

THE BLOG



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Ed, English and Embarrassment

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The precise words that Ed Miliband used in his immigration speech on 14 December will not matter. Whatever careful caveats were inserted to try to counter any claims that he was blowing the rhetorical whistle of race will be ignored. His press officers spun the story so that the headlines in the papers said it all, even before he began speaking.

The Telegraph chose: "[Learn English Ed Miliband tells immigrants as he admits Labour failed to stop segregation](#)". Segregation by ethnicity fell during the Labours years. Detailed analysis of the 2001 census and other sources by Ludi Simpson and Nissa Finney showed that even by then, as people spread out across the country, rates of segregation were falling and mixing was increasing. The 2011 census results have already revealed a doubling in the most personal kind of mixing. Twice as many people are now of mixed ethnicity than were in 2001. A few will have decided that they are more mixed than they said they were ten years ago, but most of this increase will be newcomers, mostly Britain-born children. The last Labour government had little to do with this reduction in segregation, but it has happened. No one has 'failed' on segregation. Perhaps we are just a little too embarrassed to explain that mixing is about mixing within homes, as well as along streets and across cities?

Where there has been a failure is the failure to remember that there is more than one 'official' language spoken in Britain. This is always forgotten when this story rears its ugly head. The proponents forget that in some local authority districts in schools teach in Welsh. Are we about to demand that very large numbers of people immediately learn Welsh who live in those areas where Welsh speaking is more central to life than English? Will the English immigrants in North Wales be taking crash courses?

When the Independent headline came out "[Ed Miliband: More Britons in publicly funded jobs must speak English](#)" I wondered how it might have gone down had it said "and Welsh" at the end, but that was not what was most concerning.

Apparently, according to its current leader, New Labour had "failed to tackle the growing problem of segregation along racial and ethnic lines in Britain's cities". What segregation? It was not geographical - there was dispersal. It was not social - there were more mixed couples. Could it be political?

The real segregation that Labour failed to tackle was economic. Rich people in rich parts of the country became richer. Poorer parts and poorer people saw far slower improvements in their material conditions between 1997 and 2010. It is true that educational divides were narrowed, child poverty did fall, unemployment was reduced, (especially for older people), but the rich got richer and the poor got a smaller share.

House prices rose most where they were highest to begin with and have now fallen most where they were lowest. As the latest census has revealed, the number of households private renting during New Labour's tenure almost doubled between 2001 and 2011. The numbers with mortgages had fallen quickly, from 39% in 2001 to be just 33% all households by 2011.

Many of the newly privately renting are families with children in school who now fear that at any time they can be given two months notice to leave home (and possibly schools and jobs). As Ed said in his speech, "Britain is at its best when it comes together as a nation, not when it stands divided. That's what One Nation is about." Unfortunately we can now see that it was in housing, wealth and income - not race - that Britain became more divided under New Labour.

Think about the growing class divides in Britain. Think about how the children of the rich are increasingly segregated from the children of the affluent, how the affluent are moving away from average areas, how the average are mixing less with those on modest means and how those on modest means have to try harder than ever not to be seen as poor, not to mix with the poor, and then read Ed's words [as reported in the Guardian](#) but with those economic divisions in mind, and not race: "But there is another idea we should also reject: the belief that people can simply live side by side in their own communities, respecting each other but living separate lives, protected from hatreds but never building a common bond - never learning to appreciate one another. We cannot be comfortable with separation. It blocks opportunities, leaving people at the margins. And it breeds ignorance, suspicion and prejudice".

Ed would be right if he were talking about class, income and wealth; about how the top public schools are moving away from the lower private schools, about how state school league tables now determine local rents, about how we never learn to appreciate each other if we live parallel lives, working in the same offices but having less and less in common with those on different floors of the building, or those who come in to clean our workplaces, or those who come in to run them. Economic separation blocks opportunities. It leaves people at the margins. It breeds ignorance, suspicion and a nasty temptation to deflect the argument onto race, language and immigration.