

— CHAPTER 8 —

## When racism stopped being normal, but no one noticed: generational value change

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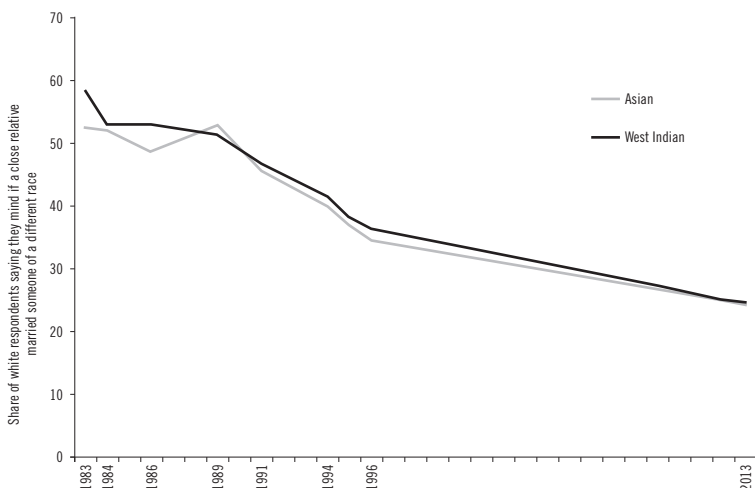
**H**ow can you tell when the times are changing and great progress is being made, or when we instead appear to be going back in time – ‘going back to ’79’, as the lyrics of a recent tribute to David Cameron’s government suggested? Often it feels as if it was mostly in the past that great steps forward were taken. However, it was probably the case that at those times people did not realise that they were achieving much. The same may be true today.

Anxieties and social conflicts fuel a belief that Britain is becoming a less tolerant society. In some of the most unequal of rich countries, such as the UK and the US, benefit levels are now so low compared to average wages, that people will do almost any job, or more than one job, to avoid having to claim the new, very low dole. The government complains that immigrants will still do jobs locals won’t. The environment is nasty and issues of immigration become highly ranked in what is most important at each forthcoming election.

In this environment you might expect people to become increasingly

intolerant of others – people from different groups who could be taking ‘their’ jobs. The following graph challenges that assumption. It shows the slow but steady decline in opposition to mixed-race marriages, a good indicator of racial prejudice. A generation ago, in 1983, a majority of white British respondents expressed discomfort with the idea of having in-laws from a different race. By 2013, this figure had fallen to less than a quarter.

### SHARE OF BRITISH RESPONDENTS EXPRESSING DISCOMFORT ABOUT AN ASIAN OR WEST INDIAN IN-LAW (1983–2013)



Source: British Social Attitudes

What the graph shows is that some things change slowly and steadily in a way that is almost impervious to immediate events. This is because much of this slow shift is produced by generational change. Older voters, whose views were shaped by growing up in an almost all-white Britain prior to larger-scale immigration, are very strongly opposed to inter-racial marriage – in 2013 over 40 per cent of those

born before 1940 disapproved of it. Opposition is much lower among their children, born in the '60s, and vanishes almost entirely among their grandchildren: less than one in ten of those born in the '90s express any discomfort about having an in-law from a different race.

The graph shows that attitudes can become radically more tolerant even in times of rising inequality and social conflict. Hostility to minorities fell during the early '90s, despite a recession and mass unemployment, and fell in the 2000s despite the rise in BNP voting and widespread public anxiety about immigration. It is possible that the brief hiatus in the rise in tolerance in the mid '80s was related to the experience of mass unemployment and rapidly growing economic inequalities then, or a birth cohort effect, but what is most important about it is its brevity.

Your parents could well be amongst those who objected to mixed-race marriages. But if they were growing up in the Britain of the '40s then they were normal. Among younger people today few people worry about whether folk get married or not, or to whom – male or female, black or white. But not long ago it was as normal to be a bigot as not.

Exactly the same has been seen in the US. In the late '50s in the US, twenty-four people disapproved of mixed-race marriage for everyone who approved. By the late '60s, that ratio had plummeted to 4:1. By 2012 the *approval* ratio had reached 6:1.

But have a little sympathy for your parents. Just look at what was common in the time of *their* parents, who grew up in a generation of British imperial rule, fascists ruling half of Europe and blackshirts marching in the streets in London. And now have a think about how the generations to come might view your generation. Look at how quickly attitudes are still changing. In a generation's time your views on whether we should worry about how few young men go to university or the sanctity of national borders or the theory that the very

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wealthy create jobs by investing their wealth could easily be perceived as a sad statement of the ignorance of our time. Whatever it turns out to be, it will be a view that is widespread today but will come to be seen as misguided in the near future.

Looking at past trends in changing attitudes helps us to see how much views that appear to be very fixed can change over the course of lifetimes and between generations. Politics often appears to be in a desperate mess. Progress is slow. Many things are getting worse. But we tend to concentrate on the bad news and on the most powerful, immediate crises. That is how we improve our political lives. We complain and agitate about what matters to us right now, even as other things continue to change and often improve. We might well look back in future at the years just before and after the 2008 economic crash and say: ‘That was when the tide of social change began to accelerate.’

If the analysis of the figures above is right, especially in terms of recent US trends on public opinion, the tide may also be changing, not just in relation to the tolerance of mixed-race marriages and what that implies for the diminishing of racism, but perhaps also in many other areas that currently do *not* look encouraging in contemporary data. Whatever you think is true today ain’t necessarily going to be so tomorrow.

### FURTHER READING

This chapter is based on two articles that the author worked on in 2013: ‘Tolerance, inequality and the recession’ (Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute Blog, 2013) and ‘It is necessarily so’ (*Significance Magazine*, 2013), both of which use data from the USA. For a proper introduction you should read ‘The Better Angels of Our Nature: How the Antiprejudice Norm Affects Policy and Party Preferences in Great Britain and Germany’ by Scott Blinder et al (*American Journal of Political Science*, 2013).