

No, no, no! You shouldn't talk like that! **Brushes with political correctness from the 1960s to the 2010s**

I'm white, male, heterosexual, British, able-bodied, public-school and university educated, and middle-class. Although I don't identify enthusiastically with any of these elements in my background they have left their mark. I was born in 1947; my earliest ideas about the greater world belonged to the period when Britain was still glowing with victory and had not yet woken up to the loss of empire. I am now a prosperous pensioner. Based on this information you could produce a list of my prejudices, my instincts. But it has been my good or bad fortune to spend my adult life in circles ruled by political correctness. Many people regard the striving after political correctness as a sort of inauthenticity, a surrender of one's natural instincts, the tame acceptance of a bureaucratic code – as pure humbug, in fact – but on the whole I regard the process as a positive thing. On the whole I'm better for having lived in PC circles.

Ever since the 1960s the Right has used *political correctness* as a bogey-man, along with *nanny state* and *health and safety*. All three have thrown up enough absurdities over the years to fill many columns of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, sniping at local authorities who celebrate Diwali and the Chinese New Year, primary schools that don't do nativity plays, employers who ban crucifixes, or the right-on¹ 'fad' for saying *Happy Holidays*. These excesses are easily exploited as cover for an assault on the territory gained in the last forty years by feminism, the gay movement, disabilities campaigners, and above all by opponents of racism. We (the libertarian and egalitarian Left²) have always recognised the dangers of too rigid adherence to a party line. Among ourselves we have treated political correctness with a certain irony, but we've closed ranks against the satirical attacks from the Right. But recently things have come to light which challenge our complacency – I refer of course to the failure to investigate child and sexual abuse by members of the South Asian communities in certain towns. It is said (with how much truth one doesn't know) that fear of 'seeming racist' inhibited police, social workers and members of the public in these cases. Fear of accusations of racism also operated in other areas, such as electoral malpractices. The challenge to political correctness is put eloquently in the report by the electoral commissioner, Richard Mawrey QC, on the 2014 mayoral election in Tower Hamlets:

Events of recent months in contexts very different from electoral malpractice have starkly demonstrated what happens when those in authority are afraid to confront wrongdoing for fear of allegations of racism and Islamophobia. Even in the multicultural society which is 21st century Britain, the law must be applied fairly and equally to everyone. Otherwise we are lost.³

This isn't sniping at excesses, but a serious challenge to the politically correct ideology of multiculturalism.

Earlier versions of this note debated these matters at some length, concluding that political correctness might be compared as an ideology with the evangelical Christianity of the nineteenth century, pregnant with opportunities for humbug, but at its best a force for progress and civilisation. In this version I'm leaving out the public policy discussion, and concentrating on a simple account of my own brushes with political correctness over the years. I shall find myself using, in the interests of historical accuracy, language which was once commonplace but which is now (and indeed was then) decidedly incorrect, so if you are squeamish about words, be warned.

My earliest memory of the term *politically correct* dates from when we were living in Seaton Court, so before the end of 1969. I don't remember the context, but I'm sure it came from America. Both the *OED* and a 1995 article in *American Speech* give 1970 as the date of the first published use of

- 1 It was in Heaton that I first heard the term *right-on*, meaning someone who is conspicuously and admirably liberal and radical in their opinions. We knew a lot of right-on people in Heaton, although it wasn't a term I ever used myself. The *OED* says it is 'sometimes mildly derogatory' – double-edged like *politically correct*. One of the dictionary's citations for the mildly derogatory use is taken from a book review in *The New Internationalist* in 1987, but the magazine itself was decidedly right-on.
- 2 I happily yoke these together as though they weren't in some ways mutually incompatible.
- 3 Commissioner Richard Mawrey QC, Judgement in the case against Mohammed Lutfur Rahman in the Mayoral election in Tower Hamlets, 2014, paragraph 686. Available from: <https://trialbyjeory.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/judgment.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2015).

the phrase as a 'fixed collocation', but say it was in use in the 1960s among the American New Left (feminists and Black Power activists). The idea, if not the phrase itself, has a longer history on the ideological Left. The wide popularity of Maoist writings in the 1960s, not only on the extreme Left, may have helped it to take root.⁴ The connection with both feminism and Black Power is confirmed by the 1970 citation which is from Toni Cade's *Black Woman*: 'A man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too.' The phrase was quickly picked on by liberals as a way of satirising the Stalinist enforcement of a party line by statements which were politically, as opposed to factually, correct. Because we (that is to say the people I tended to mix with) were never very sure whether we were liberals or communists, soft- or hard-leftists, the phrase had for us both a serious and a satirical use, often at the same time. It could be a bit of a game, or an intellectual exercise, to work out the politically correct position on a particularly knotty question.⁵

The *OED* gives the following definition of the current use of the phrase *politically correct*: 'conforming to a body of liberal or radical opinion, esp. on social matters, usually characterized by the advocacy of approved causes or views, and often by the rejection of language, behaviour, etc., considered discriminatory or offensive.' The article in *American Speech* refers not just to 'a body of liberal or radical opinion' but specifically to egalitarianism and multi-culturalism.

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Well before 1970 it was clear that some women were disenchanted with the boisterous no-good boyo aspects of 1960s liberation, which was mixed with a lot of very traditional, 'patriarchal' assumptions, now declared politically incorrect.⁶ The phrase turned up in contexts which were not political in the conventional sense – many feminists arguing that every relationship, every context, was political. Legal reform on its own would not bring about a true equality between the sexes.⁷ We had to get our minds right, a long and sometimes painful process.

In Lundin Links I was on the committee of the PTA at the primary school. The headmaster called for someone to take charge of the catering at some school event, and I volunteered. I did this because I couldn't see myself doing any of the other jobs on offer, but although it wasn't a deliberate statement against gender-stereotyping I remember a small smug feeling that I was a bit in advance of the unreconstructed⁸ population of Lundin Links. I should have realised that there was a group of women, not on the committee, who had always done the refreshments. They managed everything, making it clear that I was not wanted, and they were understandably annoyed when, at the end, the headmaster thanked 'Mr Crowe and his band of ladies' (or some such phrase). Here, as elsewhere I was apparently behaving like a 'new man' some years before the phrase became common.⁹ I was always more than willing to undertake household chores and responsibilities. But this had nothing to do with feminism and everything to do with wanting to be in charge, to be thanked and valued, like my mother. Fooled by appearances, I didn't see how far I

4 Irving Lewis Allen, 'Earlier uses of *politically (in)correct*', *American Speech*, Spring 1995, vol 70, No 1, pp 110ff. Allen quotes from a 1992 essay by Karen Perry: 'A Short History of the Term *Politically Correct*'. The *OED* offers a number of Chinese citations from the 1950s and 1960s referring to the correct line or attitude. In the 60s Mao was greatly admired by many idealists who believed that what he said about violent revolution could be, in some way, adapted to apply to a non-violent reversal of the injustices of the world-order.

5 This was much in the same spirit as Edmund Gosse's parents are said to have amused themselves by interpreting passages from the Bible.

6 The *OED* gives two citations from the 1960s for the phrase *women's liberation*. In 1966 the British *New Left Review* associates it with *sexual freedom*; a year later *New Left Notes* (publication of the US organization Students for a Democratic Society) refers to the Women's Liberation Workshop, suggesting a new direction.

7 There were significant advances of a conventionally political nature during early 1970s, for example the Equal Pay Act of 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, and the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act of 1976.

8 It's possible that I used the term (un)reconstructed at that time. The *OED* gives examples from the 1960s and 70s of *reconstructed* in the sense of 'converted to a current orthodoxy from a belief system regarded as unacceptable' – an extended usage, derived, it is suggested, from the era of 'Reconstruction' following the American Civil War.

9 I don't think I heard the phrase until we were in Heaton, after 1980. Nor was *gender stereotyping* a phrase I'd have used in the 70s.

was from getting my mind right. Slowly and painfully I came to recognise that however correct my behaviour was on the surface, my attitudes were all wrong. I suspect that most of my unhappiness in those years, the late 70s and early 80s, was due to the difficulty of this adjustment.

Feminist sensitivities weren't much to the fore in the East Neuk, even in the Labour Party. The Labour parliamentary candidate Henry Macleish persuaded me to help set up the East Neuk branch and one Saturday we turned out in Pittenweem and Anstruther to campaign in the European elections of 1979. When an unknown woman joined in I assumed she was Henry's wife, but she turned out to be our European candidate, Mary Panko. Had I made such a mistake later on in Heaton it would have caused a stir, but in the East Neuk it was just a momentary embarrassment, with apologies on both sides.¹⁰

Political correctness in all its branches often seems to involve nit-picking over language, and this was particularly true of feminism, as I encountered it in 1980s Heaton. The practice (unquestioned right up until the 1960s¹¹) of using a masculine pronoun when the gender was unclear or where both males and females were involved, was now denounced as patriarchal. All sorts of arguments were dredged up (by me and others, including many women) to resist the change, most of them variations on 'it's always been that way' – in Latin, for example, as though the Romans provided a good model. We said the hard-line feminists failed to understand 'how language worked', when the whole point was that they understood its insidious ways only too well. As with all hard-liners, they didn't always help their cause. Their suggestion that *history* meant *his story* and so should be replaced by *herstory* allowed some particularly humourless critics to accuse them of that grave crime, a false etymology. Eventually, the argument was won and it was no longer permissible to say things like *Everyone must do his best* unless it was absolutely clear that only males were involved – and the social revolution which has accompanied these linguistic adjustments makes such unisex contexts less and less common.¹² There was a transitional stage when the correct terminology was still a matter of debate: should it be *his/her* or *his or her* or even a new pronoun altogether such as *heir*? Some people still favour the oblique stroke, particularly in the nominative case where *s/he* seems quite neat, but by fortunate coincidence there has been a loosening of the pedant's grip on English grammar, and this has provided the most elegant solution: *Everyone must do their best*.

Likewise there was a period of hesitation over *chairman*. Should we use a different form for men and women – *chairwoman* being a perfectly manageable word – or adopt a single gender-neutral word? For some reason the word *person* is obnoxious to some people, so *chairperson* never really took off, leaving us with *chair*, which is now pretty well universal.¹³ Anna chaired the playgroup committee in Lundin Links, but I don't remember whether she was known as *chair*, or *chairwoman*. In the East Neuk Labour Party our chairman, a traditionally-minded bus-driver and trade unionist, was probably happy to be known as *chairman*, but I suspect that Henry Macleish and his agent, Mark Lazerowicz, called him *chair*. I don't remember what line the Heaton Labour Party took, but it was certainly *chair* in the Heaton CND group.¹⁴

10 Was she Ms or Miss or Mrs Panko? Or Dr (she was, I think, some sort of academic)? In those days it was a lively issue, with opponents of change making a great fuss about how to pronounce *Ms*. The idea was to avoid drawing attention to a woman's marital status, but this was largely thwarted by the widespread belief that women only ever called themselves *Ms* if they were divorced. This was the line we were expected to take in the Leven Social Security Office. I never took the argument seriously on one side or the other, because I still adhered to the Quakerly preference for doing without titles altogether.

11 The masculine embraces the feminine, people used to say, with a wink. For example: 'The writer feels he must either stick to recorded fact ... or cover himself by inventing ... If he keeps ...' – from the Author's Note to *The Adventurers* by Margot Heinemann, 1960. Margot Heinemann was well to the Left and highly politically aware, but it clearly didn't occur to her that there was anything wrong with the conventional usage. Our friend Claire (her niece) says that by the 1970s Margot would have been shocked by such usage.

12 When the *everyone* referred to groups such as criminals or social deviants people were sometimes less insistent on gender-neutral language, happy that they should all be classed as male.

13 I've occasionally heard women addressed as *Madam Chair*, but men are, I think, always addressed simply as *Chair*.

14 At first the CND group resisted the idea of anything as authoritarian as a chair. Anna and I were made to feel very incorrect when we assumed that there would be a committee and office-holders – as we were

Why did it matter? I suppose it was because so long as we went on referring to women as *chairmen* we seemed to imply that there was something anomalous about having a woman in authority. If we get used to saying *chair* we will, perhaps, get used to the idea that the position is gender-neutral. Other gender-neutral terms have become commonplace, such as *fire-fighter* and *police officer*, and there have always been occupations whose designation makes no explicit reference to gender: such as doctor, nurse, park-keeper, soldier, film-star, pilot, playwright, cleaner, and so on. What do we think when we hear these words? After decades of political correctness my first assumption is still that fire-fighters, police officers, doctors and all the rest, except nurses, film-stars and cleaners, are men. I try not to betray myself, carefully saying something like, ‘When you saw the doctor what did *he or she* suggest?’ – or even, more cunningly, ‘... what did *she* suggest?’ It requires conscious effort.¹⁵

There are almost endless opportunities here for pedantry – what to do, for instance, about feminine forms such as *actress*, *poetess*, *bus-conductress*, *murderess* – or the Victorian *bankeress*, who is not a female banker but a banker’s wife? Or *farmer’s wife*? I enjoyed this sort of casuistry, but for some it was not a game. Traditional language had reinforced traditional attitudes, and by consciously correcting our language we could, perhaps, break out from our imprisoning attitudes. Each time I force myself to use a feminine pronoun for a surgeon the difficulty I experience is a reminder of the greater difficulty that women face in becoming surgeons. The idealistic hope is that each bit of correct language will loosen the bonds of patriarchy just a little.

Whether or not the bonds of patriarchy have been loosened, the battle over forms of language has largely been won. I remember Nick Dibben saying as much in the late 1980s, that the resistance to gender-neutral language had been overcome, and we didn’t have to think about it any more. Nick worked for Sheffield City Council, of course, which like our friends in Heaton was toward the vanguard of political correctness. In St Andrews we had a few feminist friends, notably Mary Collier, who worked in a women’s refuge in Dundee, but at the Computing Lab I found myself more advanced than most of my colleagues, who objected when I wrote something like, ‘When the user does so-and-so, she finds such-and-such.’ I learned to avoid the issue by referring to users in the plural, and later I stopped referring to ‘the user’ or ‘users’ altogether, and wrote instead, ‘If you do so-and-so ...’¹⁶ Eventually there was a move to stop using the word *user* for computer users; it was felt to be somehow insulting, although I never understood why. People said it was because it suggested drug-users, but that seemed far-fetched. If you look *too* hard at the implications of words you will raise unreal scares like this, which is where the excesses beloved of the *Daily Telegraph* creep in..

But it wasn’t just a matter of politically incorrect language; there were politically incorrect opinions to be jettisoned as well. For me the word *chairman* was never particularly masculine – unlike *surgeon* and *doctor*. It brought my mother to mind, because when I was very little I heard that she was the chairman of three things – the Old Girls and the Parents (at Blackheath High School) and also something else, which I don’t now remember, perhaps something to do with the Church. It stuck in my mind because I didn’t know what a chairman was, although it sounded a good thing to be, and I took it for granted that it was natural for my mother to be one. This wasn’t the only way my family experience left me resistant to the feminist message. My family, entirely dominated by women and girls, was unrepresentative, giving me a distorted view of the balance of power within families and within society.¹⁷ My own preference for staying in to look after the home rather than going out to work made it hard to sympathise with women who resented their domestic incarceration.

when we helped to organize a public meeting without providing a crèche. It soon became clear that not having a chair allowed the more aggressive members to dominate the group’s meetings, and so a committee was elected. I was briefly secretary, a thankless task.

15 I still get caught out. The other day Christopher said he had met the Shadow City Minister, and I said, ‘What did he have to say?’ ‘She, actually,’ reproved Christopher.

16 My friend and colleague Peter Adamson pointed out this way of cutting the knot. He was more concerned for clarity than political correctness.

17 It may be that I’m wrong even about the situation in my own family. The female dominance may have been more apparent than real, with my father exercising more influence than I ever realised – and more than he himself realised or wished. In my childhood I never really understood how my father fitted into things.

Among Heaton friends I didn't often admit to these views. Sometimes it felt as if I was simply afraid to speak out against the majority opinion, and I'm sure that timidity and peer-pressure played a part, but there was more to it. I could see that my opinion was incompatible with a political programme (equality, freedom, solidarity) that I was strongly committed to, more strongly than I was to my incorrect views on the place of women. But even now my instinctive reaction is, as it was thirty years ago in Heaton, a failure of sympathy. There is always a temptation to treat our own instincts as privileged, and to base grand conclusions on our own limited experience, like a climate-change denier who points to the last cold summer as proof. But experience is moulded by prejudice, and instinct is socially conditioned. The pressure to be politically correct encourages us to put our instinct and experience in context and get them in proportion.

There's another way of putting it: by schooling yourself to speak in a certain way you gradually come round to thinking that way. This is the discipline of political correctness, and it sounds alarming, it sounds like the sheep in *Animal Farm*. We learn to cast off our old prejudices – and (some would say) adopt a new lot.

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So far I have concentrated mainly on feminism, but there are other areas where political correctness seeks to intervene to improve our language and our practice. I shall have a fair bit to say about race and class, but first I'll deal briefly with two other important topics, disability and sexual orientation.

We used to talk about spastics and cripples, about lunatics, the subnormal and mental defectives, the blind, the deaf, the disabled. So far as we knew we didn't intend any disrespect by these terms, and it didn't occur to us to wonder what it felt like to be referred to in this way. Gradually – and I suspect the process began in the mid to late 1960s¹⁸ – we learned what was wrong with such language. One argument was that some of the words, notably *spastic* and *lunatic*, were frequently used in a crude, derogatory way, amongst children in the play-ground for example, and therefore even when they were used in a dignified, clinical sense they could be hurtful. The trouble is, of course, that any word can be taken up by children in the play-ground and turned into an insult.¹⁹ To abandon every misused word in favour of a more anodyne substitute will lead to an endless cycle. Another line of argument is that we should not use any language that implies a norm, a standard which some people fall short of. So *defective* and *subnormal* are out. Sometimes objections are raised to the word *disabled* or *disability*, because of the negative implication, and the suggestion that because a person cannot do some things he or she is devoid of ability. I am not defined by my ability to walk, nor indeed by my inability to sing or run, so why should someone else be defined by their inability to walk? You hear now and then of various alternative locutions, but in the end *disabled* and *disability* have proved too useful to be dispensed with.²⁰ The fundamental objection is to the grammatical form *the disabled*, an abstraction, a label which seems to sum up the essence of the disabled person – this is why we now speak of *deaf* or *blind people* rather than *the deaf* and *the blind*.

These linguistic points are less important than the practical requirements of disabled people, and I have only mentioned them because over the years those who dislike political correctness have been known to grumble against the imposition of new terms and the outlawing of old ones. *Spastic* was good enough for our parents, so what's wrong with it? 'Oh,' people say sarcastically, 'of course we mustn't say that now. Isn't it silly! Political correctness, bah!' – but I think these language battles have more or less been won. The names of charities such as the RNIB have been changed in line with this new thinking, and disabilities-campaigners can concentrate on the substantial issues.

The various acts of Parliament on disabilities and equality impose obligations which some people find disproportionate. What about the ramps leading up into public buildings – just in case one day a wheel-chair user comes along? For many buildings they will be needed on a daily, hourly basis, but there are some small organizations who have been put to the expense of constructing a

18 It's the sort of development I associate with *The World at One*, which was the first news programme to break away from the rather bleakly impersonal presentation of events.

19 I was always grateful when children laughed at me for being called Julian, because it meant that for the moment they were not making fun of my clumsiness, my dirty ears or my spots.

20 Where would be without such grammatically confusing but perfectly clear phrases as *disabled parking*?

ramp when there is no immediate likelihood of anyone using it.²¹ Surely the money could have been better used. There were mutterings along these lines when the University provided expensive equipment for a visually impaired student who, in the event, did not turn up. There are variants on the 'little old lady' argument²², with struggling small businesses in the role of the little old lady – struggling to make ends meet and ruined by equalities legislation that forces them to make provision for disabled access and support for disabled employees. Similar arguments are directed against laws concerning parental leave. People who don't see the point about equality can always find examples to make political correctness look downright silly. And it is very hard not to go along with these arguments, not to wonder whether things might be going too far. It takes an effort to look beyond the handful of 'bonkers', extreme examples, to keep the principles in view.

You hear similar arguments about the application of political correctness to issues of sexual orientation. At first, years ago, it seemed enough to change the law so that homosexual acts no longer attracted a criminal penalty. My father was opposed to putting homosexuals in prison, but he had no wish to encourage homosexuality, which he regarded as a misfortune. He would have abhorred any kind of violence against homosexuals, but would probably have believed it was inevitable – the same sort of attitude as the belief, common amongst his generation, that it was hopeless trying to eradicate wife-beating amongst the working class. Later on, friends of my own age were willing to accept that homosexuality was a valid lifestyle choice, and that those who made it should be allowed to get on with it, provided they kept quiet about it – and provided they acquiesced in flat-footed jokes about limp handshakes and handbags. Legalization and the equalizing of the age of consent, along with a measure of protection against homophobic abuse, this was where reform should end, many in the straight world thought. But far from ending, the 'demands of the gay lobby' went on and on. In the 1990s many of my contemporaries found the 'antics' of Gay Pride distasteful – gay lifestyle, gay mannerisms, gay fashions were infiltrating our heterosexual homeland. Wasn't it all a bit aggressive? It went beyond the superficial: the discourse, the personality even, of our young people seemed to be changing in response to the uninhibited 'flaunting' of gayness and the imperatives of political correctness – the outlawing of queer-jokes and derogatory language, and the relentless demands for equality.

I believe that these developments are unequivocally, unreservedly positive, but at the instinctive level I can sympathise with those of my contemporaries who are mildly appalled by them. I am alienated by campaigns for gay marriage, by the self-assurance of some activists and the more ostentatious displays of gayness that you find in media coverage of Gay Pride marches.²³ There is a little bit of me that snaps, 'The state doesn't lock you up or sterilise you, it prosecutes those who abuse you or attack you, why can't you be satisfied and pipe down? All right, some ignorant Christian guest-house landlady refuses to receive you on misguided grounds of conscience – tough, but you're lucky not to have a mind as narrow as hers, so why not just shrug it off?' This only has to be written down to be seen for the nastiness it is, but it is a habit of thinking that is very hard to shake off. And this is where the mental discipline of political correctness comes in. Because we know that we cannot say such things, the recalcitrant part of our mind which harbours these 'incorrect' thoughts is gradually subdued. And here lies not only the value of political correctness, but also its terrible danger.

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21 As I understand it one is not required to take unreasonable measures. It may be that the law was applied over-zealously in a few instances, either from a genuine desire to be inclusive at all costs, or from fear of litigation. In considering the cost-effectiveness of ramps, however, we should take account not only of the wheel-chair users for whom they are absolutely necessary, but also of others (old people with stiff legs, parents with push-chairs, and so on) whose lives are made a little easier by having a ramp.

22 Campaigners against high taxes on large houses or on unearned income would find a harmless little old lady in reduced circumstances whose supposed sufferings made the taxation appear inhuman.

23 I shy away from any kind of self-assurance, and my automatic response is to look for the counter-argument. I don't see the point of the demand for gay marriage, but this has more to do with my attitude to marriage than to gayness. I don't like ceremonial, or vows or anything like that, and to me it seems odd to feel bound by a form of words rather than by the real ties of affection, memory and duty. My own wedding left me cold, something we went through out of deference for the older generation. When they had gone, I thought, no-one would bother with weddings. And as for the exuberance of gay pride, well, with all my inhibitions I don't react well to exuberance.

Class, class, class. This will be the most complicated and emotionally difficult part of the whole argument. I can't help being white, British and heterosexual, any more than I can help being in my sixties, it's the way I was born, but somehow this exculpation doesn't apply to my being middle-class. But surely I didn't choose my parents and grandparents, or the attitudes and values that they taught me, the examples they set before me or the options they offered as I set out on life. These are what made me middle-class – had I any choice in the matter? I was a middle-class little boy in my grey flannel suit and scrubbed knees; I'm a middle-class pensioner now with my *LRB* and paid-off mortgage. The choices which daily confirm my membership of the middle class are conditioned by the tastes and desires, one might almost say the needs, which I acquired as a child. All the same, they are choices. Day by day I choose to be a beastly bourgeois. I choose the privileges, the comfort, the stability, the culture and civility of a middle-class life. It might be argued that race, nationality and sexual orientation are likewise constructed by my daily preferences, and philosophically speaking I can see that this might be true, but if so, the choices are much more deeply buried in my unconscious than those which constitute class. I don't feel the same immediate responsibility for being white, British or heterosexual as I do for being middle-class.

I remember my father (Tony) saying that we were lower-middle-class. When I told our children this they said it was nonsense, that my father must have been in denial about his upper-middle-class background – he went to Oxford, his father (Lee) was a bank-manager, his grandfather (Joseph John) a self-made businessman and leading figure in the small Essex town of Brentwood.²⁴ Our children remembered my parents living in a lovely four-bedroomed house on a private road in Farnham – if that isn't upper-middle, what is? they said. Of course, by this time my parents were living in prosperous retirement, after a life that included periods of financial hardship.²⁵ Also our children seem to have a wider definition of the *upper* class which includes what my father and I would have regarded as the upper-middle class – people like the current leadership of the Tory party, leading barristers, directors of large companies and senior fellows of Oxbridge colleges – and taking people like this out of the middle class would undoubtedly place my parents closer to the upper limit.

But to go back to what Tony said. He probably said it in the course of some discussion over Sunday lunch or high tea – in most weeks of the year those were the only family meals at which he was present. At that point he was a lecturer either at Woolwich Poly or Farnham Art School. Technical education, including art education, was not thought much of in those days. At a later stage lecturers in further education received large salary increases, but I guess he was then paid no more than a grammar school teacher, possibly rather less. In terms of pay and prestige he had not moved far beyond his first post-war job at Hither Green Secondary Modern School.²⁶ Standard Marxist taxonomies would classify teachers at Elementary Schools (the predecessors of Primary schools and Secondary Moderns) along with clerks and small shopkeepers as *petit bourgeois*. This would probably justify Tony's assessment of himself as lower-middle-class. As to why he said it, I have forgotten the context. He may have been responding to something my mother had said. Her family background was undeniably lower-middle-class. She had married above her station, and assumed that as a family we were bound to make further progress upwards.²⁷ Whether or not it was Tony's intention, she was undoubtedly annoyed by his remark – as she was by another of his Sunday lunch themes, that his life had been a failure.

24 It is often said (for example by Harry Hopkins in *The New Look*, 1963) that during the twentieth century the middle class expanded at both ends with the move from factory to office work, manual work to brain work, and with the conversion of large independent entrepreneurs into corporate managers and the growth of state employment. The Crowe family exemplifies some of this in its small way, going in three generations from entrepreneur to bank employee to school-teacher. Of course it is more complicated. In the first of the three generations Joseph John Crow (not yet Crowe) arrived 'penniless' in Brentwood from Clare and created his business from nothing.

25 This hardship was probably softened by loans from Grandpa Lee, who had his own savings as well as a certain amount inherited from his father – although the Joseph John's fortune seems to have shrunk quite rapidly, virtually none of it coming down to my father's generation.

26 He often looked back fondly to his days at Hither Green. One reason why he moved on was that at Woolwich Poly he could manage his hours so as to have a day free each week to work on his PhD.

27 Later on, when I spent long months on the dole, it occurred to her that perhaps one might slip downwards.

But my children were right not to take their grandfather's claim to be lower-middle-class at face value. Both from his fastidious parents and from his Oxford years Tony had acquired a strong sense of *comme il faut*, tact and courtesy, the appropriate clothes, the correct form of address. His letters from Oxford to his parents display delight in finding out and explaining how things ought to be done. Lee, my grandfather, had worked his way up in the Westminster Bank (as he also worked his way up in the army, ending the Great War as a lieutenant), but all his life he had really wanted to be a farmer. In retirement, in his poky between-the-wars villa at the foot of the South Downs, he managed to give the impression of living the life of a country gentleman, with his tweeds, his chickens, his horse-riding, his garden.²⁸ When I stayed with them in Wannock Lane (which I did, I suppose, about a dozen times between the ages of eight and fourteen) there was something of the feel of a country-house weekend. I had read about such things, and having no conception of what it would be like to be waited on by servants or to stay in a real country house, Wannock Lane represented the pinnacle of poshness. It's not an accident that the Crowes were Congregationalists, traditionally the most genteel of the non-conformist sects. Lee had a definite position in the church, being for some years the treasurer of the London Missionary Society. I recapture a sense of all this forgotten gentility whenever I open the cupboards in their massive sideboard (which we blasphemously keep in our kitchen).

My grandmother looked the part of a country gentlewoman, but I wonder how far she felt the part. Did she forget that she was the daughter of a failed builder, rather looked down upon by her husband's family? Like my mother, she married above her parents' station, and like my mother she feared a slide downwards on the social ladder. Hence the snobbery. As a snob she had much to put up with from Tony, with first his socialism and then his proletarian army friends. He tried to persuade her to vote Labour in the LCC elections on the grounds that he might then get a state scholarship for Oxford, but I doubt if he succeeded. She could never forget (and the family has never forgotten) that one of his friends came to tea and at the end uttered the terrible words, 'Had sufficient, done nicely thanks.'

If Granny had died at seventy all I'd remember would be her fussiness and snobbery, but she lived on into her nineties and into a new world. She led a sheltered life. The lack of deference in New Zealand in 1951 came as a shock, and she was glad to return to Eastbourne. She was not forced to recognise that in England too deference was on the way out until the late 1960s and 70s, when she had to deal with the difficult final years of first her husband, and then her sister-in-law, Ethel, and her own sisters Margaret and Suzanne. This unavoidable brush with real life forced her into contact with the egalitarian familiarity of hospitals and social services. Not that things were really egalitarian. My father used to say that it was worth 'speaking proper' because it would make the police treat you better, and the same was true of hospitals and public services generally. Class remained, and remains, powerful, but on the surface there was a breaking down of barriers and a growth of informal chumminess. As a reader of the *Daily Telegraph* Granny would have been familiar with its sarcasms about political correctness, and although I don't remember her ever using the term she would express the idea quite plainly by prefacing her snobbish remarks with the words, 'I know it's all very wrong, but ...' But with her this was neither sarcasm nor an empty apology. She was a serious woman, pained to find that her feelings and reactions fell below the standard which, with part of her mind, she could see was right.²⁹

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Our children, who are every bit as middle-class as I am, are much more at ease with all sorts of people than I have ever been. They have never had the middle-class fixation on high culture.

²⁸ By the time I knew my Grandfather he had given up riding, having, I think, fallen off once too often for Granny's peace of mind. Wannock Lane where they lived must have been one of the developments that so maddened people like the Woolfs who denounced the sprawl of speculative building in their beloved Sussex. When I hear of campaigns to stop house-building in the countryside I think of the years of contentment that my grandparents enjoyed. Foxes, cowslips, and views of unspoilt downland are all very fine, but don't count for as much as modest human happiness. Needless to say, my grandparents were warm in their denunciation of later waves of building, as the villas and bungalows climbed higher up on the Downs in the 1950s and 60s.

²⁹ I don't think she made the same sort of apology about her religious views. She was an intelligent woman and knew she was living in a rationalist age, but she didn't question her literal belief in an afterlife.

Christopher in particular is firmly anti-elitist. Their tastes in music and in life-style are more clearly defined by their generation than by class.³⁰ They are at home in pubs for example, which has always been a testing ground for class attitudes. I used to dread being asked to the pub when I was working at Leven. I used one excuse after another to get out of it. There's a story about George Orwell reprimanding a BBC colleague, John Morris, for ordering 'beer' in a pub. No working man, Orwell said, would ever ask for beer. 'A pint of bitter for me,' he said to the barmaid, 'and a glass of beer for my friend.' I have a vague recollection of Bernard once putting me right about what to say when ordering a glass of beer, although I can't remember now what it was I said, nor what Bernard thought I ought to have said.³¹ Our children's ease in these situations has something to do with their schooling, Madras College being, despite appearances, a comprehensive. As my mother would have put it, they 'rubbed shoulders' with working-class children.³² This meant that, as well as making friends, they were also subject to a certain amount of bullying based on class-resentment, and were realistic enough to say so.

'There were some not very nice people,' Christopher told me not long ago, looking back on certain incidents at school. I'm not sure whether he told us about them at the time. If not, perhaps it was because he sensed that I would never feel I could say of a working-class child that he was 'not very nice'. Probably I'd have defended them, tried to get him to change his view, suggested explanations for their behaviour, attempted mediation. I think this would have been because I have a sentimental reluctance to write people off as bad, rather than out of left-wing political correctness, but I am not sure. But the main point I want to make is that Christopher (and our children generally, and their partners) are more clear-sighted and down-to-earth about working-class people than I have ever been – better able to make friends with the nice ones, and more willing to judge the ones who are not nice. Recognising all this, our children have several times told me that I have a rosy view of the working class.

It's true that back in the 1960s I, in common with many others, had a romantic view of the proletariat, made up of several ingredients. The hard-drinking, wife-beating working-class man was deplorable, no doubt, but somehow 'authentic'. I expect some of my more analytically inclined contemporaries looked at the social conditions that produced this behaviour, but for many of us it seemed just more instinctive, less inhibited, than our own. Why, we couldn't even drink tea from a saucer! Novels of the 1950s and 60s offered a contrast between the ineffectual lower middle-class Jim Dixon with the unabashed masculinity of Arthur Seaton. More generally, we found a robustness, a directness, about *working-class culture* (a phrase which, when first used, was uttered defiantly, as though it were an oxymoron). There was, however, already a heritage-tint to our view, influenced as we were by Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*, accounts of the Hunger Marches, and the products of folk-lore research. We often used the word *bourgeois* with all its beastly connotations – suburban, philistine, materialistic – which betrays our snobbery. Our attitude was as much aristocratic as proletarian. We thought we were shaking our fists at the middle class, when in fact we were looking down our noses.

We didn't want to be caught taking *a middle-class view* or, worse, *imposing middle-class values*. This fear particularly dominated discussions of education in the 70s and 80s, but it could arise in almost any context – holidays, food, films, music, clothes. You would express an innocent preference, and suddenly out would come the riposte: That's a very middle-class view; you can't impose your middle-class values, you know. Middle-class language also was to be avoided. It was

³⁰ There has been an attempt (largely, but not entirely, dishonest) to redraw the boundaries and air-brush out all reference to class. Aspiration, supposed once to be the hallmark of the middle class (sharp-elbowed, my father used to call them), is now said to be the preserve of hard-working people.

³¹ Morris also recalled Orwell, in his desire to identify with the working class, defiantly drinking tea out of a saucer in the BBC canteen, to the embarrassment of two doorkeepers who were sharing their table. Morris told the stories in 'Some are more Equal than Others', *Penguin New Writing*, 40, 1950. While much of the article appears critical of Orwell, Morris concludes: 'I wish I could have known him better, for I greatly admire his work, but we seemed always to irritate each other. When we were alone together he always tried to behave in an aggressively working-class manner, and the effect of that was to make me talk like an unrepentant reactionary. But I am sure the fault was mostly mine.'

³² My mother used this phrase when justifying (to herself, perhaps) our being sent to council primary schools. She remained apprehensive about this rubbing of shoulders, and was never happy for us to mix with children from council houses.

not just words and phrases like *glass of beer, lunch, lavatory or drawing-room*; correct grammar was middle-class. Much of this was very silly³³, but at the root of it was an awareness of the cultural shibboleths so long employed to keep people out.

I also retained from my debased public school upbringing a residual feeling of obligation towards those who were less – less *something* than I was, but I couldn't say what that something was: less fortunate, less well-off, less well educated, less refined, less well brought-up. Whatever it was, such a feeling was decidedly incorrect, and not to be voiced. Not for me the paternalistic confidence of an earlier generation of middle-class left-wingers. There's a famous comment by Hugh Gaitskell to the effect that members of the upper-middle class like him and Richard Crossman were better able to relate to and deal with the working classes than less self-assured and less securely established lower-middle-class Socialists like Roy Jenkins.³⁴ Be that as it may, I find that my attitude to working-class people is seldom natural, seldom spontaneous. I'm often unable to find a middle way between being hostile and being patronising.

Christopher may well have detected this brew of inhibitions, and if so it may well have made him hesitate to tell me about his difficulties with 'not very nice people' at school. He told me once that the trouble was I'd never had anything to do with working-class people, and I can see why he thinks so, but it's not true, as a brief account of my early working life will make clear.

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When I left school in 1964, determined not to go to University, I was interviewed for a number of jobs. I pictured myself on a building site, but the jobs I went after were not like that – a solicitor's clerk in Northumberland Avenue, house-keeper to a lesbian couple living beside Regent's Park, packer in a firm in Store Street, office-boy for a public relations firm near Shaftesbury Avenue.³⁵ The man from the PR firm seemed to regret not being able to offer me a job, and as a consolation he took me to lunch in an Italian restaurant. He was a smooth-talking chap, and when he learned that Alan Eden-Green was my uncle he expressed surprise that he wasn't able to give me a leg up.³⁶ We were joined at lunch by his partner, a rougher diamond, who asked if I had been to the labour exchange, and when I said no he said he thought as much, meaning that I fancied myself too genteel for signing on. My suspicion that the Labour Exchange wasn't for me was confirmed a year or so later, when I was a student in St Andrews. I went to the Labour Exchange (located somewhere on South Street, perhaps in the same premises as the current Job Centre) to look for a summer job. The woman looked at me appraisingly and said they had only one job, in Tentsmuir Forest, but she didn't think I'd be strong enough.

Later I was unemployed for six months in Oxford. At that time even in Oxford the dole queue was almost exclusively working-class, but my experience didn't bring me any closer to sympathy with those around me. This was for two reasons. First of all, I was on the Professional and Executive Register, which meant that the dole office never sent me off to apply for jobs. The woman from the P&E told me it was up to me to find a suitable job. She was the only one of the civil servants dealing with my case to treat me sympathetically.³⁷ The second reason why I didn't make contact with my fellow benefit recipients was that I fell in with the young man from the Workers Revolutionary Party who was selling their paper outside the office. Most of the signers-on avoided him. His Marxist talk did a lot to reinforce my fear of 'taking a middle-class view', but didn't help me find what other view I ought to take. Their paper was, as I recall, very well produced, with excellent photographs, one of which has stuck with me. The aim was to rubbish the soft-Left's response to the Upper Clyde Shipyards work-in, and their photograph showed Tony Benn gazing,

33 There was a backlash against this, a favourite grumble centring on the so called 'greengrocer's apostrophe', which threatened to become a middle-class obsession to rival the old pre-occupation with how many workmen it took to dig a hole in the road.

34 Quoted by David Kynaston in *Modernity Britain*.

35 I was offered the first two of these jobs, but turned them down, timidly preferring to go and work for my sister Jennifer at the Graduate Teacher Training Registry.

36 Alan was president of the PROs' trade body that year.

37 It was her job to be sympathetic. I don't mean to imply that the others treated me badly, but it wasn't their job to do more than process my claim or pay me my money. The P&E woman was heavily pregnant, so it was clear that after our one interview she would never see me again. She also had the bluest eyes I've ever seen. I've written about all this in my memoir of my life on benefits.

pipe in mouth, at the locked gates. The picture captured Benn's trademark humbug and self-satisfaction. He was manifestly taking a middle-class view.

For the next couple of years I worked in further education, teaching art students at Chelsea and apprentices at various colleges, including Aylesbury, Harrow and Croydon. I felt a humbug at Chelsea, and utterly inadequate when it came to the apprentices. They were on 'day release' and most of their day was spent on technical instruction, which they could see the point of. They didn't understand why they had to spend an hour doing what was called, variously, English or Liberal Studies or General Studies with someone like me. The reason went back to a post-war report on technical education which laid down that the technicians of the future needed a rounded education, to understand the society they lived in, to have access to culture. My father, who spent most of his working life in this area (including his time in the Army Education Corps), believed that what everyone needed from education was a path to self-knowledge – a way out of the chaos, as he put it.³⁸ I found this inspiring, and (having enjoyed what I still thought was the most rounded of all educations – the classics) assumed that I was just the person for the job. I immediately found that I was wrong.

I don't think this was to do with class. This isn't the place to consider all the reasons why I am temperamentally and intellectually unsuited to teaching, but I was equally incapable of teaching middle-class undergraduates.

But although class wasn't the root of my problem, it didn't help with the apprentices. I knew at once they despised me because of my appearance, my lack of what they saw as a proper job, my ignorance of what they thought of as real life, and my inability to string words together, but I didn't see at first that they also resented me, thought me stuck-up, superior. They assumed that I looked down on them. There was no quick way of proving that I didn't, since if you say, 'I don't look down on you', you demonstrate that you do. Most of them were good-natured but a few liked to tease and goad me. One of their tricks was to show me naked women from the *Sun*, or to read out stories that they thought would provoke me. If they went too far their colleagues would intervene. My one triumph was when a group of printing apprentices at Croydon let off a stink-bomb in class, and I said there was a nasty smell coming in from outside, and made them close the windows.

I lasted a whole year at Aylesbury, largely due to the kindness of the head of department, an American called Bill Winget. But he could see how badly I was doing, and was always making suggestions of other jobs I might try, including the police and the church. 'You can be an anarchist policeman or an atheist vicar,' he said. 'Hell, half the church of England are atheists. When you're a vicar I'll get all my friends to bring their fucking babies to be christened.' I liked Bill. The department was despised by the technical staff (he used to say the Liberal Studies people had to walk around in pairs for their protection) so it was good of him to put up with a liability like me. But at the end of the year he said he couldn't take me on again, muttering something about reorganization. His farewell advice was that in applying for jobs I should not let on that I had studied Greek and Philosophy – better to say I'd spent those years in prison.

In 1973 England we returned to St Andrews, or rather to Pittenweem. Pittenweem is now teeming with middle-class people, but wasn't in those days. We were happy there and the people were friendly, apart from a man with big dogs who lived next door for a while. Although we were obviously different from the majority of Pittenweem inhabitants it didn't feel like a class difference. We were English people in a Scottish fishing community, not middle-class people in a working-class community.

The only time we were embroiled in a typical class confrontation was over the matter of the door between our courtyard and the next door garden. When part of the next door house was let to what was then just beginning to be known as a 'problem family' the children would come in and out through our yard, slamming the gate onto the High Street, and leaving it to bang in the wind. I was almost as proud of this street-gate as if I had put it up myself, and I could see that this treatment

³⁸ I once used this phrase during an interview at Ashford College of FE. I didn't get the job, even though I was the only applicant. The head of department said apologetically he would have to spend so long licking me into shape that he'd be better off managing on his own. He said one needed to establish a rapport with the lads, describing (as an example of his own success in this) a lad who came to ask advice about 'something wrong with my knob, sir'.

would damage it. As I sat working in my little study above the courtyard I would wait for the next crash. The other tenants, the Browns, had a little girl called Gillian who managed the gate perfectly well, but the poor problem mother couldn't, or wouldn't, get her children to shut it properly. The neighbours on our other side, the couthy Mrs Imrie and her raffish husband Jack, who kept a sweet-shop, told us that the door between us and the other house did not mean there was a right of way; we should simply block it up, they said. Although their advice was based on a mixture of self-interest and snobbery, we followed it. It meant that the people next door, including the inoffensive Brown family, would have to go all the way down their garden (some 50 yards of rough ground) and then round by the lane to get out onto the High Street. Everyone accepted that we had acted within our rights, although I suspect that if there had been an owner-occupier next door, or if a drying-green had been involved, there may have been more of a fuss – Pittenweem was riddled with quarrels over access. Irrespective of the law I was anxious about it for the rest of our time in Pittenweem. What if they fell and injured themselves in the garden? What if they were run over in the lane? It remains one of the actions I'm most ashamed of.

Our time in Lundin Links was awkward for all sorts of reasons, one of which was to do with class. Anna felt this in her dealings with the playgroup, where she had to smooth the friction between the 'executive housing' of Lundin Links and the council houses of Lower Largo. We didn't fit into either group. We were too poor to mix easily with the businessmen and 'professional people' along the Leven Road, but middle-class attitudes to things such as healthy eating and television proved a barrier on the other side. Being members of the Labour Party didn't help us in either direction. My difficulty in accepting that some working-class people were 'not very nice' led to my failure to mistrust the boorish, and allegedly violent, Andrew Balfour, and the plausible Peter Heaney, who sold us our terrible house. The people of Leven Road and Lower Largo could all have put me right over this.

My position in the Leven social security office was similarly ambiguous. Most of my difficulties were to do with my slowness in mastering tasks which everyone else found comparatively easy, but I'm sure everyone thought I was a bit odd. Most of the time my colleagues and I were content to fall back on the fact that I was English³⁹ – this was the easier explanation – and I was so lacking in self-knowledge that I was usually unaware of the class factor, and was always surprised when it forced itself to the surface. When the manager interviewed me on arrival he said that the office was very democratic and everyone was known by their forename.⁴⁰ I thought he was going to say that I should call him Bob, but he and his deputy were exceptions to the rule. I was puzzled by his little homily until just recently when I realised that he must have been warning me not to expect any deference on account of my superior class and education. The idea had not occurred to me. Was there something in my manner that suggested it? Or something in my file?⁴¹ The manager went on to say that he noted that my forename was Julian, and was that what I wanted to be called? Again I was puzzled by this. Was he hinting that Julian wasn't a very democratic name? I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to say I was usually known as Jim, but wasn't confident enough that I could pull off the pretence.⁴²

A misunderstanding that should have alerted me to how I was viewed by my colleagues arose when Joan Penman and I were discussing our holiday arrangements – we were responsible for the process known as claims-building, and were not supposed to take leave at the same time.⁴³ I had to contact my mother to fix the dates for our holiday in Farnham. I told Joan that I had phoned the

39 Some of the regular claimants would refer to me as the English laddie. One of them complained that he couldn't understand what I said. I often didn't understand what they said.

40 I'm pretty sure he said forename rather than Christian name; it was not out of political correctness, but because it is common usage in Scotland.

41 I had been receiving Supp Ben for some eight months prior to taking up my post, and I once caught sight of my bulging file. Supp Ben staff had their way of noting the character and attitudes of claimants.

42 I was known as Jim at school, but the only person who has used the name since schooldays is Derek. Andy Balfour, when warmed by brandy, said that he hoped I would not take offence, but wasn't Gillian a girl's name?

43 Joan was the one person at Leven I was sorry to lose contact with. The procedure for gathering together the documentation for new benefit claims wasn't particularly complicated, but I was slow to pick it up. It was the first practical skill I managed to learn, and I felt the affection for Joan that one feels for one's first teacher.

previous evening but my parents had been out, but I had left a message with – and I hesitated before saying ‘with the woman who lives with them’. Joan was cross with me for not saying honestly and frankly that my parents had a servant. The fact was that the woman was a colleague of my father’s who didn’t live in Farnham but stayed with them for a couple of nights each week during the term. I had hesitated because I wasn’t sure whether to describe her as my parents’ friend or their lodger, but I found it difficult to explain, and I don’t know whether Joan was convinced. She had a humorous, appraising way of looking at me, and although she was misled on this particular occasion I think she generally had me pretty well taped. After we had sorted the incoming mail we had to go into the filing room where the ‘General Benefit Units’ were stored. To get there we had to go through three or four doors. I always stood aside and held the first door open for her, and then she would push through all the others ahead of me. She knew full well that my upbringing dictated that I had to let her go first while also saving her the trouble of opening the doors, but she had no intention of playing my game.

On the whole I was regarded with amused tolerance (contemptuous tolerance was how I felt it at the time) but this was put under strain by my failure to show solidarity during the strike against the Callaghan government’s pay-restraint. I spoke against striking both because I was a supporter of the government and because I didn’t approve of jeopardising payments to needy claimants, because Anna and I had experience of being left without money when a benefit giro was late. This was the only time I encountered hostility. ‘Surprising how easily you can go off folk,’ I heard one woman saying. I carried my opposition to the length of crossing the picket line, which I now think I should not have done, particularly since the small band of strike-breakers (me and a handful of non-unionised eccentrics) could not send out giros on our own, so we did the claimants no good at all. My colleagues may have thought I was behaving like the Ian Carmichael character in *I’m All Right, Jack!* who crosses the picket line because gentlemen don’t go on strike. I don’t think that was how I felt, but arguably my reluctance to ‘let the claimants down’, as I put it, betrayed a residual feeling of obligation to ‘those less fortunate than oneself’.

Although one way and another the 1970s brought me into close contact with working-class people – the apprentices and then the claimants and most of the staff in Leven – I was no nearer to discarding, or even being fully conscious of my middle-class attitudes. But the 1980s and Margaret Thatcher made me think more sharply about my place in the class-war.

For a year or so I shared a desk with Steve Walker, a member of the Militant Tendency. He spent a lot of time lecturing me on Marxism according to Gramsci and Trotsky. None of his lessons stuck, except that I remember how he gloated over the lies and deceptions practised by Militant. My ‘idealist’ disapproval of dishonest tactics proved that objectively I was opposed to the interests of the working class – or something like that.

I don’t remember anyone in the Heaton CLP selling *Militant*, but most of the activists seemed to be pretty hard-left. Our right-wing MP felt under threat and defected to the SDP. I always had a sentimental attachment to Michael Foot (despite his endorsement of the Falklands war) and was horrified to find that the prevailing orthodoxy denounced him as the tool of the Right because he went along with the moves against Militant. Cries of witch-hunt and Macarthyism meant that you didn’t have to be a full-blown supporter of Militant to be opposed to its expulsion. It wasn’t easy to identify oneself as ‘soft-left’. Who wants to be soft? And anyway, if one was soft in opposition to the hardness of the Tories, as I suppose I was, one had no chance against the hard-left. In the arguments about Militant in Liverpool it was impossible not to be swayed by slogans such as ‘better to break the law than break the poor’.⁴⁴

In this situation I felt under pressure to conform. Moral blackmail, like other kinds of blackmail, works best if the victim has something to be ashamed of. And I had something – I was middle-class. I needed to demonstrate that I was not, as Steve had said, objectively opposed to the interests of the working class. During the miners’ strike my doubts were stifled by the pressure from the hard left. I didn’t like Arthur Scargill, his half-truths and his arm-waving rhetoric. More

⁴⁴ I had forgotten this slogan, but see (from the Wikipedia entry on Militant) that it was used by Militant in Liverpool, who took it over from the Poplar rates strike of 1919-21. The Poplar leader was George Lansbury, whom I have always regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a softish figure – perhaps this is because of Ernie Bevin’s famous attack on his pacifism.

seriously, I doubted whether what he was doing was in the interests of the miners themselves. But how could I be sure that my feeling was not deep down one of snobbish disdain for an uppity Yorkshireman?⁴⁵ It was easy enough to avoid confronting this thought. I could ignore Scargill and concentrate instead first on the iniquities of Thatcher and the hatchet man she had put in charge of the Coal Board, and secondly on supporting the miners' families who were suffering the effects of the strike.

There was a weekly collection of food for the miners' families, and we always made our contribution. At about the same time we became concerned about the effect of food additives such as tartrazine, particularly on Christopher with his liability to both eczema and unruly behaviour. With the help of one of Miriam Palunin's books (given us by Chris and Bessie) Anna went through the kitchen weeding out various offending food-stuffs, including a couple of packets of jelly and an as yet unopened bottle of orange squash. Instead of throwing them away (along with various opened packets and bottles) we put them in the bag for the miners. We did this with some misgiving because of the implication that something that wasn't good enough for us was good enough for miners' children. But it seemed better than throwing the stuff away. After all, in previous weeks we hadn't given thought to the tartrazine (we had given jellies before) and we had no reason to suppose that anyone else had – most people's contributions, so far as I recall, consisted of the cheaper supermarket brands, which in those days were invariably well laced with additives. But for all the arguments in favour, I remain a bit sheepish about it. Nowadays, if asked for a contribution to a food-bank I give something comparatively up-market.

Another occasion when my middle-class sensibility bumped up against the miners came after we had moved back to Fife. I'm not sure exactly when this happened, but I assume it was during the campaign against the Heseltine cuts in the coal industry in 1992. The 'Coal not Dole' slogan was revived from the miners' strike, and a march to London was organized. Local Labour parties were called on to turn out in support as the march passed through their area. Philip and I met the marchers as they crossed the Tay Bridge, and we planned to accompany them from Newport to Cupar. I don't think the marchers were very impressed by a welcoming party of just two – they probably expected better from an old mining area like Fife.⁴⁶ We chatted desultorily as we made our way out of Newport along the A92, and then were surprised when a large van pulled up and everyone piled in, us included. We were driven to the outskirts of Cupar, where we jumped out and marched on, banners aloft, to the council offices where a lunch had been laid on.

Neither Philip nor I could quite overcome our feeling that to cover most of the distance in a van was not quite playing the game. But then, of course, it wasn't a game, it was serious and real. Or so I told myself, going back to that old 1960s feeling that the experience of the working classes was somehow more raw, more authentic than that of the middle class. To insist pedantically on walking every step of the way is just the sort of empty gesture you'd expect from the airy fairy middle classes. If you do real work you know about conserving energy. Philip and I were like the people who get indignant over the number of men it takes to dig a hole in the road.

It was plainly politically incorrect to 'take a middle-class attitude' or 'impose middle-class standards'. This inhibited discussions of education, when it was sometimes hard to avoid accusations of elitism. It also made us keep quiet about things, suppress our disapproval, as Philip and I did over the marchers' van. George Orwell, who despite his cultivation of working-class manners continued to look on the world with middle-class eyes, wrote in his wartime diary:

According to F., it is quite true that foreigners are more frightened than English people during the raid. It is not their war, and therefore they have nothing to sustain them. I think this might account for the fact – I am virtually sure that it is a fact, though one mustn't mention it – that working-class people are more frightened than middle-class.⁴⁷

45 Where I've written 'arm-waving rhetoric' my first thought was *vulgar*.

46 This was in the aftermath of the disappointing 1992 election, when our morale, never very high in NE Fife, was particularly low.

47 Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 2, *My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943*, Penguin, 1971 (1968), p. 429. I guess that "F" is Fred Warburg.

I'm not concerned here about the claim that working-class people were more frightened, which is a typical Orwell generalisation,⁴⁸ nor about his explanation in terms of 'morale', an abiding preoccupation, but only with his 'one mustn't mention it'. What sort of compulsion is he referring to? It might be wartime self-censorship, not to say anything that might damage morale still further or lead to unnecessary friction, but I suspect he was particularly thinking of the fury that would be unleashed on the political Left by such a verdict on the working class. It wouldn't be politically OK.⁴⁹ In general, of course, Orwell was scornful of the Left's willingness to distort and ignore the truth for political reasons, and although in this case his wish to identify with the working class (remember the pint of bitter) may have made him personally unwilling to declare publicly what he thought about their response to air-raids, it's likely that his 'one mustn't mention it' is an ironical comment on political OK-ness.

I'm not sure what conclusions to draw from this survey of the anxieties of a middle-class lefty. The root of my troubles lies in my insecure grasp on who I am and where I belong. My instinctive responses are all wrong, or rather all confusing. Does political correctness offer any guidance? There is no check-list defining the correct attitude to be taken up towards those of a different class, apart from platitudes such as that we should treat everyone the same. You might say that the whole question of class is fundamentally politically incorrect. We should turn our backs on it, make it go away, pretend it's a thing of the past. All right, we can pretend it's a thing of the past, but it isn't. So long as our cheap and varied diet, our global travel, our leisure and pensions, and our electronics all depend on other people doing physically debilitating, dangerous, undignified and ill-rewarded labour, there will be classes. How I treat individual members of other classes is a trivial matter compared with the scandal of inequality.

With some relief I leave the topic of class unresolved, but it's only to enter the equally contentious topic of 'race' – so contentious that one puts the word in scare-quotes.

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I was made aware of multiculturalism by a conversation over an Indian meal in Newcastle in the company of Linda and David Winkley (visiting from Birmingham) and three or four of their friends. This must have been about 1984 or 1985.⁵⁰ Much of the conversation was over our heads, because everyone else was an experienced and committed professional in the fields of education, psychiatry or social work. I came away from the over-priced Indian restaurant with a vague and uneasy sense that everything I had thought about our multi-racial⁵¹ society was incorrect. I suppose at that time my attitude to race was that it would be better if we could put all these problems behind us, treat everyone the same and make the differences a thing of the past. Such an idealistic hope might (just might) make sense when applied to class, but it would be clearly politically incorrect to apply it to other areas such as gender, sexual orientation and disabilities. At best this attitude is an evasion, a way of avoiding the challenge of reconciling equality with difference.

I'm still no nearer grasping the public policy implications of all this than I was in 1984/5. Instead I'll give a quick account of the various phases that I have gone through in my efforts to become politically correct on multiculturalism.

48 In his retrospect of his wartime 'London Letters' in the *Partisan Review* Orwell admits to making generalisations based on little or no evidence. (*Partisan Review*, Winter 1945)

49 He uses the phrase in another 'London Letter', referring to certain journals that would print anything 'however bad which is politically OK'. (*Partisan Review* Fall 1944) He mentions intimidation by 'prevailing left-wing opinion' as the reason why pacifists were reluctant to criticise Russia. (*Partisan Review*, Summer 1944)

50 Our slight sense of being 'out of it' was affected by our concern for the children – would they be bored? – and worry about the cost of the meal; we were conscious of being less well-off than the others.

51 Before I heard the term *multicultural* I was used to hearing Britain described as an increasingly multi-racial society. Theoretically there is a crucial difference between race and culture, but it's not always easy to keep them distinct. A lot of discussions tended to get bogged down in inconclusive arguments about the concept of race. One would like to stick to *culture*, a safer term altogether (safer, if for no other reason, because it doesn't pretend to the speciously scientific precision of *race*), but this is made hard by the indiscriminate use in this context of the epithet *racist*.

My first contact with the idea of foreignness came from our German *au paire* girls, who first appeared while we were still in Guibal Road, so before 1953. I picked up the idea that they were foreign from the attitude of my sisters, who were decidedly hostile. They were both called Waltraud, which I could tell was not an English name.⁵² I don't remember noticing that their speech was different, although I am sure my sisters must have mimicked them. They introduced us to exotic customs, in particular the joys of sugar sandwiches – presumably not a traditional dish, but a reflection of the scarcity of jam and cakes in post-war Germany.

When I was in hospital early in 1953 I noticed that some of the nurses and most of the orderlies had dark faces, although that was not the most striking thing about them: some of them moved in a different way and most of them were more easy-going than their white colleagues. I looked out for the black nurses because they were less likely to make a fuss if I asked for a bed-pan at the wrong time. As with the Waltrauds, so with the black nurses, I accepted the difference as one of the given facts of life and didn't think any more about it. With my friend Martin, however, I did ponder why he and his sister had dark skins. I speculated whether it was because he ate too much Marmite, but didn't think that was very likely, although he did eat an awful lot of it, ignoring the instruction to spread it thinly. A new factor was introduced into my speculations when I met his father, briefly, on Begbie Road. Mr Colley, unlike Mrs Colley, whom I knew well, was black.

Over the next few years residents of South-East London became more and more accustomed to seeing black people in the street. We didn't call them black people, but Negroes, or preferably West Indians – to the annoyance of people like Martin who were from Africa.⁵³ Passing through Lewisham and Deptford in the car we would count the black men – this would be in the mid 1950s, and they were nearly all men. By the time I was travelling regularly on the bus to school there were many West Indian conductors and conductresses, and as with the nurses they were usually more good-natured than their grumpy indigenous colleagues. One West Indian conductor saw me studying my Latin grammar and told me that *bus* was Latin. Unfortunately I thought he said *bos* and so we had a slightly confused conversation about buses and cows.

I didn't realise that all this was an issue until the time of the Notting Hill disturbances of 1958, at which point I identified black people as victims, and decided that I was *on their side*.⁵⁴ This was perhaps an acceptable attitude for an eleven-year-old, but my views remained at the same fairly infantile level for the next twenty years or more. Of course I took notice of the political repercussions, the immigration acts and race relations acts, the riots and the complaints against the police, but I didn't engage with the issue. I just knew that black people were victims and I was on their side. The victim perception was reinforced by events, and also by the publicity material put out by Oxfam and other charities, from the Biafran appeals onwards.⁵⁵ So I was against immigration controls and in favour of integration – not only in favour of it, I thought it was possible. Racism seemed such a peculiar point of view that I thought it must be rare – just a few bad men, who could be easily overcome, as the heroic Andrew Faulds overcame nasty Peter Griffiths in Smethwick.

It used to be said that naïve views like mine were held only by privileged people who never came into contact with immigrants. (The middle-class view again.) On the surface this wasn't true in my case. For three years in Oxford and six years in Heaton we lived in streets where around a third of the inhabitants were first or second generation Asian immigrants. But although we lived in close proximity, we had no real contact with the Asian people, we were incomers to the area just as they were, and there was no competition with them over jobs or over council houses. So the jibe was

52 My parents had an earlier lodger called Mr Pfanda. My sisters talked about him a lot, but I don't remember him, although he took photographs of me as a toddler. The name was obviously funny and different, but I accepted it as a fact and formed no idea of foreignness from my sisters' talk about him.

53 I remember reading a facetious article (probably in *Punch*) proposing the term *wig*, or *West Indian Gentleman*, a rather sickening allusion to one of the common suggested etymologies of *wog*.

54 There is an unprepossessing character in Anthony Powell who repeatedly declares that she is on the workers' side.

55 Since 1945 if you were looking for a simile for extreme malnourishment and emaciation you would invoke the victims of Belsen; from 1968 onwards you would say, 'like a child from Biafra'. I suppose that went on until the Ethiopian famines.

justified. We could afford to look down on the old woman opposite who kept grumbling about ‘the blackies’.

In Marlborough Road there were women in saris – my father said he thought they were from the Punjab. He was with me, I remember, when they were crowding round a merchant with a van full of colourful sari-cottons. When my father came to our allotment he admired the grace with which the women stooped to plant out their onion sets. He also commented on a man who was filling a scoop from a water-tank and throwing its contents over his ground with an easy action, as though he could go on doing it for ever. ‘A real Indian,’ my father said. He said it again when the man paused to take a long drink from his scoop. A few doors along from us was a family with a boy, Taseem, of about seven or eight. He was sent out to look after his little sister. A serious boy who felt the responsibility, he got into the habit of bringing her into our house where perhaps he felt he could relax. Anna lent him books to read and got to know him quite well. I don’t remember whether we ever spoke to his parents.

In Rothbury Terrace there were Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. The two corner shops were owned by Asians, the supercilious Mr Haq at the Chillingham Road end, while opposite us there was the much more friendly Mr Kohli, known as Colin. Colin’s shop was less well stocked, so we usually went to Mr Haq. On our first night in Heaton someone put a stone through Colin’s window, and we wondered what sort of place we had come to, but it never happened again.⁵⁶ The worst I witnessed in the way of racist behaviour was when a boy about Swithun’s age whispered through the door, ‘Paki, Paki, Paki.’ We made no friends amongst our Asian neighbours. The closest we came was when we found ourselves involved in a bout of reciprocal gift-giving with the family of a Hindu child in Christopher’s class. Christopher ended up with a beautiful mirror-work waistcoat, but we panicked when we realised with horror that we had given them mince-pies containing suet. We felt on firmer, impersonal ground when it came to a public case of cultural friction. The Muslim community bought a large house on the corner of Rothbury Terrace and Heaton Road, and proposed to turn it into a community and educational centre, a Madrassa, I suppose, but referred to by the white residents as a Mosque. There was a petition to have it banned by the Council, which we refused to sign. I was sorry it wasn’t a Mosque, and that there would be no call to prayer. The petition failed and in due course the Madrassa opened, and we would see the little boys running along the street behind their bearded teacher. I rather liked it. So far as I know there was no active hostility. Heaton was on the whole a friendly place.⁵⁷ Even when we disagreed with the majority of the neighbours (white and Asian) over the half-way house for released prisoners two or three doors down from us, there was no lasting animosity. When it had been open for a few months one of the Indian women confided that she now thought they had been wrong and there was nothing to worry about.

In between Oxford and Newcastle we had six years in the East Neuk where immigrants were seldom seen, unless you count the well established Polish community. There were two Polish shopkeepers in Lundin Links, Mr Croll⁵⁸ who kept a rather gloomy grocery, and Janek, who ran what would now be called a convenience store, and was the most dynamic figure in the village.⁵⁹ When I was working in the ‘contributions’ section at Leven I had to write an embarrassing letter to the owner of a Chinese restaurant because the DHSS computer had two different versions of his name and I had to ask which was the right one. He came into the office, thinking the letter was a demand for money, and produced a wad on banknotes from his back pocket. And then there was Mr Gopal the dentist in Leven. He said all the fillings I’d been given by Mr Duncan in St Andrews needed to be replaced, so he administered several injections and then left me alone while he went off to operate on another patient. He bustled back and without a word set to work on my mouth.

⁵⁶ Colin’s shop was always a bit gloomy but Google StreetView shows that now, thirty years on, it’s much smarter.

⁵⁷ The boy who whispered insults through Mr Kohli’s shop once left a turd in a shopping bag on our doorstep. This may have been in connection with the Mosque controversy. Someone also drew swastikas on our gate-post.

⁵⁸ The children used to say, ‘Mr Croll has lots of rolls,’ but I don’t remember how that came about.

⁵⁹ Polish people settled in Fife after 1945. There had been Italians since the early twentieth century. Down in Lower Largo was a large ice cream parlour said to have been established by a family from the same village as Charles Forte.

Bemused by the anaesthetic I thought of him as a grenade tossing commando storming my mouth. It was the first time I'd been given local anaesthetics by a dentist, and also my first experience of superfast drills. It was an extraordinary performance, particularly in comparison with Mr Duncan's half an hour for a single filling. This was almost forty years ago, and some of Mr Gopal's work is still intact.

I remember these encounters partly because they were so rare. Because the East Neuk and Levenmouth were almost untouched by Asian immigration some people thought it unwise of the Constituency Labour Party to adopt an Asian politician from Glasgow, Bashir Maan, as its candidate for the election in February 1974.⁶⁰ Two people we know resigned from the Party over it, not because they disapproved of an Asian candidate as such, but because they felt he had been foisted on the constituency by the national headquarters irrespective of whether he was likely to appeal to the Fife electorate. They said it was an insult, as though the people of Fife were more likely than others to feel insulted by an Asian (or Glaswegian) candidate. There was a suggestion that some activists felt that if they rejected him they would risk being accused of racial prejudice. It was said later that Bashir Maan did not run a very vigorous campaign, confirming the view that his interests were mainly in Glasgow – where indeed he went on to have a long and distinguished political career. It may be that his apparent lack of interest in the constituency was what made people say later that his candidature was an insult.⁶¹

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It should be clear from the foregoing account that nothing in my experience of living alongside immigrant communities gave me the slightest reason to be hostile to them. My vaguely benevolent feeling of being on the side of black people – or I should say, black and Asian people – remained unshaken. Unshaken, but also unexamined, so that I was ill-equipped to explain or defend my view when it was challenged. I knew that some white people felt differently – how could one fail to know? It's sometimes said that people are afraid to say what they think about immigration for fear of being called racist, but there's no lack of voices raised in criticism of the immigrant communities, usually prefaced by 'I'm not a racist, but ...'. If what we mean by racist is a BNP thug or the cop played by Rod Steiger in *In the Heat of the Night*, then most people are not racists, but there are lesser degrees of racism, and many ways of being racist – so many that it makes little sense to throw the words around. Since the unfortunate *bigoted woman* incident during the 2010 election many people have been slower to shout racist. This might be sensible, since abusing people isn't the best way of persuading them to agree with you, but I suspect that at the same time genuine bigots and racists have felt freer to spout their poisonous nonsense.⁶²

But for most of the last forty years or more the politically correct thing has been zero tolerance for racist remarks. Let nothing get past you. Pounce on anything that smacks in the slightest degree of racism. Don't let it grow. Which is fine if you are equipped to do it, but I've never found it easy. The apprentices in Aylesbury had my measure. One of my classes at the FE College was a group of about a dozen plasterers which included one very vocal white boy, a big lad, obviously used to throwing his weight around, and two quiet black brothers, both very tall and handsome.⁶³ Week

⁶⁰ I wasn't involved with the CLP in 1974, so everything I say here is based on hearsay.

⁶¹ The Labour Party was criticised for putting their only Asian candidate up in such an unwinnable seat, but this was unfair, since constituencies like ours were often used to give promising politicians a first taste of a parliamentary contest. John Smith, Harry Ewing, Helen Liddell, Henry Macleish and Lynda Clark all stood first in unwinnable NE Fife. Bashir Maan's association with NE Fife is remembered mainly because he was hurt in a road accident on his way to the count. In the October election his place was taken by Helen Liddell.

⁶² See *How to talk about Immigration*, 2014, by Sunder Katwala, Steve Ballinger and Matthew Rhodes of the think-tank British Future, which argues that to gain support for pro-immigration policies you have to persuade the majority of people who are neither committed racists nor fully paid-up liberals, but who occupy what the authors call the 'anxious middle'. *The Privatisation of Prejudice: equality legislation and political correctness in the UK*, a briefing paper by the Living in Difference in Europe project, University of Sheffield (November 2014), addresses the question of what happens to 'incorrect' opinions when they are not aired.

⁶³ There's a side issue here: am I right to refer to these young men as boys and lads? If they'd been young women there is a strong argument that it would be politically incorrect to refer to them as girls. It would feel odd to refer to them as men, although that's what they were, and clumsy to say *young men* every time.

after week the big lad tried to provoke me. One of his tricks was to cast in the direction of the black lads nicely calculated remarks just on the edge of being palpably racist, daring me to tell him off. I don't know whether he thought I was frightened of him, but his skill in teasing me didn't depend on physical intimidation. He carefully left himself room to claim, if I criticised him, that it was me who had the implicitly racist attitude. In the end I fell into his trap. 'You can't tell them apart, those people,' he said, looking at the black boys. In those days the gibe that all black people looked the same was regularly thrown about; it may not be so common nowadays, but back in 1971 it was a favourite racist insult. 'No, no, no,' I protested, 'you shouldn't talk like that about people.' One of the black brothers then said (perhaps the first thing either of them had ever said to me), 'Don't worry, sir, we're used to it, we're identical twins.'⁶⁴

My naïve and inarticulate views made no progress in the next thirty years. Joe, the owner of the guest house where I used to stay in Leeds in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is a case in point. He was a nice man, kind and interesting to talk to, provided you could keep him off the subject of the blacks. He and his wife belonged to a local group concerned at the decay of the neighbourhood, the litter, the traffic, the prostitutes, the crime and the closed-up shops. If the other members of the group were like Joe, then no doubt they also included the immigrants on their list of complaints. It wasn't that Joe didn't like black people – he probably got on well with individuals – but he believed that immigrants had transformed, destroyed, the place where he had lived and worked. Joe talked so much that it wasn't necessary to answer, but I wouldn't have known what to say if I'd tried. He was such a warm, genuine, gentle person, and not a fool either, that none of the ripostes provided by political correctness seemed to fit.

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Writing this memoir (and the much longer drafts which went before) has been a depressing undertaking, and several times I've wondered why I've bothered. Why has it been important to go over these painful questions? They don't really touch me. As a comfortable middle-class person I've not been adversely affected by the social and economic transformations that coincided with (if they weren't caused by) large-scale immigration, and as an Englishman I could afford to be careless about questions of identity which provide the arguments both for and against multiculturalism. So I'm not truly engaged on either side of the controversy. Why not fall back on the comforting myth of colour-blindness? I have all the liberal credentials I need. Why, I'm even a member of a thoroughly multicultural family.⁶⁵ Placing myself, therefore, above the fray, and secure in the knowledge that I have always been on the black man's side, I have not confronted the corner of my mind which has never lost its inherited racism.

So let's go back over this inheritance.⁶⁶

My grandfather Lee was, as I've said, a member of the London Missionary Society. By his time the role of missionaries in Africa and Asia had long been criticised, but right up until the 1950s the

My uncertainty over this may well have contributed in a small way to my inability to relate to them at the time. They were all bigger than me, and only a few years younger. Thinking back, perhaps I should have discussed it with them, but I'd have got the answer, 'Call us what you fucking well like, squire, we won't take any notice of you.' In America, of course, it would be unthinkable to refer to the young black men as boys – Jim Collier had a story about a Glaswegian colleague who got into trouble over this when staying at the YMCA in New York. At Aylesbury Bill Winget, being American, avoided my problem by saying *guys*, but that was not as common in Britain as it has since become.

64 When we are tempted to think of people like my plasterer as racist bigots we should entertain the possibility that they are laughing at us. I was reminded of this Aylesbury embarrassment by something I heard during the recent election. A reporter investigating apathy among young people spoke to a lad who said he knew nothing about the election and didn't care about it. She asked him if he knew who the prime minister was, and he replied by suggesting just about every leading politician in the country except David Cameron – clearly taking the piss.

65 In the olden, politically incorrect, days I might have said I was the head of the family. Not a position I want to claim, partly because I wouldn't like to be the head of anything, but mainly because it has no place in my conception of family as a sprawling net stretching across generations and marriage ties.

66 I shall mainly talk about my father's family. My maternal grandmother, when I knew her, repeated what she read in the *Daily Express*, but what she really thought about anything I have no idea. Her husband, Samuel Eden-Green, who died in 1938, was by all accounts a kindly and far-seeing man.

principal, or only, overseas charity supported by the Congregational church was missionary work.⁶⁷ I'm not sure how far my grandfather believed in the supernatural aspect of Christianity, nor do I know whether he supported the missionaries for their religious proselytising or their educational and medical efforts. No doubt some good work was done, but the attitude of superiority, the sense of a civilising mission, is now seen as politically incorrect.⁶⁸ I don't know whether my grandfather had any such qualms. He once sent me an LMS leaflet or magazine, intended for children, describing in some detail a painful initiation ritual undergone by boys on some Pacific islands, but the only moral he drew from it was that I should try to be as brave and uncomplaining as the island boys.

Most of the stories about my grandfather represent him as a kind, tolerant, Christian man, and this is exactly as I remember him.⁶⁹ My grandmother was, I gather, sometimes exasperated by his penchant for supporting lame ducks, but she remembered it quite fondly when told how, the night before his funeral, Anna and I exasperated my parents by bringing home a tramp we found standing in the rain – just like Lee, she said. One of Grandpa's lame ducks back in the 1920s was a black ex-soldier down on his luck.⁷⁰ But his open-mindedness on matters of race knew definite limits, as is clear from his behaviour over Heather's love affair with Parry, a young Persian man whom she met at work just before the war. Granny (who could see the attractions of Parry) was torn between sympathy for Heather, who was clearly very deeply in love, and her anxieties about 'mixed marriage', but Grandpa had no hesitation in doing everything he could to prevent the match, even to the extent of being uncharacteristically discourteous to the young man.⁷¹ Eventually, at the cost of a long spell of depression and anorexia, Heather gave in. She says it was because of the unhappiness that she was causing her parents. Tony once recalled that Grandpa had called in an older Persian friend to give Heather a picture of the life she could expect as a middle-class Persian wife. 'You think I am westernised and like you,' this older Persian said, 'but when I am at home I do not behave like this.'⁷² Heather records how Tony and Kay helped her get over the unhappiness of it all, but doesn't say what they thought about Parry himself. Whatever Tony thought at the time, there can be no doubt that when he looked back on the affair over thirty or forty years he thought Heather had had a lucky escape. Although Grandpa's hostility was probably mainly due to a visceral fear of losing his daughter to a far off land, it may have been based in part on fears about miscegenation. Tony would hardly have worried about 'mixed blood', but, after his time in India, would have been horrified to think of Heather as an Eastern wife, deprived of Western-style freedom – as though she had gone into a nunnery.

I've gone into this incident in some detail because it is a measure of the distance travelled in two generations. For my grandparents it was all but unthinkable to marry someone of Asian or African heritage. Now it sounds odd to so much as mention that our daughter-in-law is from Sri Lanka – in fact the only time I ever do mention it is when explaining why someone like me who dislikes going anywhere has managed to get as far as Sri Lanka. We never thought of disapproving of any of our children's choices of partner, and even if we had, it wouldn't have occurred to us to do so on grounds of race or colour. And yet we are not better people than my grandfather. What has brought about the change?

As it happens, my grandfather thought, or at least hoped, that we would be better people. He once told me (while we were watering the roses in the front garden at Wannock Lane) that he was himself a better man than his father had been, that my father was a better man than he was, and that I would be a better man than my father. I was so taken aback that I didn't ask what he meant. I've puzzled about it ever since. I suppose it was in part a religious idea of the perfectibility of mankind (or humankind as we would say now). I think Grandpa admired Tony for his socialist

67 In my church-going childhood we collected ship-halfpennies for the LMS.

68 Some people detect a quasi-missionary attitude in parts of today's overseas aid community.

69 He died in 1967, after some years of senility, so my memories are all from my childhood.

70 Phrases like *lame duck* and *down on his luck* have an old-fashioned sound.

71 Heather, in her very brave account of the affair in her memoir *The War Years*, describes the pressure put on Granny by neighbours, and by Mr Wigley of the Congregational Church. Aunt Suzanne, who lived in Turkey and so, one can imagine, thought she 'knew all about these people', wrote that Granny was wicked to allow the affair to continue.

72 It seems to have been taken for granted that if they had married they would have lived in Iran.

ideals, but didn't share them himself. Perhaps he thought he wasn't good enough to be a socialist.⁷³ I also see his words as a version of Peter Singer's doctrine of the expanding circle of empathy.⁷⁴ It would go something like this – or so I guess. My great-grandfather believed that slavery was wrong, but that while black people had souls to be saved they were inherently inferior to white. My grandfather, while his kinder version of Christianity meant he did not believe in the inherent inferiority of any race, could not get beyond the fact that some were culturally conditioned in a way that left them inferior to the white races with their long history of Christian civilisation. Tony in turn, influenced both by his Marxist views and the more cosmopolitan contacts he made at Oxford, saw the differences between the races as the result of political and economic conditions rather than moral backwardness, with a consequent broadening of sympathy and understanding.⁷⁵ In each generation the extension of sympathy was influenced by ideology. My generation in turn has been influenced by the libertarian and egalitarian ideology of political correctness.

This account, schematic though it is, seems plausible enough. Put it another way. My grandmother would have been horrified if she had got on an underground train and seen so many non-white faces or heard so many foreign languages. My mother was not horrified by the phenomenon, but she mentioned it often enough. I don't mention it – political correctness prevents me – but I notice it. I suspect that our children, improving, according to my grandfather's rule, on what has gone before, don't even notice it.⁷⁶

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My first lesson in political correctness came years before I'd ever heard the term, while I was still at school, from Tony Wills. He was too much of a maverick thinker to be a natural exponent of political correctness, but he was quick to point out inconsistencies and liked showing me where I was wrong. He was shocked by the inconsistency between my liberal opinions and my dreadful language. Why did I need to have it pointed out? Why wasn't I shocked?

Blinded by confidence in my impeccably liberal opinions I couldn't see what was wrong. Surely my instincts could be trusted. I had the credentials. When I referred to people as wogs, wops, frogs or dagoes you could take it on trust that I was only doing so ironically, and not at all with an intention to offend. What, though, was the irony that I intended? Hard to say, but I think I meant something like this: Your average Briton tends to despise foreigners and uses these insulting terms to refer to them; I am so far from being an average Briton in this respect that I can use the same words without any insult; in fact, when I use them it is a way of mocking and rebuking the average Briton.

There is a couplet from Hilaire Belloc's *Modern Traveller* that my father and I used to quote with some relish: 'Cain Abolition Beecher Boz/ Worked like a nigger, which he was.'⁷⁷ I thought it was possible to find this harmlessly funny, while at the same time heartily disapproving of the racial supremacist attitudes of the characters in Belloc's poem. Although Belloc himself is satirising these attitudes, he largely shares them, but as readers we were secure in our abhorrence of them. We were laughing at Belloc as well as with him. I think I may have gone further, and subscribed to the view that these insulting words, if used often enough without any insulting intention, would have

73 The idea of having to be good enough to hold certain beliefs was one that appealed to Tony. He meant that there were some beliefs that he felt unworthy to hold, such as pacifism. Perhaps Grandpa felt he wasn't worthy to be a socialist.

74 I first came across this idea in a talk on animal rights. It is discussed at length in Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature*.

75 One thing that my Father used to say which doesn't fit in with this schematic view was that the Germans were more culpable than the Japanese, because the Germans had had the benefit of a thousand years of Christianity.

76 Jessy says she does, although she added that what chiefly strikes her is the number of different languages, although unlike some who comment on polyglot railway carriages she doesn't see it as a bad thing – far from it, she bends her ear and tries to recognise which language is being spoken.

77 The joke depended on the fact that *working like a nigger* had become, by Belloc's time, a cliché, drained of meaning, tamed, domesticated, far removed from the world of slavery. It was what elderly ladies might say, for example, after a tiring day running a stall at a sale of work. I suppose the last respectable appearance of the word was as the name of Guy Gibson's dog in *The Dambusters* (filmed in 1955). According to Wikipedia, in the proposed remake of the film the dog was to be re-named Digger. I don't think one should change historical details like this.

the poison drawn out of them, and would become as innocuous, even as friendly, as nicknames like Dusty Miller. For example, in my ignorance I imagined that this process of detoxification had already been achieved in respect of the soubriquet *Spud* applied to an Irishman.

When Tony Wills and I discussed this we talked in terms of *causing offence*.⁷⁸ At one time the word *offensive* was worked to death in politically correct circles, but it's a risky approach to the problem. I could say that my words would not have been offensive if people were not so quick to take offence, and so throw the responsibility onto the victims of my prejudice. Perhaps this was why the word *unacceptable* came to be preferred to *offensive*. Of course the risk of causing offence is important enough, but the main issue is that spoken words tend to solidify into thoughts and attitudes – into an arrogance that believes it has the right to speak lightly of other people's identity. I learned, first from Tony, and later from my politically correct friends, to mend my language, but the arrogance was harder to eradicate.

The Scottish referendum taught me that I have a very weak sense of who I am. At the beginning of this note I tossed off a list of my 'identities', but admitted that in fact I didn't really *identify* with any of them. But something I've learned in recent years (from Simon, who is Scottish, and from Daphne, who is from an ethnic minority) is that this insouciance about identity is characteristic of those who belong to a dominant culture. We don't have to bother. It's a class thing too. If I were less comfortably off I might feel less comfortable about my ethnic and cultural identity. As it is, my identity fits so perfectly that I don't even feel it. As a result, I'm inclined to be irritated by those who make an issue of it.

Let me give some examples. The first is something that happened when I was involved in the Labour Party in the 1990s. We were having our annual discussion of resolutions for conference, and I was arguing for a resolution to do away with faith schools. It was the anti-evolutionist tendency in Christian schools that I had in my sights, with my second line of attack being against Catholic/Protestant sectarianism. I was surprised when the student members of the branch vigorously opposed the proposition, and more surprised still when they argued that it was a racist proposal, aimed at Islam. Wouldn't it seem odd, they said, if the Labour Party, having tolerated faith schools for most of the twentieth century, suddenly started opposing them just at the time that Muslims were wanting to set them up? I'd have been happy to include Muslim schools in my ban, but I hadn't given them a thought. It was as though I had assumed that Christianity was the only faith. Nor had I considered the asymmetry between Christianity and Islam. If we deprive Christians of their faith schools, they can still be assured that their children will grow up in a society which, though increasingly secular, has a predominantly Christian background and ethos. Deprive Muslims of their faith schools, I was told, and they will have no such assurance. To attack faith schools is therefore to attack Muslim identity. I was so taken aback that I dropped my proposal, quite wrongly, I think now. So here we have an example of both the good and the bad working of political correctness. It was good because it alerted me to cultural dimensions that I had not thought of, but bad because the racist tag frightened me off advocating a policy which has a lot to be said for it.⁷⁹

It must have been around the year 2000 that the next incident occurred. It was quite literally a matter of identity. A number of youngish economists were given chairs at about that time, presumably because only a professorial salary was high enough to tempt them to slum it in a university economics department. They were all pretty bumptious and made it clear that they thought they had come to the back of beyond as a great favour. One of them was an Indian – I did know where he was from in India, because I spent a lot of time in his office talking to him while

⁷⁸ I would not have dreamt of calling anyone a wog, wop, frog or dago to their face. At least I wouldn't do so until I had persuaded myself that they would understand that I was insulting them ironically and therefore inoffensively. It then became a kind of compliment, a way of assuring them that they were as civilised as a liberal Englishman.

⁷⁹ The student members of the branch were at that time New Labourites to a man and woman. They were also scrupulously political correct, as though their purity in that respect could compensate for their wholesale abandonment of socialism. It's possible that they exploited political correctness in order to trip up the clumsy Old Labourites – which would have appealed to their Machiavellian leader, Adam Bowen. I now think that we should have persevered with our proposal. Although the French experience might suggest that secularism is not a panacea, getting rid of faith-based education still seems a good thing.

fiddling with his computer, but I've forgotten. He called me in because the ITS technicians, when installing Windows, had entered his name incorrectly – it was a long name and I think they had entered a couple of letters in the wrong order. There are numerous points at which you can modify the user's details, and I managed to correct the error everywhere except in one place. To change it there would require a complete re-installation of Windows, and to do that I'd have had to call on the technicians. I was a bit afraid of the technicians, so was reluctant to make them come back for what seemed to me a pretty trivial thing. I'd managed to prevent the incorrect spelling turning up anywhere that would be visible to other people, so I hoped we could leave it at that. It has never bothered me if people mis-spell my name, as happens now and then, and when the professor insisted on having it put right I thought he was being self-important and throwing his weight around. But then he said it was a matter of principle, and that he was insisting not for his own sake but for the sake of other ethnic minority staff who might come after him, and who might not be in a position to stick up for themselves as he was. When I saw it in that light I relented and called the technicians in, and as often happened the job turned out not to be nearly as complicated and time-consuming as I had feared.

It wasn't long before the professor left the department. I don't know why he didn't stay, but there was some talk of his having been unhappy, and of disagreements with colleagues. I think he gave up academic life altogether. It occurred to me that I might have contributed to his failure to settle down. I suspect he was a generally difficult person to deal with, but on reflection I'm sure his demand to have his name corrected was entirely reasonable. He may have suspected that I was being obstructive just because he was from an ethnic minority, which wasn't true. If I discriminated against him it was because I was generally less accommodating towards professors than towards secretaries and junior lecturers. I'd have held out even more stubbornly against any of his white-British colleagues – but then if he'd been called Smith, Brown or Robinson the situation would not have arisen.

My third incident is something that happened in the family, a supper-time conversation when all the children were with us. It is the most recent of a number of occasions when Daphne has taken me up and exposed a seam of racism in something I've said. We were talking about a website that collected examples of a certain sort of misuse of English by non-native speakers. I had not seen the website, but had read an article which suggested that although the phrases made no sense according to standard English grammar they followed definite rules of their own, and so succeeded in communicating. I thought that if true this was moderately interesting. What didn't occur to me was that the website in question was primarily a vehicle for mocking non-native English speakers, and was therefore racist. Daphne said I was at fault for not acknowledging this. I thought at first that she was being a bit unreasonable, particularly because the point of what I was saying was that the language-users in question were, despite their failure to master English, nonetheless succeeding in communicating effectively. But when I came to consider it I realised that here again, as in the case of the quotation from Belloc, I was using the supposed purity of my motives as a justification for indulging in behaviour which, in other people with less pure motives, was undoubtedly racist. The reason it took a while for this to sink in was that I didn't appreciate how insulting it was to collect and display the solecisms of non-native English speakers. Does it matter? I thought. Don't we all make mistakes when we're learning a foreign language? But the balance of power is not equal, the relationship is asymmetrical. As a native speaker of English my need to speak a foreign language is less urgent than the need felt by others to acquire the language which, they hope, will unlock so much.

What all three examples reveal is the insouciance of the insider. I don't care, why should they care?

I could give more examples, but these three illustrate clearly enough why, in my own case, the discipline of political correctness has proved useful, whether it is self-discipline or a sharp rap over the knuckles from someone else. Long-standing habits of thought don't melt away of their own accord. They need robust treatment.

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I've several times referred to George Orwell, which is appropriate, since he is the great exponent of clarity and honesty in political debate, a sort of god for many of my generation. Again and again we come back both to his rules for writing clearly, and to his warnings about dishonest thinking. He

would not have given the time of day to political correctness. At the beginning of 1945 having looked back at his own commentaries on the progress of the war, and having admitted his mistakes, he went on to consider the weakness of most left-wing thought.⁸⁰ He diagnosed a ‘nationalistic habit of mind’, which thinks ‘purely in terms of power politics and competitive prestige’, and which persists even in those who have repudiated their own nation, because they have merely transferred their allegiance to another nation or a political faction. In order to boost their favoured brand of nationalism intelligent people ‘seem capable of holding schizophrenic beliefs, of disregarding plain facts, of evading serious questions with debating-society repartees, or swallowing baseless rumors and of looking on indifferently while history is falsified.’⁸¹ These are precisely the accusations that are nowadays brought against political correctness. Orwell goes on to assert that ‘it is possible to be more objective than most of us are, but that it involves a *moral* effort. One cannot get away from one’s own subjective feelings, but at least one can know what they are and make allowances for them.’ He means that we should make the moral effort to detach ourselves from our favourite ideology – in our terms, that we should ignore political correctness – in order to look objectively at the world and report honestly what we find. But perhaps we can also turn his words into a qualified defence of political correctness. When I look back over my own brushes with this phenomenon, this ideology of political correctness, I can see its dangers and absurdities, but also its value. It has provided the discipline which again and again has helped me to make the moral effort to escape from the prejudices (often masquerading as instincts) that arise from my absurdly privileged background and way of life.

80 ‘London Letter’, *Partisan Review*, Winter 1945.

81 He speculates that the need to promote one’s own faction is ‘the product of fear and of the ghastly emptiness of machine civilisation’.