

Enoch Powell and British Politics: Blood Speeches and Anniversaries

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“What struck me re-reading it, and thinking back to how I felt at the time, was how in a way the ghost of Enoch Powell still stalks British politics.” – [Lord Hain](#), BBC, April 15, 2018

Speeches are often at the mercy of their interpreters and biographers. They can incite and encourage just as they can deflate and demoralise. On April 20, 1968, Enoch Powell, a political figure who still stirs the blood of the milk-and-honey protectors of the strife free inclusive society, issued a dire warning.

In his mistermed [“Rivers of Blood” speech](#), Powell claimed before Conservative party members in Birmingham that Britain was “busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre”, with people becoming “strangers in their own country”. He spoke of “wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond all recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated”.

It did not stop here:

“at work they found their employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native born worker; they began to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted.”

Rich in discomfoting implication, he conveyed the view put forth by one of his constituents, who might well have sounded like a modern UKIP voter:

“in this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.”

Ugly stuff indeed, though there are points when Powell is sympathetic. He conceded that there were those Commonwealth immigrants,

“many thousands whose wish and purpose is to be integrated and whose every thought and endeavour is bent in that direction.”

To expect, however, this sentiment to prevail amongst the “great and growing majority of immigrants and their descendants is a ludicrous misconception, and a dangerous one.”

Powell, then shadow minister, was dismissed by an alarmed Edward Heath. It was a point of [severe disagreement](#) with various East End dockers and meat porters from Smithfield, who protested in some numbers. He was duly, as one biographer notes, drowned in 100,000 letters and some 700 telegrams. Despite his exit from the front bench, Powell haunted conservative immigration policy sufficiently to influence Heath when in government to pass the 1971 Immigration Act.

It has become a matter of routine: All anniversaries on Powell's speech begin with an error, one spawned in its immediate aftermath. To even christen the speech with the title of "Rivers of Blood" was problematic in ignoring the original source of its inspiration, Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River of Tiber flowing with much blood'."

Other errors, omissions, and misunderstandings populate readings of Powell. Far from being illiberal in any jackboot sense, he was citing immigration as a possible cause of strife that could prove inimical to democracy. This was liberalism turned inside out, ugly yet yet comprehensible on a certain level.

Having worked for military intelligence in India between 1943 and 1946, he feared the possible introduction into British life of the very communalism that was sundering a country he admired, albeit through the worn lenses of a dusty imperialism. But as the world recovered from the trauma of a global conflict, Powell persisted to see Britain's colonies as examples of liberal paternalism and possible future danger.

Historians have attempted to chew what they can about his motivations in uttering those words at Birmingham. Racism in some way, certainly, though a picture somewhat more complex than that. Did Powell do so on the belief that Britain had to sever itself from its own imperial offspring? The empire, having set, had been replaced by a Commonwealth of nations he would rather have ignored.

In an excellent feat of digging, Peter Brooke in the [Historical Journal](#) (Sep. 2007) identified a prescient statement made by Powell in a report (December 3, 1946) drawn up for the Conservative Research Department. While economically driven in its attempt to assess India's future, Powell levels a tantalising snifter on his thinking:

"That division of labour and specialization of production should be bounded by international frontiers is to some extent inevitable because men have differences other than economic ones, such as political and racial, and value certain other aims more highly than economic aims."

It brutally states the case of familiarity over difference, the prospect of dangers in mingling the two. There were the nations "closely connected politically and racially as the British Dominions"; then there were those differences "between European and Asiatic nations." There could be no "redistribution of population" between India "and other nations, especially European nations."

Historical nuance can be a drag, but Powell continues to remain the kryptonite of political discussion. Even after all these years it was deemed controversial to even broadcast the Birmingham speech in full, as if taking a few snippets of it (read, hacking off most of it) would somehow do service to balanced meaning.

Andrew Adonis, Labour member of the House of Lords, deemed the speech “the worst incitement to racial violence by a public figure in modern Britain” insisting the BBC not broadcast it in an act of pre-emptive responsibility. [Censorship](#) was his implausible suggestion, given that any politician, were he to make a similar speech today “would almost certainly be arrested and charged with serious offences.”

Anyone who challenges the established notion that EP was an off-his-head racist is similarly shouted down.

“He wasn’t a racist in the crude sense,” claimed UKIP Wales leader [Neil Hamilton](#), a qualification that might have been better stated. “Powell actually changed politics by articulating the fears and resentments of millions and millions of people who are being ignored by the establishment.”

True envy indeed.

Twitter offers very few avenues for explanation but is delightful for vitriol and reflex stomping. Powell was hardly going to get much of a hearing at the hands of [Leanne Wood in Wales](#), who had already considered him a sharpened spear to be used by UKIP.

“If anyone was in any doubt that UKIP are ideologically far right, listen again to their Assembly leader justifying Enoch Powell’s racist speech on @BBCRadioWales. UKIP are keeping Powell’s racist rhetoric going.”

It is precisely the snippets, the cuts and incisions made to speech – and in some cases total prohibition – that make subsequent interpretations flawed, even dangerous. Rarely are incitements to hatreds the products of lengthy observations about a state of affairs. More often than not, they stem from one portion, a slice, a section.

Political figures have tended to avoid Powell like the pox but Brexit Britain is, to a large extent, a continuation of one strand of dominant resentment alluded to fifty years ago. The concept of the inclusive integrated society battles that of those beyond accommodation. Anxieties remain.

Where hashtags count for substantive discourse, Powell will not so much rank as burn. His words will be taken into an orbit of social media mash, and then re-delivered in unrecognisable form. The BBC will be attacked for conveying the fuller picture, even in the context of historical analysis. In its effort of balance, which was bound to be criticised, the [Beeb’s statement](#) of explanation for broadcasting the speech on Radio 4’s *Archive on 4* was credible as it was desirable. “It’s not an endorsement of the controversial views themselves and people should wait to hear the programme before they judge it.”

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