

To those who say where is Labour's passion for social justice,
I say education is social justice.
Education is liberty. Education is opportunity.

Tony Blair, April 1997^[1]

The fact is you can talk to a teacher who will tell you that at the early stages of primary school it is perfectly plain which kids will be going off the rails a few years later. (...) The black community - the vast majority of whom in these communities are decent, law-abiding people horrified at what is happening - need to be mobilised in denunciation of this gang culture that is killing innocent young black kids. But we won't stop this by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it.

Tony Blair, April 2007^[2]

INTRODUCTION

An opinion poll marking Blair's ten years as prime minister (PM) revealed an interesting range of views: most respondents said he was 'ineffective' (60%) and 'cannot be trusted' (63%); and yet a majority (51%) also described him as 'likeable as a person' (YouGov 2007: 1). Apparently contradictory reactions and perceptions, such as these, often lead to Blair being seen as an enigma. Someone so concerned with being liked that he was once nicknamed 'Bambi', but who then led his country into a war that many viewed as illegal and literally millions protested against on the streets of London (Hammond 2004). Certainly Blair's premiership saw many changes: in the 10 years that separate the quotations (above) education moved from being seen as *the* doorway to freedom and justice, to eventually become yet another disciplinary device, where 'cohesion' and 'integration' would be defined by the perceptions of the White majority and enforced by the state.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that these visible changes reflected fundamental shifts in the underlying policies and priorities of Tony Blair and his governments. In this paper I analyse the place of race and education in the Blairite project from a critical race perspective.^[3] I argue that although the rhetorical surface,

and the precise policy measures, changed frequently and dramatically during the Blair years, in terms of race equality the essentials of the system remained fairly stable: policy was formulated with White people in mind (usually, but not always, White middle class people). Core education policies were never properly interrogated for their likely race-specific impacts and, wholly predictably, their outcomes were often racist (in that one or more minoritized groups suffered marked disadvantages in relation to the White majority).[⁴]

The paper begins with an analysis of the early days of Blair's premiership including the first education proposals and the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). I argue that despite a public commitment to race equality, policy continued to treat race/racism[⁵] as a peripheral issue and, consequently, exacerbated racist inequalities. Next I consider a period that, initially at least, looks very different: the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry propelled the issue of 'institutional racism' to the top of the news and policy agendas.[⁶] The experience of the following years, however, suggest that the government's response served a largely cosmetic purpose in wider policy terms. Finally, I consider Blair's conduct at the end of his premiership, when the so-called 'War on Terror' gave a new impetus to popular authoritarian and racist politics.

This analysis, therefore, focuses on New Labour policy and on Tony Blair's own presentation of the core ideas. It is, of course, impossible to definitively separate Blair's personal views and ideas from those of other participants in the policy arena, especially his inner circle of advisers. But it would also be wrong to absolve Blair of responsibility given his stated identity as a 'conviction politician' (Campbell 2007: 129). Wherever possible I draw on Blair's own statements as data that reveal some of the core ideas shaping race and education policy during his premiership.

THE EARLY DAYS

'Goodbye Xenophobia'

Front page headline, *The Observer*, 4 May 1997

It is difficult to over-state the sense of widespread relief with which progressive commentators welcomed Tony Blair's election as PM. The headline in that week's *Observer* newspaper (above) captured perfectly the sense of epochal shift that many sensed as Blair's 'New' Labour swept away 18 years of Conservative rule with the largest Labour majority in history. Surely now things would be different?

At first sight the signs were positive but, behind the rhetoric, almost immediately a gulf could be detected between, on one hand, the fine words and public sentiment in support of race equality, and on the other hand, a reality where the principal education reforms not only ignored race equality but actually relied on measures that would probably make matters worse.

Just 67 days after taking office Blair's new Government published its first detailed statement of policy intentions and, true to his often-quoted election commitment to make education his first (second, *and* third) priority, the first New Labour White Paper focused on education. In a significant break with the tone of policy under the preceding Conservative administration, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997) proclaimed 'the Government's core commitment to equality of opportunity and high standards for all'. The ritual citation of 'standards' (measured in a crude form through national tests and school league tables) was a clear legacy from previous Conservative policy but a focus on equality of opportunity contrasted sharply with the Conservatives' open hostility to the issue; what Kate Myers memorably termed *equiphobia* (Myers 1990). Under Margaret Thatcher the Conservatives had made sweeping reforms to the system (including the imposition of national testing regimes and the introduction of a statutory 'National Curriculum') all pursued without any meaningful reference to cultural diversity and with complete disregard (often contempt) for the likely consequences for minoritized pupils, parents and communities (see Tomlinson 2008: ch. 3). 'Colour-blindness' (an obstinate refusal to consider ethnic diversity despite a wealth of evidence that minorities are *not* sharing equally) was Prime Minister John Major's official policy:

Few things would inflame racial tension more than trying to bias systems in favour of one colour - a reverse discrimination that fuels resentment. An

artificial bias would damage the harmony we treasure. Equality under the law - yes; equality of opportunity and reward - yes. These promote harmony. Policy must be colour blind - it must just tackle disadvantage. Faced by British citizens, whatever their background might be. (Major 1997: 7)

In a dramatic break with Conservative approaches, Labour's policy documents involved a new emphasis on 'equal opportunities' and an explicit concern with *race* inequalities. *Excellence in Schools* included a section entitled 'Ethnic minority pupils' that referred to racial inequalities in achievement and offered modest commitments to consult on ethnic monitoring and 'best practice' in multi-ethnic schools (DfEE 1997: 34-5). A year later another significant policy intervention repeated the same pattern: the first report of the new Social Exclusion Unit took education as its theme and, once again, the scale of race inequities was noted (SEU 1998).

Unfortunately, the symbolic break with colour-blind approaches did not translate into meaningful action. Both the education White Paper and the SEU report discussed race inequalities separately from the rest of the analysis and left the main thrust of policy untouched by any sense of ethnic diversity. Consequently, an understanding of racism and race inequality remained absent from how the principal policy issues were conceived. As a result, policy continued to pursue colour-blind targets (Gillborn 1997 & 1998). Indeed, the principal education reforms threatened to *worsen* existing race inequalities. The SEU report on school exclusions, for example, set targets to reduce the overall number of permanent exclusions but failed to set any race-specific target despite the continuing over-representation of Black students in the official statistics. Similarly, New Labour's distaste for selection *between* schools did nothing to dampen their belief in the utility of selection *within* schools.

In his keynote speech to the 1996 Labour Party Conference, Blair made this commitment:

No return to the 11-plus. The comprehensive system will stay, modernised for today's world, taking account of children's different abilities but not setting them apart. (quoted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 October 1996, p. 4)

In fact, *setting* children apart is exactly what Blair's education policy did right from the start. The 1997 election manifesto stated:

We must modernise comprehensive schools. Children are not all of the same ability, nor do they learn at the same speed. That means 'setting' children in classes to maximise progress, for the benefit of high fliers and slower learners alike. (Labour Party Manifesto 1997: 7)

Support for the wider use of 'setting' had been an emerging part of Labour's education policy for some time. Predictably, *Excellence in Schools* had a good deal to say on the subject, including the following version of the history of comprehensive education:

The demands for equality and increased opportunity in the 1950s and 1960s led to the introduction of comprehensive schools. All-in secondary schooling rightly became the normal pattern, but the search for equality of opportunity in some cases became a tendency to uniformity. The idea that all children had the same rights to develop their abilities led too easily to the doctrine that all had the same ability. The pursuit of excellence was too often equated with elitism. (DfEE 1997: 11)

From the very start, therefore, New Labour accepted common-sense beliefs in ability as a relatively fixed and measurable potential that was best served by separating children on the basis of what the 1997 manifesto called, their 'distinct abilities' (Labour Party 1997: 4). This view was later enshrined in the development of 'Gifted and Talented' schemes, initially as part of the *Excellence in Cities* programme, launched in 1999, but then rolled out nationally. Despite its meritocratic aspirations, antiracists argued from the very start that these policies would deepen existing race inequalities. Decades of research in the US and UK had demonstrated that whenever teachers (the vast majority of whom are White) are asked to rank students according to some measure of ability, motivation, attitude or behaviour, then particular minoritized groups are systematically over-represented in the lowest ranked groups (especially African Americans in the US and African Caribbeans in the UK) (see

Gillborn 1999). Despite its rhetorical commitment to evidence-informed policy (Whitty 2006), education policy under Blair refused to hear antiracist warnings and repeated the failures of the past. Dismissing antiracist criticism of the ‘Gifted and Talented’ measures, for example, the Education Department stated:

The gifted and talented scheme will identify children by looking at ability, rather than attainment, to capitalise on the talents of the individual child, regardless of ethnic background. (BBC News OnLine 2002)

Incredibly their own rebuttal demonstrated clearly that the Education Department was working under the familiar but mythic belief that ‘ability’ and ‘attainment’ are somehow different (as if ‘ability’ were some inner quality or potential). In fact, *all* tests (including IQ tests) measure *current* knowledge and, therefore, performance can be raised by tutoring (see Gillborn 2008: ch. 5; Sternberg 1998; Stobart 2008). There is no detectable inner limit to the possible future performance of students. Even where a test is used to *predict* future performance, such as with the popular ‘CAT’ (Cognitive Abilities Test), all that is being done is that the tester is using past performance to say how students who received that score in the past, usually performed later on when they took their GCSEs (Gillborn & Youdell 2000).

Three years after the initial warning and the official rebuttal (above), the DfES published the first breakdown of ‘Gifted and Talented’ cohorts by ethnicity. The data showed that White students were the most likely to be identified as ‘gifted and talented’: the White rate was more than twice that of Black Caribbean children and five times that for their Black African peers (DfES 2005: 36).

THE STEPHEN LAWRENCE INQUIRY

Looking back now, I am sure that if the government had realised all that would come out of the inquiry, they would not have let it take place.

Doreen Lawrence (2006: 179)

The Stephen Lawrence case is one of the most important episodes in the history of British race relations. Like the wider story of Blair's premiership, the case seemed initially to promise a major step forward in progressive politics, only for time to confound expectations and render the words not merely empty promises but reveal them to be diversionary tactics that hid ever more regressive realities.

Stephen Lawrence was 18 years old when he was murdered in an unprovoked racist attack by white youths in 1993. Stephens's mother and father (Doreen and Neville Lawrence) led a high profile campaign for justice which drew support from diverse sources, ranging from Nelson Mandela – who met them just weeks after the murder – through to the *Daily Mail* newspaper, which publicly accused five men of the killing. [7] In the face of such widespread coverage it was no surprise when 1997's incoming Labour government agreed to an official inquiry, more than 4 years after the murder.

Much of the inquiry was held in public and the nightly coverage in the news media meant that the catalogue of police errors and racism was broadcast nationally; initially to a sceptical public but eventually to a growing sense of outrage. The swagger of the accused men as they entered the inquiry was especially striking and caused widespread revulsion (see BBC News Online 1998). When the inquiry report was published (Macpherson 1999) the revelations about the police's arrogance, incompetence and racism were such that the government *had* to be seen to respond. Every major daily newspaper covered the report in stories that ran across several pages, with headlines repeatedly citing a sense of national shame and the need for change:

The Legacy of Stephen: Judge's damning report on race murder will change Britain

Daily Mail, 25 February 1991, p. 1

Stephen Lawrence's legacy: confronting racist Britain

The Guardian, 25 February 1991, p. 1

A family tragedy, a police force disgraced and a nation shamed

The Independent, 25 February 1991, p. 1

Nail Them: Mirror offers £50,000 to catch Lawrence killers

Damning verdict that shames the nation

Daily Mirror, 25 February 1991, p. 1 & 6

As the report was published Tony Blair told parliament of his pride in having established the inquiry and proclaimed it as a turning point in race relations:

The publication of today's report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence is a very important moment in the life of our country. It is a moment to reflect, to learn and to change. It will certainly lead to new laws but, more than that, it must lead to new attitudes, to a new era in race relations, and to a new more tolerant and more inclusive Britain. (*Hansard* 1999: column 380-381).

The following year saw radical changes to the race relations laws. Amendments to the Race Relations Act meant that more than 45,000 public bodies now faced a legal duty to act pro-actively to ensure race equality. The limits of space mean that an exhaustive analysis is not possible here but, unfortunately, the fate of the reforms can be appreciated from even the briefest review of subsequent developments.

In May 2002 the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, passed two years earlier, became active. The new regulations required every state-maintained school to have a written race equality policy; to monitor student achievement and staff appointments for signs of racial bias; and to publicly plan to eliminate race inequality. Incredibly, less than a year later, in January 2003, the then home secretary David Blunkett gave a speech where he argued that 'the slogan created a year or two ago about institutional racism missed the point' (*Guardian* 2003). In a statement that seemed to betray a total failure to understand the Lawrence Inquiry, and its view of institutional racism as the racist beliefs, actions and processes that disadvantage minoritized people in practice (regardless of intent), Blunkett said:

It's not the structures created in the past, it's the processes to change structures in the future and it's individuals at all levels who do that. That's why I was so worried about people talking about institutional racism because it isn't

institutions, it's patterns of work and processes that have grown up. It's people that make the difference. (*Guardian* 2003)

The following month provided powerful evidence that the new laws were not having the desired effect. An independent review (headed by Gus John) found that more than a third of English universities were not complying with their legal duties (John 2003). A few months later a survey for the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) found that two-thirds of schools had not set any specific goals for improving levels of attainment, despite this being explicitly highlighted in the legislation (Schneider-Ross 2003). And it was not only schools and universities who were slow to react to their new legal duties on race equality: the entire direction of education policy was revealed as disturbingly colour-blind when a bold new 'Five Year Strategy' was launched (DfES 2004). Running to 110 pages the document mentioned '*standards*' an impressive 65 times; 'business/es' warranted 36 references; but racism, discrimination (and even the more anodyne 'prejudice') were entirely absent. Just five years after Blair promised 'a new era in race relations ...' his government's education plans had apparently jettisoned any concern with race equality and the fight against institutional racism.

Research on the over-exclusion of Black students revealed more cause for concern. Many people assumed that Ofsted inspections would play a key role in ensuring that schools met their race equality duties. In practice, however, it emerged that even when inspection reports included statistics documenting the over-representation of Black students in the school's exclusions, this was *not* identified as an issue that the school needed to address in any follow up action (Parsons *et al* 2004).

If the failure of schools, universities, Ofsted and policy-makers to take account of the Lawrence Inquiry could be excused as 'mere' inaction, inattention, or misunderstanding, then 2005 brought unmistakeable evidence that Blair's government was actively stepping back from even the pretence of honouring its commitments to the Lawrence family and to racial justice. In September 2005 the then-home secretary Charles Clarke decided to disband the Stephen Lawrence Advisory Committee (a group established in 1997 to help take forward the recommendations of the Lawrence Inquiry Report). A couple of months later, in the government's sixth progress report

on the Lawrence recommendations, Clarke expressed his personal dedication to race equality, stating '[this] is the first report since I became Home Secretary and I am personally committed to the continuing delivery of this Action Plan' (Home Office 2005: 3). No further progress reports have ever been published.

The final retreat from Lawrence came in 2007, just weeks before Blair handed the reins to Gordon Brown, when the Government launched a consultation document on a 'Single Equality Bill' which was meant, in the words of the 2005 manifesto, to 'modernize and simplify equality legislation' (Labour Party 2005: 112). A key principle was that:

The duty is designed to help all public authorities to do what they do better, not stop them operating effectively or weigh them down with bureaucracy. The duty should not lead any public authority to feel it needs to take any action which might be disproportionate to the benefits the action would deliver. (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007: 89)

If enacted the proposals will remove all the gains made after the Lawrence Inquiry by allowing public bodies to decide which equalities issues are relevant (they may legally decide that 'race' is not a pressing concern) and whether addressing an inequality is actually worthwhile. Consequently, under the proposed new system, even if a school decides that race inequality *is* relevant, it is free to choose not to take action if it judges that the effort is disproportionate to the benefit (see CRE 2007). At a stroke the new equity proposals would legitimate the racist status quo within the education system.

I have argued elsewhere that the Lawrence case represents a classic example of what critical race theorists have termed '*contradiction-closing cases*' (see Bell 1985; Delgado 1998; Gillborn 2008). These cases occur when there is a contradiction between, on one hand, the state's preferred narrative of society as overwhelmingly meritocratic and just, and on the other hand, some event or series of events, that reveal the true extent of real material inequality and disadvantage as systemic phenomena. The contradiction is closed by reforms that *appear* to have addressed the inequality but actually leave the situation pretty well unchanged. Indeed, things might even be

worse because the celebrated case now stands as evidence of the state's benign nature. In this case the far-reaching requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act appeared to have addressed the institutional racism that was thrown into stark relief by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. But the effect was almost entirely cosmetic.

POPULAR AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

It would be a mistake to underestimate the effect of 9/11 on the psychology of the Government or Tony Blair.

John Prescott, deputy prime minister 1997-2007 (2008: 305)

Blair's overall legacy is irrevocably tied to his military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the field of race and education these actions had particular resonance because the so-called 'War on Terror' had dramatic consequences for policy in relation to minoritized people in general, and Muslims in particular (Gillborn 2008; Tomlinson 2008). The level of popular authoritarianism grew markedly stronger after the London bombings of July 2005. Rather than try to review the full scope of this trend, it is revealing to examine one particularly important example: Blair's vision of *integration*.

As 2006 drew to a close Blair, who had already stated his intention to step down the following year, made a series of keynote statements intended to cement his legacy and ensure policy continuity (regardless of whoever succeeded him). His statement on 'the duty to integrate' made headline news and seemed designed to project a tough, no-nonsense image. TV news broadcasts repeatedly showed the same sound-bite from the end of the speech:

Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain, Britain.

So conform to it; or don't come here.

Tony Blair (2006: *the Duty to Integrate*)[⁸]

'In other words', as Karen Chouhan (2006) noted, 'Britain's tolerance is based on intolerance'. The sound-bite was typical of the disciplinary nature of the entire

speech. The word *duty/duties* appeared ten times in the body of the speech and was used in a cavalier fashion that belied both the complexity of the issues and the very real fear and intimidation that Muslim communities increasingly experienced (Bhatia no date). The speech also announced a new restriction on would-be migrants that echoed the decades old obsession with the English language (Gillborn 2008; Tomlinson 2008) but actually went further than any previous policy phase by insisting that the language now become a *prerequisite* for citizenship. Typically, however, the measure was presented, not as a restriction, but as a requirement of ‘cohesion’ and ‘justice’:

It is a matter both of cohesion and of justice that we should set the use of English as a condition of citizenship. In addition, for those who wish to take up residence permanently in the UK, we will include a requirement to pass an English test before such permanent residency is granted.

This policy is even more restrictive and regressive (likely to disproportionately hit non-White applicants) than anything enacted in the original decades of assimilationism in the 1950s and 60s. This same authoritarianism was later solidified in government guidance on school uniforms. Although the guidance made no direct reference to the veil, it stated that ‘if a pupil’s face is obscured for any reason, the teacher may not be able to judge their engagement with learning, and to secure their participation in discussions and practical activities’ (DfES 2007). The document found support in *The Sun* newspaper whose headline read ‘Veil Ban on Kids’ (20 March 2007: 1).

CONCLUSION

Doublethink ... to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them...

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*[⁹]

Early in Blair's premiership I remember presenting a seminar paper on racism and education policy. I talked about Thatcherite constructions of the nation and showed a slide of the following quotation:

... consider a thousand years of British history and what it tells us.

The first parliament of the World; the Industrial Revolution - ahead of its time; an Empire, the largest the World has ever known, relinquished in peace.

The invention of virtually every scientific device of the modern World.

Two World Wars in which our country was bled dry, in which two generations perished, but which in the defeat of the most evil force ever let loose by man showed the most sustained example of bravery in human history.

This is our nation.

The audience shook their heads in disgust. They were appalled at such a chauvinistic construction of the past. Some laughed at its supreme arrogance: 'The invention of virtually every scientific device...' Others scoffed at the idea that the British Empire had been relinquished at all, let alone that independence had been peacefully gifted: what about the numerous Slave Rebellions, the Irish revolt and the American War of Independence? But the sense of shared outrage was replaced by shock when I revealed that the speaker was not Margaret Thatcher but Tony Blair (during his address to the Labour Party Conference in 1996). One audience member simply rejected the possibility out of hand. The words might have appeared on a web-site, they argued, but there was no way that *Tony* would actually say such a thing. The following day I sent them an audio recording of the segment and offered to copy them a video of the entire speech.

The incident is significant for many reasons. It reveals that a crude, even jingoistic, nationalism was always present in Blair's politics but went unnoticed for many years. In his resignation speech on 10 March 2007 he stated:

This country is a blessed nation.

The British are special.

The World knows it; in our innermost thoughts *we* know it.

This is the greatest nation on Earth.

Blair's brand of nationalism is especially important because it illuminates his governments' failure to understand the nature of the racism revealed by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Despite its radical rhetoric, New Labour never moved beyond a superficial notion of equal opportunities; education policy simply could not accept that many fundamental assumptions that appear commonsensical (such as the nature of 'ability') are actually deeply implicated in the creation and legitimation of racist educational inequality. Hence the colour-blind targets, the failure to rigorously enforce the amended race legislation, and the meritocratic love affair with setting and 'giftedness'. Hence, the same PM who celebrated the Lawrence Inquiry could (less than a decade later) happily stereotype youth crime as a facet of a racialized sub-culture:

What we are dealing with is not a general social disorder; but specific groups or people who for one reason or another, are deciding not to abide by the same code of conduct as the rest of us. This came home to me when, at the recent summit I held on knife and gun crime, the black Pastor of a London church said bluntly: when are we going to start saying this is a problem amongst a section of the black community and not, for reasons of political correctness, pretend that this is nothing to do with it. (Blair 2007).

For all the high hopes on his election and the rhetorical commitments to equity, therefore, Tony Blair was not an enigma, and he broke no mould. Blair represents the latest in a long line of White politicians who have shaped education policy in the interests of White people. The principal beneficiaries of his policies have been White children (the *only* ethnic group to improve their GCSE performance every year during his reign: Gillborn 2008). When the façade of a non-racist Britain was shattered by the Lawrence Inquiry his government produced radical new laws but soon moved on and failed to enforce them. And in the post 9/11 context of his later years in power, Blair proved himself all too ready to support moves against Islamic dress in school and the further demonization of Black young men as a criminal presence in society. From a critical race perspective, Blair's premiership is a story of broken promises, betrayed trusts, and overwhelming continuity with the racist history of the country he described as 'the greatest nation on Earth'.

Notes

1 Quoted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 April 1997, p. 6.

2 Quotation is from Blair (2007).

3 Critical race theory (CRT) is a radical tradition that emerged from US legal studies in the 1980s and is increasingly influential in educational studies (see Delgado & Stefancic 2001).

4 I use the term ‘minoritized’ to refer to those race/ethnic groups who are rendered a power minority by the operation of White assumptions and interests, regardless of their numerical representation at a global, national, local or school level.

5 The social construction of ‘race’ differences is *always* associated with raced inequities. Consequently the notion of ‘race’ inevitably carries racist consequences (see Leonardo 2002).

6 The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry defined institutional racism as ‘the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people’ (Macpherson 1999: 321).

7 For a detailed account of the Lawrence case, including an itemized chronology, see Gillborn 2008: ch 6.

8 An uncorrected text was published on the 10 Downing Street website:

<http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page10563.asp#content> (accessed 10 December 2006). All quotes here are taken from the text *as delivered*: broadcast on BBC News Online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6219626.stm (accessed 16 January 2007).

9 Orwell (1949: 35).