



## MIGRATION

**Speech by Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP**  
*Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, Leader of the Commons  
and Secretary of State for Equalities*

~

**London South Bank University Lecture**  
**30 November 2007**

I'm grateful for the opportunity today to speak, here at London South Bank University in Southwark, on the question of race and culture in Britain. This borough is the first home in the UK of many who come from all over the world. There are, in Southwark, those who came from China, Vietnam, from Latin America and the Caribbean, and many from Africa. When I did a consultation for the Commission for Africa the responses in my constituency came from those who had come from 14 different African countries.

And while people have close knit communities of those who come from the same country as them, there is also a great deal of mixing.

The new arrivals from Africa and Latin America share Southwark with those who came here from the Caribbean in the 1960's, the white community whose families have been living here for generations and the new young flat and house owners who come to live in a central London borough which is vibrant and diverse.

It was in the wake of the tragedy of the death of Damilola Taylor that this diversity and unity was to my mind best expressed by Kemy, a Nigerian woman who said:

"Damilola was a Nigerian boy, but he could have been a Turkish boy, he could have been an English boy, he could have been a Jamaican boy. We all have lost a son."

The families who live and work in Southwark are here to work, to make a better life for themselves and their families than they could in their country of origin. They work hard, often in low paid jobs. Starting off in council housing or in private rented flats, many will move out of Southwark to buy a home they can afford.

So when I hear discussion about race, and immigration, and social cohesion, it is the changing face of Southwark families which is in my mind. And I want to add my perspective, a Southwark perspective, to the national debate about race and immigration.

First, I believe our debate about migration should start from recognition of the historic and important contribution that immigrants have made to life in this country: the families like my husband's parents who came from Ireland - she was a nurse and he dug the roads before he became a train driver; the families who came from the Caribbean to work in London Transport; the families who came from Pakistan and India and Sri Lanka who have provided generations of doctors and dentists.

But they have not always been warmly received. Sadly, there is nothing new about Britain being less than welcoming. My husband tells of how when he was Secretary of the Brent Trades Council, he came across some old minutes of a meeting of a trade union campaign stirringly demanding “Keep the Welsh out of Middlesex”. I remember, in the 1970’s being told that if I went for a flat in a road where there was a Catholic church I should offer less rent as “there would be lots of Irish in the area – drinking too much and having too many children.” I didn’t heed the warning and married one! And there was fear too, mixed with the disapproval of the Irish community – particularly at the height of the IRA bombing campaign. So my point is that just as this country has long benefited from migration, there has too, regrettably, always been fear and hostility to blunt the welcome.

And skin colour plays a particular part. How do the proud children born here to migrant families from Africa and the Caribbean feel about a national debate which sees even the second and third generation of those families as less British than the children born here to Irish or Polish migrants?

The best way to fight against this hostility, and its political manifestation in the BNP, is to understand to the full the advantage that immigrants give Britain in an increasingly globalised world.

### **Migration: key to the UK’s future in a globalised world**

Strip away the immigrants and you strip from London much of its dynamism and its hope for the future. As London changes, so it is able to face confidently outward and to be a great capital city which is of, and understands, the rest of the world. We are a small country in a world characterized by growing economic and social interdependence. London’s immigrants of yesterday and today help us face tomorrow with greater confidence.

That is the great prize for us in London and the United Kingdom if we understand and work with each other; for if we do that we can understand and work with the rest of the world. And as a small country, if we can do that, we will prosper. And London can be the “world’s capital city”. So we should look beyond the balance sheet of migrants working in our health services or migrants using our health services; or migrants contributing through their taxes or migrants claiming benefits. My point is that migration and diversity offers us the prospect of being internationally literate, being able to look outward, having a huge advantage over unchanging homogenous societies.

Indeed, this was borne out by the fact of our ability to win the competition to host the 2012 Olympics was secured partly on the recognition of the diversity of London.

The opportunity is there for us all to create a United Kingdom that can stand as an example to the world of different cultures and communities working and living together as part of a common national identity.

### **Diversity and Britishness**

Valuing diversity must be part of defining our ‘Britishness’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But what do we mean by ‘diversity’? To me, diversity means that people are able to uphold their own cultural and religious beliefs and peacefully coexist, whilst having a common thread of being British – society being held together by every individual having a pride in where they come from and a shared hope for where they are going. To achieve this, all cultures need to be open, self-critical and interactive in their relations with each other

This was best summed up for me by a group of Southwark residents from the Ivory Coast who I met to discuss their South London organisation FARASSA. We met to work out how we could

match together their offer to help the local schools and the local schools' need for language teachers. Ivorians are French speakers. As part of the discussion I asked why they chose London when they fled the violence in their own country – rather than France or Canada. Without a moment's pause they gave three reasons

- Their wish for their children to have English – a global language - as their first language;
- Their sense that they could use their enterprise and initiative to set up businesses and prosper in our strong economy; and
- That while being British they could still be Ivorian.

We should be proud that that is how our new citizens see the country that they have chosen for their home.

What can we do to ensure that the aspirations of those who come here are met? To be a diverse, multicultural and peaceful community we must have equality and tackle discrimination and racism.

But we are a long way from equality. We see around us here in Southwark the picture that makes up the national statistics. Two thirds of black people live in the worst housing in the country. By every measure of poverty used in a Policy Studies Institute study including housing and worklessness, and the unique Families and Children Study index of hardship, minority ethnic children are more likely to live in households prone to hardship and marked by disadvantage and persistent low income.

We have taken action but we still have further to go. And that means responding to the foremost demand of black parents in Southwark, which is a better standard of education for their children.

### **Migrants contributing to development in their country of origin**

The economic contribution of migrants is measured not just in our economy but in the economies of their countries of origin and their contribution to international development. The London Borough of Southwark has the largest community of African origin in the UK. As well as working hard, often in low paid jobs, and supporting themselves and their family, many Africans in the UK send money back to their country of origin.

This money, “remittances”, is a vital, largely unseen, contribution to tackling poverty and helping development around the world. A survey I carried out in my constituency found that forty per cent of respondents sending remittances earn less than £12,000 a year – taking home £830 per month, but sending an average of £130 a month to family abroad. Some people are paying more than 30 per cent in administration costs, with an average cost of £7 for every £100 sent. Many respondents often relied on two or more low-paid jobs in order to provide for both their family in the UK and send money home. This meant long, unsocial hours often at minimum wage level.

The Government has made International Development a priority by creating a new Department for International Development (DFID) with a Secretary of State at the Cabinet table, more than doubling the UK overseas Aid Budget, setting up the Commission for Africa and making International Development a priority for other well-off countries in the meetings of the G8 and the European Union

But the role of the UK in international development is more than what the Government does. As well as the work of Aid charities, such as Oxfam and CAFOD, hard-working men and women in the African Diaspora are making a huge difference with their generosity through remittances. The Government's aid budget is £4.4billion – remittances are more than half that, again contributing an extra £2.3billion from the UK to developing countries worldwide. The Department for International

Development is taking steps to support remittances and in his pre-budget report in December 2005, the Chancellor acknowledged the key role they play.

The remittance money is important. I asked one of my Nigerian constituents how he could be sure that remittances were not wasted on those who didn't need the money or projects which local people didn't want. He answered with the question, "why would low paid Africans who already struggle to make ends meet send money back home if it wasn't absolutely necessary and if they weren't convinced it was doing a great deal of good?"

Government does best when it formulates policy on the basis of listening to people and learning what people themselves are doing in their lives. This is as true for International Development as it is for health or education.

It is important for us in Government to acknowledge as we do explicitly where people make a huge contribution to achieving government objectives – in this case, tackling poverty in the developing world. People will believe that Government does not see and understand what they are doing unless it is specifically acknowledged.

### **Protecting migrant workers from exploitation**

As well as working in the health service, in IT and in the City many of the cleaners who work in London live in Southwark, as do many who clean the House of Commons. And it is right that we take further the legal protection for migrant workers employed by "agencies" who are not only prey to exploitation but who are used to undercut the hard-won pay and conditions of existing workers. As well as working in the health service, in IT and in the City.

I must pay tribute to the work of the Trade Union movement, particularly the Transport and General Workers Union, in organising and representing migrant workers who face exploitation

### **The democratic imperative of diverse representation**

To bring about the progressive change that we want to see, our diverse community must be reflected in our political system. I have long argued that our democracy could not call itself representative or democratic while women, fifty percent of the population, were less than four percent of our House of Commons. I argue too, that our House of Commons is not representative or democratic until it represents, through its MPs and local councillors, the diversity of our country. While eight percent of the country is from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, there are only two percent of MPs from those communities.

We have made progress from the time when I was first an MP in 1982 and there was not one single Black MP. I was joined in Parliament by Keith Vaz MP and Bernie Grant MP. I am proud that now my colleagues in the PLP include women such as Diane Abbot MP and Dawn Butler MP, and David Lammy MP as my ministerial colleague. And now, the Speaker of the House of Commons calls into the debates Sadiq Khan, Parmjit Dhanda, Khalid Mahmood, Shahid Malik, Marsha Singh, Ashok Kumar, Mark Hendrick and Mohamad Sarwar. It is because Labour is committed to equality and diversity that it is our party that has been the opportunity for more diverse representation.

This is not just important so that all can see our democracy representing them, it is also important to enable us properly to debate and formulate policies fit for a diverse country in an interdependent world. Take one recent example. There has been recent political controversy over the question of Muslim women covering their faces. Who does this issue most affect? Muslim women. Who have the strongest and widely different views on this issue? Muslim women. Who are the group that are unrepresented in the House of Commons? Muslim women. My point is that you cannot have sensible discussions about people who are not there to contribute to the debate.

The last General Election saw a net increase of only two black Asian and minority ethnic MPs taking the total to just fifteen. But we still have further to go. If the chamber is to reflect the make-up of society, that figure needs to increase four-fold.

### **Strengthening local politics**

The changing nature of my own constituency of Camberwell and Peckham since I have been the MP is reflected in Labour's representation in our local council. I was in no doubt as I went out campaigning with our candidates in Camberwell and Peckham in the council elections in Southwark 2006 that they would be successful. For in each ward, the candidates reflected the community. The youngest candidate was 24, the oldest 64; half were men and half women; and as well as those from families in Peckham for generations, there were candidates from different African countries as well as from the Caribbean, and black candidates born here to migrant parents. They were all elected and they have gone on to give my constituency representation in our local council of which we are rightly proud, representation within local Government that they deserve and we need. My point here is that not only was this good representation, it is good electoral politics too. A party which represents the community will have the confidence of its community and will win votes.

### **The diversity debate must be part of the Labour leadership elections**

And whether it is in our council chamber in Southwark or in the chamber of our House of Commons, it is not enough for black and minority ethnic representatives just to be there, we need to ensure that they have the support and respect they need as pioneers. It is a harder when you are breaking new ground as I remember well when I was first elected in 1982 as one of only 10 Labour women MPs in a House of Commons of 650 members.

The task of ensuring proper levels of representation and inclusion goes beyond Parliament and councils and extends into all spheres of public life, at all levels. Representation is crucial throughout all public decision-making bodies: including school boards of Governors, health trusts, local area forums and local Government. With it will come greater levels of confidence amongst black and minority ethnic communities in the democratic process and in their role in society as a whole. With it will come better informed decision-making.

### **A fair and just justice system**

Our justice system is a classic example where diversity is essential to ensure public confidence and to reassure ourselves that the system which is responsible for dispensing justice is itself fair in the way that it recruits. Women victims of domestic violence can have more confidence in a legal profession of men and women working together. Black and minority ethnic victims and defendants will have more respect for a judiciary of black and white working together.

That is what underlies the arguments for greater diversity in the legal profession and in the judiciary. I always say that I will know that work is done when we have in the House of Lords Judicial Committee – the highest court in the land – someone who is from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community and who has a Liverpool accent. The only question is: will she be wearing a wig?

### **Conclusion**

The work of tackling prejudice and racism is a moral imperative and a duty for any modern political party. You cannot be 'a bit' against racism: you need to be standing up against it, identifying it in all its forms and eliminating it from the mainstream of political culture and public life. It is the duty of politicians to act as custodians for shared values: including those values of freedom, opportunity and equal life chances, each of which can exist only when conferred without regard to colour, race

and ethnicity. They are universal values and they apply to all without exception. That is why to fight prejudice is first and foremost a moral imperative.

It is our task to ensure that no-one is left out in the task of identifying the problems that divide us, whilst no-one is left behind in finding the solutions that bring us together.