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"THE VALUE OF MINORITIES"

by

Rt. Hon. Jo Grimond PC, MP

The Minority Rights Group,
36 Craven Street,
London, W.C.2.

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The theme of this lecture is that minorities are often valuable. I regret that this is not stressed more today.

It is typical of the British in their present defeatist mood to see minorities or immigrants as problems. Everything is a problem for us, if it is not that even more depressing chimera - a challenge.

Minorities in too many countries are considered a source of trouble.

In too many countries minorities are treated as peculiar. And even in countries which make a conscious effort to be nice to minorities, their peculiarities, and often the burden which the majority feel they shoulder in putting up with these peculiarities, are accentuated by special legislation, commissions, etc.

In this lecture I deal mainly with such minorities as are groups distinguished by racial, religious or social characteristics. These are the type of minority with which the Minority Rights Group has been concerned.

But perhaps the most valuable and most threatened minorities are those who do not conform to the bureaucratic patterns of modern states.

Not only should states be judged largely by their treatment of non-conformists and their resistance to the closed shop but these minorities have contributed a very high proportion of the characteristics which make a country livable. When uniformity is not tolerated as in Communist states the urge to get out is very strong.

England should be grateful for minorities. The Jews, the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh, not to mention smaller minorities such as the Huguenots, have contributed much to its success and well-being. I am myself a member of a minority within a minority. The Grimonds in their grander moments claim that they were Huguenot weavers who settled in Scotland. Certainly the name is, or was, more common in France than Britain. As I have spent much of my life in England I can claim to have come from a family which has conferred inestimable benefits on two nations.

But, of course, the country which is a patchwork of minorities is America. The constant invasion of the U.S.A. by immigrants from different nationalities has been the making of the Americans. Their vitality, their best native art, jazz, and many of their greatest inventors have sprung from minorities - or at least not from the dominant original British-bred ruling class.

I do not want to get entangled in trying to define a minority. But in the sense that they are made up from different strains, nearly all European nations, except perhaps the Scandinavians, have been built up on minorities and so I imagine to an even greater extent are all African nations and certainly India.

Efforts to expel or exterminate minorities, the Jews constantly, the Arabs in Spain, the Huguenots, if you count them as a minority, from France, have done little good to the majorities.

So it might seem that the value of minorities is self-evident. Why then are they considered as a problem and why are they frequently so unpopular ?

What exactly is the value of minorities ? The contributions of

minorities vary. The circumstances in which minorities can make their contribution also vary.

Some minorities have special skills. It may be thought that at the present time when technology is said to be so important there is less chance than there used to be of a minority holding special skills. But I am not sure that this is so. It is not so long since Italians greatly enhanced the life of small Scottish towns by setting up their ice-cream shops. The restaurants in Stornoway in the Isle of Lewis are said to be greatly improved by Pakistanis. I am not here talking of the ability of minorities simply to provide labour - Turks, Yugoslavs and Italians in Germany, coloured immigrants in Britain. But this has certainly been vital to the economies of some Western European countries. Minorities lend interest to a country.

They also make the majority aware of themselves. The Welsh are particularly good at this. I served in a Welsh Division during the war. An English orderly officer on routine inspection of meals in response to the question of 'Any complaints?' was greeted by a Welshman with 'Thank you sir for leave to speak - the food is delicious.' It at least made him think, it made him aware of how clod-hopping the rest of the British may become.

And to this increased self-consciousness in the majority can usefully be allied a new perception gained from the minority. All nations and among them the British carry round with them certain presuppositions, barriers, marks of prestige. Socially they can at once divide themselves into classes. They are inhibited by what is accepted as possible and even more by what is accepted as impossible; geographically they consider it desirable or prestigious to live according to certain customs or in certain places. But minorities and particularly immigrants do not recognise these inhibitions. Niki Secker did not find it odd to go to Cumberland to set up his silk business. Those who have not been brought up in the hierarchical life of a country are unaware of the pecking order, of the need for reticence, of the criteria of good form which can be extremely stifling. They bring new and different blood.

The country galvanized by new blood was America. Note first that this blood which became renewed in America was very old, African, Irish, Polish, etc. But by being transmuted and pitched into a new country it was refreshed. If Britain had won the American War of Independence what would have happened? Presumably much the same as has happened in Australia or New Zealand. The population might by now have risen to 25 million, largely concentrated on the East Coast. The difficulties of crossing the Alleghanies, far less the Rockies, would have been emphasized in flawless English by a number of Royal Commissions. The Queen's Birthday would have been celebrated at numerous government houses on over-clipped lawns. Cricket would have been the national game and inventing ingenious new difficulties for simple solutions would have become the national pastime. Restrictions of every kind, class, bureaucratic and psychological would have ensured the minimum of enterprise. Commerce and Industry would be despised.

Though I caricature the British I am well aware that there is much to be said for the British way of life. If you think America a failure or too brash for sensitive souls, then my argument in favour of minorities breaks down at the start. But if, like me, you consider American a gigantic success then much of its success must be attributed to the mixture of minorities. How has this come about?

First, we are struck by the situation of the Blacks. They have suffered

in America gross degradation. But that does not destroy my argument that they have contributed much to America. Indeed, it is at least arguable that the Southern Whites have as a community suffered as much as the Black community in regard to its development owing to the stultifying effects upon them of Jim Crow laws.

In the North of the United States the waves of Irish, Poles and Italians have raised the tempo and interest of the country because the conditions have been favourable.

The first favourable condition is the Constitution of the United States. It is a miracle that the Founding Fathers, firmly embedded in the 18th century, should have produced a Constitution which has ensured justice and democratic government through a period of constant change and to the satisfaction of many nationalities and large influxes of people who had never heard of democracy. When you consider that nowadays states which have had decades of introduction to democracy find it apparently impossible to operate - though they all pay lip service to it the achievement of America is indeed astonishing.

Three of the features of the Constitution to which attention in this context might be paid are - first the position of the President - he is a recognisable human being. He is the effective head of the State but he also attracts the impact felt for the symbol of the state. I suggest that when you are anxious to weld minorities into co-operation with the majority and give them some token towards which they can express active loyalty this is an advantage.

Secondly, the American Constitution is a written constitution in which certain rights and liberties are enshrined for all. I suggest that in regard to minorities this is a great advantage. The difficulty about the Race Relations Acts to which we have recourse is that with the best intentions they divide off minorities and are drafted, quite naturally, not on the supposition that minorities are going to confer a benefit but are a cross to be borne.

Thirdly, the Founding Fathers had a healthy fear of the attraction and corruption of power. Lust for power is far more damaging than greed for money. Government is the aim of the power seekers. The American Constitution does its best to limit and divide power. Our own alas does not.

Next, the contribution which minorities have made to America has been possible because frontiers of every sort have been expanding. Geographically, of course, America had lots of room. But mentally too ideas have expanded. She was and still is a country of opportunity for all individuals. But collectively too she still believes in the solubility of all problems. She is still confident and curious. Minorities, therefore, are encouraged. Their strange customs are not greeted with hostility. If they have contributions to make they have the opportunity to make them. And in this fluid but abrasive society sparks are struck out of material that might seem inert.

If I am told that minorities only can contribute when there is a basic affinity between them - and if I am reminded again of the difficulties which have been faced by Blacks in America, I would like to know more about Brazil. Some of the news from Brazil sounds bad. But the Brazilian mixture seems to produce a ferment which leads to considerable material progress.

What does seem apparent from the histories of the U.S.A. and Brazil is that countries which contain significant minorities which are allowed some degree of freedom create societies imbued with a dynamism which minorities in their home countries or homogeneous societies often lack. But I

must stress that this depends upon a degree of freedom. Russia has plenty of minorities but is conspicuously lacking in originality or economic dynamism. Also, the opposite proposition is not always true. The under-developed country which has made spectacular economic change in the last century is Japan. But apart from the Ainu she lacks minorities.

Two countries which are short on minorities are Sweden and Norway. They have many virtues as places in which to live. But they have drawbacks. It is a question of what are the values to be sought? There are moments when I wonder whether Sweden will not die from its perfections. It is so hygienic, so given to a logic which sometimes seems to part company with reality that I occasionally wonder if its falling birth-rate is not a sign of a sort of planned suicide. I do not know. Certainly Sweden and Norway are very pleasant countries. Would they be better or worse for an infusion of Italians, Greeks or Jews? At least the point is arguable.

Britain, as I said at the outset, is made up of minorities absorbed at different times with the mainstream of the people. But there are still in Scotland minorities which have maintained some personality of their own. There are my constituents in Orkney and Shetland who retain from their long association with Scandinavia characteristics which are not Scotch. These characteristics are founded on the values of small communities, homogeneous within themselves. They have a particular value in today's world of the big, centralized, impersonal organisation. In the Highlands Gaelic is still significant not only as a language but to some extent as a civilization. I have been somewhat sceptical of well-intentioned efforts to spread the Gaelic, Irish or Welsh languages. But I was impressed by a visit to a project in Skye where an effort to revitalize a locality through improvements in agriculture and the introduction of knitting has been given a strong flavour by being associated with Gaelic. The language way of life of a minority may add some salt to the drab uniformity of majority fashions. In an age when many people are looking for an alternative to predominant customs, it can keep alive other possibilities.

I am not arguing that minorities are better than majorities. I am not arguing that all mixed societies are better than all pure-bred societies. At this moment it is impossible to maintain that Northern Ireland or the Lebanon are superior.

I have never believed that dislike of minorities is a peculiar aberration from which all good men are free. All animals, including the human animal, are inclined to be suspicious of animals that are different. When the different animals compete for housing or employment, when they introduce customs which are repugnant or plant themselves in the face of the majority, we are all liable to feel resentment.

Of course, minorities differ. 'Minorities' are not a simple species. There is no particular virtue inherent in all minorities. They are not in any sense of the words 'good' or 'bad', necessarily better or worse than majorities.

As with so many other things, we often get from minorities the behaviour we deserve. Not always clearly. The Czechs, as far as I know, treated their German minorities well. That did not prevent many Germans from becoming anti-Czech Nazis. The situation is complicated by the geographical distribution of the minority and its ties with majorities elsewhere. But in Britain today there must surely be much that minorities can and do contribute. The British are in a somewhat stagnant phase. Useful production is hardly rising. There is a mood of political dissatisfaction. Life for most people is pleasant enough but there is not much confidence in the future.

It is not so much that we have not found a role as that we are not looking for one. We are divided into interest groups each pursuing its own demands.

We might hope that some minorities would bring a new appreciation of our situation. The Indian immigrants, for instance, have habits of self-reliance and energy which must be valuable. The West Germans when rebuilding their country after the war welcomed immigrants. Whether they welcome them still as permanent minorities I do not know. But immigrant labour has contributed to the German economic success. Without it indeed our own economic failure would be worse than it is. It is with minorities rather than immigration that I am concerned. It seems at least arguable that Britain may be ripe for another infusion of minorities.

But Britain seems to be going the other way. The closing in of her horizons, the chronic mismanagement of her affairs and her lack of elan have led to centrifugal movements such as Scottish and Welsh nationalism. This is not surprising. It has been indeed the way of empires in decline. But because it is not surprising it is not necessarily to be welcomed. I have been a supporter of Scottish Home Rule all my life but I view the present proposals with dismay. They will duplicate all the faults of Westminster in Edinburgh, they will add yet more government to stifle enterprise. I am now afraid that whatever British governments and their bureaucrats attempt will be bungled. What the whole of Britain wants - and the need of Scotland or Wales is as great as that of England - is a shot of new blood, new thinking, new energy. I am at least doubtful whether each country is likely to achieve this by the proposed devolution within the British orbit. I had hoped at one time that by all becoming minorities within the EEC we might break away from the old moulds and carry on a useful cross-fertilization within Europe.

Unfortunately, the very vacuum which minorities could help to fill - the absence of any belief in values - is caused by forces antagonistic to minorities. For in a mood of contraction and self-pity countries are not likely to look favourably on minorities. We have brought our present troubles on ourselves. They are not the results of war or earthquakes. Their causes are easily seen and are caused by obvious incompetence and vices. We are more apt to look for scapegoats rather than to welcome new leadership and example. The expansionist outlook is missing. But if we are to pull ourselves together then minorities have a part to play. And since our troubles are common also in many other democracies they too should turn a hopeful eye on their minorities.

I do not think that you can lay down detailed rules for bringing out the value of minorities. I have suggested that these values vary. The degree to which minorities should blend must also vary as all human relations vary. But there seems, as I have indicated, to be some general principles.

As far as the rights of minorities are concerned, this should be regulated as far as possible by general laws which apply to all individuals. It may be that some of these laws should be entrenched by a bill of rights. But they should be enforced by normal courts with general jurisdiction.

Secondly, the majority must be prepared to not only tolerate but to actively encourage the minority in competition. But if it is to avoid the natural antipathy which this will raise, it must try to guide the talents of the minorities in directions useful to the whole community. In too many countries it seems that guidance stops at toleration - or the provision of minimal rights and senses - very necessary but not sufficient.

Some charismatic role may have to be found. In Victorian times the appointment of Indian ADCs to the Queen may have done a little to offset the

overbearing social behaviour of some of the British in India. I am not suggesting anything so crude today. But while we have a House of Lords and an Honours system perhaps they could be more imaginatively used - or, better still, new avenues of promotion explored. All our institutions, political parties, Trades Unions and Universities lack representation at the top of the new minorities and I suspect in varying degrees this is true of all Western countries.

The class system, so strong in Britain, may be easier breached by minorities than by majorities indoctrinated by it. And class systems exist in different forms in many countries.

More serious today than the class system is the trend in many countries towards bureaucracy and conformity. Individuals are more and more expected to acquire the relevant qualifications, join the relevant public service, Trades Union, big company or profession and then conform to the behaviour laid down by the bureaucrats in charge of such organisations. The State itself becomes a system for imposing the conformity decided upon by the most powerful organisation. An obvious example of this trend is to be seen in the Dock Works Labour Bill now passing through parliament but it is only one example of many.

This tendency if pushed further will gravely damage life in Western countries. A great deal of what has made life in these countries pleasant, free, rewarding and inventive has been due to the tolerance of all sorts of eccentricities. These eccentricities are associated with the minority of people who refuse to conform to the growth of bureaucratic attitudes. It is not sufficient simply to allow Sikhs to ride motor bicycles without crash helmets, though the trouble it has taken to get this rather simple and primitive piece of freedom agreed is in itself symptomatic. It is essential to keep open a space in which non-conformist minorities can flourish. We very badly need a re-statement of John Stuart Mill's liberal principles as applicable to the modern world. The bureaucratic attitude is supplemented by the blind worship of technocracy. We are surrendering more and more to technocratic and economic determinism. The few who fight against this have all sorts of pressures brought upon them to conform. But if they are snuffed out then all the virtues of Western democracy will ultimately die too. Their spirit which gave birth to MRG is a non-conformist spirit. There are still plenty of minorities in the traditional sense awaiting examination by MRG and such help as MRG can give. But I very much hope that in time it may find it possible to turn its attention to the non-conformist minorities who are not necessarily bound together by religious, social or ethnic characteristics but by refusal to accept the conformity which in this country is now a much more damaging restriction than even the class system.