

Revisiting 'common-sense' in a time of cultivated ignorance – a conversation with Errol Lawrence

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Errol Lawrence is well-known for his explication of 'racist common-sense' and a critique of racist sociology in *The Empire Strikes Back*. In 2017, he met with Gargi Bhattacharyya to look back on his work and to consider the challenges to unpacking right-wing common-sense today.

GB: Could we start by discussing how you came to your formulation of common-sense racism?

EL: When I joined the centre, they were already doing some thinking about [racism]. The race and politics group was already in existence and they were already doing some thinking about these issues. Obviously it comes from Gramsci via Stuart Hall but the interesting thing is that what I was tasked to do was actually to write about the sociology of race relations and the way in which that pathologised black families. I can't remember now why I came at it from that route, talking about common-sense. Clearly there were issues around the way that the family was talked about in sociology texts, I think that is probably the entry point. There were what people at the time would talk of as stereotypes, stereotypes about Indian families and stereotypes about Caribbean families which certainly underpinned a lot of the contemporary discussion in 'race relations' but seemed to be taken up, it seemed to us without much thought, by sociologists. This was part of a culturalist approach to race relations, whereby the experience, consequences and outcomes of racism were explained through reference to our cultures. So then I began to think about common-sense ideas of the family and how that often situated black families as being in some ways outside the norm both in their structures and in the cultures they carried and in this way were authors of their own misfortunes. So I think that's the beginning of it.

GB: You have said already that it was framed as a counter to other current sociological accounts. Could you say a bit more about why those other sociological accounts were framed in that way?

EL: There had already been a number of critiques in the USA of the Moynihan Report which had developed this type of culturalist sociological explanation of poverty in African American communities. So it wasn't as if we came up with this. There was already a body of work for us to refer to and I can remember going to the Moynihan report and critiques of that and that was very much a part of how I began. In responding to these arguments I think it seemed to us that it wasn't sufficient just to say 'oh, they are trading stereotypes' because the common language of the time

was to talk about race in terms of racial prejudice, racial discrimination and then, stereotypes and it wasn't always clear how these things fitted together. And it tended also to be focused on individual thoughts and in all sorts of ways it seemed to us that this was an inadequate way to approach what was going on.

GB: Have you any thoughts about how the framing of common-sense racism has changed in this country since that time?

EL: I think we are in a really really difficult time at the moment. A confusing time, I think. And it feels as if the ground is shifting underneath us all the time. Obviously, so much has changed. But I've not particularly thought about common-sense in relation to race, I suppose I have been thinking about it more in relation to the things that I was working on, around housing. I think that the way in which people now think about the welfare state is heavily circumscribed by New Right thinking. It does seem to me that the kinds of changes that were brought in by the Thatcher government and then picked up and continued by New Labour, underneath them was this kind of idea that it was no longer possible or desirable to have a large welfare state, it was no longer possible to think of the state doing things like providing housing because it couldn't do it properly, it couldn't do it 'efficiently, effectively or economically', to use the jargon. Instead, you always needed to have some kind of private involvement, even if this only meant simulating the market. I think that is an indication of the way in which that thinking, New Right thinking about the state and its proper role has become embedded in everyday thinking. And there came a point when I was teaching when my students, who were growing into adulthood in the late 90s and after, would find it difficult to understand a way of doing things that didn't revolve around the market. For them it seemed to be the obvious way of doing things. It had become common sense. And of course we have seen how Jeremy has been vilified for putting forward the notion that public ownership might be better at providing services in a number of important areas.

GB: You mean 'the Corbyn'.

EL: Yes, the Corbyn, the dinosaur, he is suggesting that maybe there are better ways of running railways, we could take that back into public ownership. And initially people are just going, that blows my mind, that's like going back thirty years and I think that is because those ideas about the market – public bad, private good – I think they have sedimented themselves now into our common-

sense, so as I say until recently it has been difficult to make the case for alternatives to market solutions.

In terms of race, clearly the current dominant way of thinking has effects on the level of resources made available to support those people who are not in a position to house themselves or to look after their own welfare, and to the extent that racism delivers a disproportionate number of Black and Minority Ethnic families to these situations, this will have had a disproportionate impact in our communities.

Interestingly, however, public discourse has it that our communities are favoured by public policy and that things have gone too far. This notion is coupled with the idea of political correctness. Because my sense is that in terms of multiculturalism there have been a lot of successes for the left. They may not have been the kind of radical changes that some of us would have wanted to see, but I think there have been real shifts in the way race is talked about. And I think there has been a change in the language that people use to talk about race. And really just the idea that it is possible for us to be civil to each other, so you don't go around calling people 'paki' and 'nignog' and all of that. There have also been some real changes in practices, though the extent which this has changed things on the ground is open to question.

But outside, in the broader world, what I would regard as quite limited developments have been presented as if they have overturned everything that we knew. And then it is easy to start saying 'well, this has all gone too far now'. And quite often the things that are being talked about are really quite minor things [such as the freedom to tell racist jokes].

So people who promote equality and diversity policy and practice are talked about as though they are bit authoritarian, 'stopping us from just being ourselves', as if we should just be able to be ourselves without any thought about how our behaviour and speech might impact on other people. That being ourselves, is a good thing in itself over riding all other social goods.

I sometimes think that that is part of the identitarian politics as well. This idea of being yourself. I am never quite sure what that means. It's as if you have some sort of inner core that is the pure you, just waiting to burst out.

GB: It seems to me that you are suggesting, pretty convincingly, that if we want to think about racist common-sense now one of the things we need to think about is how anti-racist discourse is disallowed or ridiculed or made incredible. It seems to feed into a point you were making earlier about a right-wing common-sense as opposed to a racist common-sense, the embedding of ideas about a small state and a celebration of choice, it seems to fit into that. Because PC is then part of the bad regulatory state that is coming to take your freedoms.

EL: Yes, maybe there is a kind of right-wing common-sense. Because there is always that kind of activity going on, there is always that struggle over what are the right things to be thinking and doing. And I think, I haven't worked it out properly yet, but I think that 'anti-PC' rhetoric is perhaps a 'meme'. What I think it is trying to do is organise common-sense in a particular direction, rather than itself being common-sense. So to go back to what we did in the *Empire Strikes Back*, we talked about common-sense but then we picked out how particular aspects of common-sense were being pulled out and organised into a new racist ideology and a new right ideology. I think anti PC rhetoric is doing a similar thing today and I think perhaps we haven't been terribly good at countering this.

I think back in the day we had the better ideas and we were more than happy to articulate our opposition to racist practices, to patriarchal practices ... because our arguments were better and I think our arguments are still better but they are not made. Now I think there is a tendency to simply vilify people ... and we seem to have got ourselves into a position where we sling mud, actually not as effectively as the right.

EL: I think the problem is that we cannot afford not to have the debate. And if this whole period shows me anything, it is that it's never finished. You can make the argument but it is never done..

When we wrote *The Empire Strikes Back* we were part of a group of, I suppose, political activists who promoted the idea that we were all black, regardless of where we came from, regardless of our supposed genetic roots, and my sense of it is I don't think that was ever a secure argument even at that time and most of the people in our communities were not activists and didn't share it and I don't think we kept making the argument. And so the argument got lost. We lost the argument and a different discourse emerged.

But I've come to think that kind of activity, making the argument, is always necessary, it has to be repeated. A different example of this that has nothing to do with race, is the emergence of the flat-earthers.(laughs)

GB: Yes, my older child is very concerned about the retreat from science ...

EL: So you would have thought that that was a pretty secure argument, the earth is round but apparently not... so I don't think we can stop making the argument and I don't think aggression is an answer either, at best it might destroy some individuals, it might make some people back down, but the arguments don't go away, that's the problem and you haven't replaced them with a better argument. You have simply shut those people up. So even a victory is a Pyrrhic victory.

GB: I have some sympathy for the attempts by young activists to refuse some pretences of debate – you don't always need to be giving all of yourself in every space – but at the same time, it does seem like a turning away.

EL: Yeah, just turn away and let them get on with it. Well, when you let them get on with it, what you get is Donald Trump, I think that's what happens. I don't know – we do get tired, you get tired of it and it depends what you are doing, because in a sense I turned away from it, I went and taught housing. But you know, I had white students in the room, I never thought 'Oh, I'm not going to talk about race', that's just nonsensical. But I didn't want to be a 'race specialist', that's what it was.

GB: And did you know that explicitly at the time or did that emerge, that you didn't want to be a 'race specialist'?

EL: Yes, I was at this Camden Committee for Community Relations and that was an interesting time but there were some bitter arguments. And it was all small-scale but there were some quite bitter arguments between the different ethnic groups. I think I kind of felt that it was too big. I felt that I wanted to be able to talk about other things. Not just about race. So that's what I did. So I understand why you wouldn't want to have to talk about race all the time, and having to deal with the miscomprehension, defensiveness and so on but I would have to read the paper.

Because we've all said that, I've said similar things when I think back and to black colleagues, we'd say 'oh, I can't be bothered' [putting on exasperated voice].

But now, you see, with the wisdom of age I think that we can't afford to not be in the game. I think there's too much at stake.

The Empire Strikes Back

GB: Why do you think people still love *The Empire Strikes Back*?

EL: That's a puzzle to me, but, I say that, but I don't think there is anything like it now, is there? And I think what we attempted to do was to do something that was quite holistic because quite often we talk about racism as if it is in the realm of ideas and for us it's a practice. You know, ideology is a practice, it is not just ideas. Now although we say it's not just ideas, it is often talked about simply as ideas and what we were trying to show is that actually it has real effects in the real world. There are these practices that are taking place, in education, in health, in the workplace and so on. In the event we didn't cover things in the kind of breadth we wanted perhaps because I suppose we didn't have the numbers of people – I don't know where the book deal came from actually, but that meant that we had deadlines, we couldn't just keep writing forever. So what did we talk about? Education, policing – there was a black feminist chapter. There were the macro chapters, economics and politics – that's Paul and John – that anchored it all. But, I don't know. I'm surprised, that's all I can say. I was amazed that while I was teaching that – because you know I started teaching in '91 so that was already nine years after its publication – that it was in our library and it was being used and I was aware that it was used on other courses because I would meet people ...

GB who would say 'you are THE Errol Lawrence?'

EL: That's right (laughter).

It obviously does do something that other publications don't do.

GB: I even feel that it has had a resurgence of interest more recently. It feels that there was a time during which the study of racism seemed a bit old hat, 'oh no, we are much more sophisticated, it's not as simple as that', and then maybe in the last five or six years we've returned to thinking, oh no

it was always as simple as that at one level. And I've been surprised then to see it in all kinds of everywhere again, with all kinds of younger readers.

EL: Well, this is new moment, isn't it? It's a new moment when you can see that the ground has shifted and we're all struggling to make sense of what's going on. So perhaps that's why people would be interested in it now, because we're in a similar moment and maybe that explains part of its appeal at this point in time.

GB: In an interview about CCCS you suggested that we hadn't even now come to terms with how Thatcherism had changed the terrain. Can you say a bit more about that?

EL: I think that is what I was talking about earlier, the way in which the argument that running the state is like doing your domestic shopping, you can't spend more than you've got. The idea that the state is not able to deliver services, you can't trust the state basically to do anything. Back then, you are bit too young to know this, but back then you had British Gas, all the utilities were nationalised, rail was nationalised, water was nationalised, so this idea that there were these things that you could just give to the private sector and they would be able to do it better - I think that's it - that the private sector can do things better than the public sector. That the public sector will always just create bureaucracy that will only serve its own needs and not the needs of its customers (as they became). So I think it's that, that's what I meant and I think that is pervasive now. There has been some rethinking and people are very tentatively now talking about 'oh, maybe councils can build houses again' (both laugh) but for many many years that was regarded as just being barmy, to think about that, it was out of the question.

Housing and crisis

GB: How should we think about this crisis of housing and does 'race' play a role in that?

EL: I think, you see, Grenfell - it was a horrible horrible terrible tragedy - but I just thought 'well, yeah, I could see that coming'. I'm not at all surprised because housing has always been this kind of Cinderella service, so education was universal, health service was universal, social services were universal and housing wasn't. It always had that private element. So in housing now, most people, not everybody - because I remember my son saying to me 'why would I want to buy a house?' - but a lot of people think that's what you have to do, you have to buy a house. Renting is mad they think

because you're just paying someone else's mortgage or something like that. But I remember a time when renting was so much cheaper than buying and there have certainly been times in British history where, if you had a load of money you just wouldn't sink it into bricks and mortar. We're in a very different situation now where we're not building, we're not building enough for anybody and certainly in London and the South-East and that is just pushing prices up. But it's connected as well with population movements internally, so the South is sucking people to itself and that means there are parts of the country where there is a housing excess, a housing surplus and for a while some local authorities were thinking about just sending people to those areas, but there's no work for them, that's why people are leaving. There are all those kinds of imbalances.

We have also lost a good deal of social housing over the last 30 years so we've seen a greater concentration of poorer households in this tenure. Until recently, a disproportionate number of Black and Minority Ethnic households made up new social housing tenants. This would have been a mixture of people from the settled communities and refugees. Now housing, in my view, is one of those sites where we are reproduced as 'races' through operations that segregate and concentrate us in particular areas. What seems to be just a market operation actually has a tendency to distribute us to particular areas. In the past the allocations policies of social housing organisations and particularly local authorities, tended to replicate the market so compounding the concentrations. Now there is a different method of allocating social housing, (choice-based lettings). I'm not sure whether that produces the same or different outcomes because I haven't seen the data. So that would be one thing to look at. There is an interesting book on segregation by Finney & Simpson in which they argue that the evidence for segregation in the UK is quite weak, nevertheless there are areas of concentration certainly and the housing market plays a role in that. Then we also have to think about how people are housed, house conditions, levels of over-crowding and vulnerability to homelessness, for example, to get a fuller picture of race and housing.

GB: over the last few years, since we have been in London, which is only a few years, local housing campaigns mainly against attempted gentrification across neighbourhoods are one of the main forms of activism that you come across. This is just my hunch, but the gentrifiers seem to take us at our word, so, for example, celebrating 'de-segregation' while bussing a load of rich white people into neighbourhoods that were black or Asian or Latin American neighbourhoods. So the discourse of 'post-race' seems really out there in the legitimising of this gentrification that pushes out poorer

people, so that a 'mixed neighbourhood' means you meet some rich people, and that's a racialised category.

EL (laughs): Yeah, well of course, it is to some extent because racism in the labour market means we are more likely to be under-employed if not unemployed and although there is a good deal of variation between ethnic groups, Black and Minority Ethnic households overall tend to have lower household incomes which will clearly impact on where we can afford to live. I mean not all rich people are white, but there is a tendency for the young people moving into these areas, to be white but that is what the market will produce.

There was some debate about creating 'mixed neighbourhoods' amongst social housing landlords in the nineties and noughties. Some people harked back to the good old days when you would have the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, the judge, the doctor and so on and what that was about was not only those better off people bringing wealth to the area but also there was a sense that those socially elevated people also helped to police the working class and 'set the standard'. So I think there is a part of that in the discourse as well. But when housing associations have tried to create those neighbourhoods, it has not really worked, because the owner-occupiers don't want to be in the same area as social housing tenants. On some developments you'd find a wall between them and the social housing tenants and there was even a divide between private renters and social renters. Of course this separation is still occurring, with social housing tenants and owner occupiers having different entrances to the same development. so I think that kind of activity is fraught and the problem with it is that you are not catering for those households that are in need. And if you just allow gentrification to happen it won't create a mixed neighbourhood actually because the rich people will push out the rest of us.

The cultivation of ignorance

EL: OK, yes well, the cultivation of ignorance? During the debate about Brexit I can remember very early on people saying 'we just want the facts' but what was very clear is that whatever facts they were given were not good enough because they didn't prove their point which was actually we are spending too much money on Europe and we should get out. I think that is what they thought the facts would show. And more recently the government has had this research into ... well I'm not sure what it is research into ... discrimination is it?

GB: Yes, the Tories have taken over anti-racism.

EL: I don't think they have though, but before I come onto that, the cultivation of ignorance is about, I think, the tendency among mainstream media, they play really fast and loose with statistical information. But they also want people to be suspicious of statistics and the people who produce them, unless they are statistics that prove their point. A lot of the stats around immigration are produced by Migrant Watch which is a right-wing anti-immigration organisation and even the BBC use their stats. But there is some quite solid research that shows that actually immigration is good for the country economically. It's good for wealth creation, so the Tories should be in favour but we are asked to be suspicious of that kind of data. And immigration data, if it doesn't show the views of UKIP and people like that, then they will argue that it is not the real data, which only Migrant Watch can produce.

And then we were told that we had had enough of 'experts', we don't want to hear any more from experts, experts are not to be trusted. Somehow we know in our gut what the truth is. I think it is really dangerous, appealing to people's what? I am not even sure because the public were saying 'we want the facts'. We are not even appealing to people's instincts are we? Somehow people know, they don't need to have any kind of rational argument put to them, they don't need to hear from anybody who has studied the issues.

GB: 'Gut' is constructed as the opposite of 'informed', so, as you say, a happy celebration of know-nothingness. We don't want our authentic feelings to be clouded by reason or information, because then they would not be authentic any more.

EL: Yes, and that's part of common-sense, isn't it?

I'm trying to think – are there things where I would say 'I just knew'? Probably. There are experiences that we have probably shared, the way in which you go somewhere and the way people treat you and look at you, you think 'well, there's something going on here' but you don't *know*, you can't back it up. You might think, they are a bit racist here, don't think I will come back – but you don't really *know*. So I guess we are all prone to that kind of behaviour. But this is cultivated, isn't it? It is promoted as the right way to be, rather than to question these kinds of feelings that you have

and see if they are based on any evidence, we're being asked now to ignore the evidence. And there is the idea that the evidence will always be tainted ...

GB: Or manipulated ...

EL: Yes, or manipulated.

GB: Trump is an example of that, isn't he? There is nothing to be explained. Even the attempt to explain is fake and suspect and a sign of being interested, and to be termed interested is to be a liar. I did some work on the war on terror – if that is still what we are calling it – and I did wonder if that was even written into those security discourses, to even try to understand the world was met with 'oh we mustn't try to understand because that is on their terms and makes us complicit with the terrorist'. So we must just accept the violence carried out in our name, because if we want to have a discourse about it, then we are on their side. So we had already set up this space, which was I think a kind of precursor to Trump in the States – so that the backlash against Obama was also because he reads books, not only is he black, but look he reads books! So that all became kind of reinforcing – not even that you must trust your experience but you must distrust whatever is brought to you as reason or facts, because that could only be brought for malign reasons.

EL: Yes, that's right. That is the discourse. And I think it has always been there in some form, particularly around crime and within sociology generally, there is the idea that there are some really horrible crimes where you are tempted to say that the perpetrator is just mad and Sociology would say behaviour is always meaningful to the person engaged in that behaviour. But that would be seen as 'oh you are just trying to make excuses' you are trying to explain away this horrible behaviour. In terms of working class kids involvement in crime and black kids involvement in crime an account that attempts to explain how racism provides the circumstances in which that takes place, that's just seen as trying to argue it away. What's the term they use? 'You are trying to excuse it'. So I think that has always been there with anybody who wants to take a look at why people do anything.

But I think there has been a ramping up of that. During Brexit it all became really hyper until we get to the stage where, it was Michael Gove wasn't it? Saying 'we don't need any experts'. So that was like they had descended into chaos really.

GB: Even there I think there have been precursor.. So in the war on terror we were told don't try to understand why we are in a way because this is just good and evil and to seek explanation is to be with evil and alongside that the world of globalised economy is too complex for democracy so don't ask how the economy works trust us to have the technical expertise to solve it for you because your claims are too local to have any impact. That stuff has been going around, so they have already set up this space where you are evacuating the space of democracy and rational debate – so what do you expect to happen?

EL: And arguments about markets also fit into that, because the invisible hand of the market, so of course you don't see it – and that would be the argument against state intervention. But when the state intervenes you are actually trying to understand and plan things better. But if it is all too big and complex, of course you can't do that. But I do think there is something qualitatively different about that moment in the Brexit referendum discussions because then it was a much more active encouragement of people to be stupid, to be ignorant. Then I find it really quite ironic that they are producing all of these statistics on racism and racial discrimination because what do they then expect people to understand by that?

So if you look at the data around educational outcomes what it actually shows is quite a varied picture and apparently Indian children do really very well and Chinese children do really very well, better than white children, then you have white children who are not working class and they do OK and then you have African children who are doing well, but Caribbean children who are not, Bangladeshi children who were not doing well but are doing better – so there's that and I think it is difficult to know what that means but it is even more difficult to know what is producing those outcomes.... there is a problem here, because this data does not automatically scream out at you 'racism!'. And so being able to make an argument that will explain, without doing violence to that data, how racism produces those outcomes is quite challenging. And I haven't seen anyone do it yet. In fact in all this time I have not really seen an analysis of what is going on in schools that produces those outcomes, especially for Caribbean boys, which is not cultural. I think that's the danger with this raw data, if there is no organising principle, then I think it is quite easy to see that what you will get is a cultural explanation because that is the easiest way to be able to explain why there are different outcomes, that 'it is actually to do with them, it is not to do with us'.

GB: Also this is a government that doesn't really accept any narrative of racism or of institutional inequality or institutional anything ... what is more interesting is what you sa. Why suddenly, from all the facts that you might have chosen, would you present this data on racism?

EL: I suspect that it is not thought through and that it is just an irony. This particular government is at sixes and sevens so they have to be seen to be doing something. I don't know why they picked this particular topic ... I think that kind of data, well it will be interesting to see what is made of it. Already, one Minister, what he picked up from the data was Muslim women not working, that's what he picked up from the data.

Well we will have to see, because the data is there to be explained, so we need to explain it as well and we haven't, we have kind of shied away from offering any explanation.

GB: This goes back to one of the other things you said, that one of the things that people respond to about 'The Empire Strikes Back' is not that it is a totalising explanation but it is an ambitious and multi-faceted explanation, so it is kind of saying 'look, if you want to understand this thing, you have to understand it at these different levels, where it is more like a road map to go away and read these other books that do these things'.

EL: That's right, I heard somebody saying that we can't all be black because we don't all have the same experiences. Well nobody ever said that we did. That was never the argument. The argument was that there were sufficient things for us to come together and work together in an anti-racist project, so it wasn't about trying to reduce everybody to the same experience of racism and I think we tried to show in 'The Empire Strikes Back', that it wasn't the same.

GB: But it is still connected, through different spaces of analysis, which would be almost unspeakable now actually.

EL: my sense is that nobody [now] has the patience for a detailed multi-faceted explanation. Let alone the time to develop it.

But we tried to do something like that.

GB: I guess you are right, it is partly patience. And my defence would be it is partly a lack of space in a time of a different crisis of higher education so the people who might be in a position to write anything, no-one is in a position to do anything that takes more time, because we are all in a frenzy all the time just to keep our jobs and that has an impact. But I wonder if it is partly a reflection of the political climate that you have been describing – certainty, a lack of engagement with the other and a kind of retreat into more certain ways of asserting positions, and that all militates against the kind of thing you are suggesting is needed.

EL: Yes, and when I look back on it, we had at least two things going for us. We weren't working, we were students, so we had time. And we did it together, it was a group of us. So it wasn't one person trying to do it all on their own. And I think one of the reasons that we had different names for different chapters rather than a book written by all of these different people, is that we didn't have time to integrate it all. So that is how it came out. But I think the fact that we were able to have different people able to work on different things actually allowed us to produce something, unfinished as it is, nevertheless does that job of being able to say look, this is a very dense, difficult, complex set of issues that we have here and if we want to do it justice, if we really want to understand what is going on, this is the kind of depth of explanation that we need and breadth of explanation that we need.

GB: I am not sure if this is my failure of reading, but it is not very obvious to me that there was a 'collective line' that linked the pieces other than the collective objective and that makes it a different kind of read.

EL: Yes, because the different styles of writing are still evident and we had different knowledges.

GB: Yes, and that really shows and I do think that is why it is not only read, but all of it is read, because it is not like you can read the key chapter. And different chapters are the main chapter for different audiences.

EL: But it is not a book of essays. I think there is a thread that goes through it, even if it is not as tight as we would have liked. But I quite like it as it is.

GB: I just think there is a pressure now that militates against collective work, although I have been in attempts to work collectively, but it is all quite stretched ...

EL: It's very difficult when you are working

GB: And I guess it is in the face of very immediate attacks, but there is a sense that we have to get our 'line' right, as if we were a faction or a party ... and I think, mmm, maybe that is not the right starting point, 'well, here's the attack, what is our defence? How can we formulate a policy response?'

EL: Yes, that's a good point, because the understanding of race and racism that was actually popularised and that underpins a lot of the developments in multiculturalism was not ours, it was a different understanding which could easily be turned into policies. And I always thought that that approach of ours was very difficult to turn into policy prescriptions because that wasn't our intention, it was more political than that, it wasn't just about being able to develop policies to address particular things.

GB: I think that has been another stumbling block in research about racism, right up until now, the sense of urgency to have a policy prescription, almost at the outset, before you have even done anything. Well, that's a different kind of no-nothingness because it means I can't have anything that is too fuzzy because that is messing up my journey to my predefined policy recommendation. And I think that those pressures have also segmented the research, so, as you say, part of 'The Empire Strikes Back' is saying, 'OK, not everyone will be a family policy person, but here is a chapter on how reading family sociology will help you understand this which then has implications for black families'. It is not saying explicitly, this will lead to that, but you get it when you read the overall story. Whereas now research units are saying 'funders only care if I can say that doing this with Asian elders leads to this'.

EL: I should have said when you asked me about the extent to which Thatcherism has embedded itself in national consciousness, there is the whole question of how we fund further and higher education but also what things we should be doing in higher education. What people should be learning when they go to uni, all of that has been informed by that politics, the New Right politics of Thatcherism. So the idea that your research should be 'policy-driven' is all part of that. That's part of the new common-sense, that you can't just do, what did we used to call it?, pure research. Pure research, examining situations because you want to understand them, that has become a luxury.

GB: I was going to ask you why local government was such an important terrain for marking the anti-racism of the time?

EL: Well, I was always a bit ambivalent about it because it always seemed to be that it would only ever be reform that you were engaged in. But I suppose the way I dealt with that was that my role at the Camden Community Relations Council was also campaigning, I was campaigns officer. I didn't know what that meant, which was one of the reasons why my first interview was so appalling, but one of the things I did with one of my colleagues was we took up the case of three black women who lived in Camden who were trying get transferred and were being blocked. So I think I said to myself, well I am not going to change the world doing this job but I can maybe make things better for some people and then after that we got involved in the occupation of the Town Hall following a fire at one of the B&B hotels, resulting in the deaths of a Bangladeshi mother and her children.

GB: How long were you in occupation for?

EL: A month.

GB: But they did rehouse the families in question?

EL: Yes, they found those houses. Now, of course, they could find those houses then, difficult as it was, but there is no way now that anybody could occupy a town hall for a month and that says something about the Labour Party at that time, that was ... was it radical? ... it was certainly left of Tony Blair.

GB: What year was it?

EL: 1983 ...

GB: And that was the Labour Party in London as well and it was still GLA (Greater London Authority) times ...

EL: They [the GLA] were quite radical, and the Labour Group in Camden, they let us stay there actually. They could have asked the police to remove us, but they didn't.

GB: I am sure you know student occupations for the last three, four, five, actually as long as seven years, university authorities – so less at stake than a local town hall – have been using extreme measures, private security to remove students, quite extreme violence, you know, all of the security repertoire whereas that seems unthinkable at that time. But you were a council employee?

EL: No, or, I suppose at arms-length. That organisation, the Camden Council for Community Relations, was part of the Race Equality Council, so what happened was the Commission for Racial Equality paid for some of the officers and the Council paid for the rest. And we were big, it was a big organisation of its time, most organisations were not that big even in London.

EL: They [race equality councils] were useful, they weren't terribly effective but they took up cases of discrimination. They were there, they were someone that people could go to – that's all gone. The law centres have all gone, because we were not law specialists so when we had those issues we would refer them to the law centre. Or around immigration, JCWI (joint council for the welfare of immigrants). But then, what happened was, Labour's way of responding to the situation at that time was to take those things into the council, so they created the race equality advisers and women's officers. In Camden, in fact, they had to be very careful not to be seen to be on our side because they were Council officers and we had to get the nod from the Head of our organisation to be there but he thought it was the right way, I mean, he was a bit brow-beaten by us. So I don't think that could happen now.

I think it's probably important to acknowledge that much of the race equality work of that time and subsequently, did not spring particularly from the politics of the Empire Strikes Back. The people who led that work came from a different understanding of race. For them, 'race' wasn't a problematic concept, they took it for granted. So for them it was just 'we're black, we're Asian, and these white people discriminate against us, let's do something about it'. So it was all quite straightforward. And the anti-discrimination legislation underpinned it all and there were policies we could develop around how you do interviews, around having targets – not quotas but targets – all of that, so they were quite happy making that kind of piecemeal change.

GB: And as you say, although it was a kind of creeping reformism, they were real gains. People really did get houses, not only the 24 homeless Bangladeshi families you campaigned for, but in as much as black communities had access to some mainstream services that was an important set of years [where that was established].

EL: For a while, in London, the use of bed and breakfast accommodation was seen as a no-go area, that wasn't how you housed homeless families. So it actually had gains for homeless people generally, not just black people who were homeless. But I think that went out the window as the government turned the screw on first council housing and then social housing organisations. What happened in '88 was that the responsibility for building new social housing was taken away from councils and given to housing associations who were much smaller, really private voluntary organisations, not for profit maybe but there is no democratic control over them. And they were just not able to build at the rate that councils were able to build, so the rate of new house building just slumped and has never recovered. But councils were left with the responsibility for rehousing the homeless. They didn't have any housing but they had the responsibility and under that kind of pressure bed and breakfast accommodation crept back in. So they were not long-lasting gains. And the other thing that has happened with housing is this promotion of owner-occupation. A lot of social housing organisations now, including the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, are much more concerned, it seems to me, with developing properties for sale or shared ownership rather than developing properties for rent. And I think that has really undermined the role of social housing providers and that is one of the reasons why there simply isn't enough social housing. The money they spent on Grenfell making it prettier was really in response to some people in the surrounding area who they wanted to encourage to own, to make it look nice for those people, so the needs of households in housing need have tended to get sidelined I think.

GB: And yes, it is hard to see where that will go – although there has been a kind of sea change, partly Grenfell, partly other things, lots of things have become speakable that were not speakable, including rent control, including house building.

EL: Yes, as you say, it has become thinkable again [laughs].

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