between the two Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968. He described the first interventions of the Labour government in shaping race relations policy, and the inspiration for them to intervene in an area in which they first established that they could play a role – a fact now accepted as a legitimate area for government involvement.

The prevailing view, articulated by

Roy Hattersley, was that good race relations could only work within the framework of a tight immigration regime, and this, in turn, is indefensible without good race relations. Dr Saggar pointed out that this is not a workable scenario; government may become constrained by the possibility of immigration crises and unable to deliver the tight regime on immigration. We should be asking whether as a society we have been well served by this dualistic approach. Was it the responsibility of all parties, including the then Liberal Party, to work within that framework, or should they have tried to challenge it?

The 'liberal hour' also saw the attempt to build the architecture of long-term tolerance in British society. Racial harmony would be pursued and people of all shades of political opinion would want to move towards it in the long term. Home Secretary Roy Jenkins argued that the long-term goal should be equal opportunity and cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. This is still an issue for society today, but the developments of the time did succeed in laying the foundations for the management of tolerance in a mature industrial society.

Particularly interesting was the handling of the Kenyan Asian crisis in 1968 – a classical historical dilemma. Dr Saggar asked the question: what should have been the role of government in that crisis in a normative sense? Is it, was it, or should it have been possible for government to challenge the premise of restricting the

Kenyan Asian influx in 1968, and in doing so to codify the logic that only restrictive immigration policies – particularly in the context of crisis – can be a prerequisite for good race relations? Dr Saggar claimed that realists would say that in many ways governments have little room for manoeuvre; they are managing a crisis and they operate under extreme pressures and timeframes, including the need to keep their supporters on-side, both in the country and in the House of Commons.

Pitched against this is the critique of appeasement. The logic was to move towards a position of zero immigration; Britain's unified cohesive integrated society was not created because of society's belief in tolerance, but because it closed off options to immigration wherever possible. We now think of this period in history as the exception to the rule

Dr Saggar then asked whether political parties can lead, or have merely to follow, public opinion. He cited studies showing that public opinion tends to lie to the right of centre, and described the resulting trend to move to where the voters are as the 'iron law of rationality'. Dr Saggar's summary of the psephology and party competition were interesting and prompted several questions and interventions in the discussion. The proportion of ethnic minority individuals voting Labour (four out of five) has changed little since 1974 (when figures were first recorded) and hardly varies between elections. He pointed out that there is nothing sinister about this; it is probably the outcome of the class and socio-economic background of the voters and of Labour's successful trumping of the other parties as an 'ethnic-minority-friendly party' (although history shows that this is not always true). Dr Saggar also suggested that the politics of cultural flattery may play a part, although this could also work for the Conservatives in engaging the Asian vote.

Dr Saggar concluded with the question: why have Liberal Democrats been so poor in attracting the votes of ethnic minorities? He questioned the lack of profit in the relationship with

ethnic minority voters, as Liberals have been in the forefront of resisting the anti-immigration logic and rhetoric and in the vanguard of building tolerance and racial inclusivity.

Lord Lubbock, who chaired the meeting, questioned Dr Sagar's view of the 1960s as a 'liberal hour' and suggested that the Race Relations Acts had masked institutional racism, particularly in the public sector. This question needs to be revisited, to ask whether this veneer of tolerance created a fraud, generating much bigger problems as a result. This point is worth noting within the debate on immigration and asylum taking place under this government, especially as the most recent Immigration Act has been widely criticised as giving powers to discriminate on grounds of race.

Lord Dholakia's talk covered a great deal of ground, focusing on the various legislative measures. Prior to the arrival of large numbers of people from Commonwealth countries, the only piece of legislation dealing with nationality was the British Nationality Act of 1948, which conferred the right of citizenship on all citizens of Commonwealth countries. Lord Dholakia posed the questions: would anyone in 1964 have dreamt that thirty years later Britain would have had three pieces of race relations legislation, and now a fourth in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act? Has immigration any relevance to the Hattersley approach, that controls are needed to establish good community relations?

Lord Dholakia argued that if one accepts a multi-racial society then one must look at the reality of the process of immigration. The first mention of Britain as a multi-cultural society was in the government's 1965 white paper, which admitted that Commonwealth immigrants had made 'a most valuable contribution'. The welfare and integration of newcomers was not even discussed. Immigration policy was dictated not by the needs of this country, but based on the colour of the immigrant's skin. A numerical quota system was introduced by the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962, but no controls were applied to the entry of women and children joining

their families, and therefore more people entered under the quotas than had before.

Racism played a very important part in electing British politicians, even before Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech. Lord Dholakia discussed the 1965 by-election in Smethwick, in which the Conservative candidate (who defeated the Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker) took a negative stance on immigration, claiming that a TB camp would be set up in the Midlands. He asked where the Liberal Party fitted then, with six MPs, none representing a seat with a high concentration of ethnic minorities. Even now, Simon Hughes' seat is the exception and the party has never made the impact that it should do in similar areas.

Lord Dholakia recalled his experience working at the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, when they met the Prime Minister to complain that the government was bringing in legislation without consulting, as they had said they would. They were told that the measures would have gone through even if they had been consulted.

Politicians are still unclear about the process of integration. Roy Jenkins did not want Britain to be a melting pot creating stereotypical Englishmen; he defined integration not as a process of assimilation, but one of equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Tolerance can, however, produce friction; it can imply that we do not like you but we will try to tolerate you. That is reflected in a number of pronouncements made by the government on immigration and race relations. Jenkins cleverly brought in the Race Relations Act 1976 at the same time as the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, on the grounds that people who supported the end of discrimination for women would support the end of discrimination on the grounds of race.

The debate about immigration is now being opened up by the government, though only under the pressure of having an unworkable asylum system and economic need, rather than having any great conversion to the

positive outcomes of immigration or diversity. Lord Dholakia was clear that the discussion needs to be redefined as being about needs and skills, rather than race, in order to maintain present standards of living.

In concluding, Lord Lubbock warned that the 1960s were a time of cohesion in immigration. Britain's current influx of migrants originate from disparate countries – the result of asylum-seeking rather than economic migration from Commonwealth countries – and the record of the 1960s may not, therefore, have much to teach us. Regrettably this was a point not really taken forward by the discussion, especially in the light of Dr Sagar's observations and his questions about the handling of the Kenyan Asian debate and settlement policy. What is the right to political asylum if not crisis immigration – albeit on a different scale?

Since this meeting took place there have been riots on the streets of several northern towns and race relations have again had the most cursory of discussions in the media. Immigration is constantly discussed in terms of asylum, and parts of the media constantly reflect a sense of unease in middle England, arousing racist undertones. It would be interesting to reflect how far the seeds of these disturbances were sown in the settlement policies of the last forty years.

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