

Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture – 2012 – Sarah Veale, Head, TUC Equality and Employment Rights Department

“Divide and Rule – the Oldest Tactic in the Book”

It is a great honour to be invited to give the annual Pankhurst lecture. It is very timely given recent changes at top of TUC where we have just appointed our first woman General Secretary.

In her book on Sylvia Pankhurst's political activism, "Sylvia Pankhurst – a Life in Radical Politics", Professor Mary Davis discusses the link that Pankhurst clearly saw between the oppression of women and the oppression of black people in the UK's former colonies.

Building on that link this evening I am going to look at how capitalism exploits the differences between people and sets one group against another in order to weaken the potential for collective organisation, both at work and in other communities.

The poet John Donne said "No man is an island" – I think we can forgive the semantic solecism under the historical circumstances; on this occasion for "man" read "person"!

I agree with John Donne. Human beings are social animals and rely on co-operation and community to survive and thrive. Collectively we learned that by working together we could obtain our food, protect our young and continue the species.

At its most basic, capitalism is based on survival of the fittest. Society is organised (or organises itself if you are a market economist) in such a way as to maximise profit for a small elite group and to perpetuate itself.

The labour force must be controlled but must be fit enough to work, either physically or intellectually, to generate profits for the owners of the means of production.

Modern capitalism also has to allow the state to take some of the profits to keep the basis of society intact. The balance between the two is, of course, the subject of endless conflict within the system but that is for another talk.

Reward for the worker depends on capability, performance and on scarcity of supply. Of course it is far more complex than that today but the basic construct has not changed very much.

Today my purpose is to look at one aspect of capitalism, which is how it maintains and perpetuates divisions within society and how it can turn differences into divisions

and encourage us to hate and fear rather than respect and enjoy the differences between us.

Often the best way to illustrate a point is through a graphic. The former Commission for Racial Equality, produced a poster that showed a line of babies, all different colours, with the strap line "There are lots of places in Britain where racism doesn't exist". Children learn racism, they are not born with it.

It was Margaret Thatcher of course, in her customary crude way, who was the first UK Prime Minister to try to elevate individualism into a belief. She repeatedly told people that they should look after themselves and take responsibility for their own lives. She also said that there was no such thing as society.

At the same time and as a corollary the Government would "roll back the State" and reduce its role in providing essential services to citizens (sometimes described as "nannying"), claiming that they were getting the state off people's backs.

Thatcher also attacked the collective strength and organisation of working people and did her best to destroy the trade union Movement – the "enemy within" as Thatcher called it.

Of course she was crude in her rhetoric and her beliefs; taken to extremes individualism would not support capitalism as the latter relies on various systems in order to work and these systems can only be delivered by organised groups of people. For example a railway can be privately owned but it still needs a network of people working together to operate. The same applies to a shop or a factory.

As a capitalist you have to have these communities but you need to make sure that they do not start to identify problems collectively and recognise that they have their own strength to resist exploitation and demand a fair share. When they do you need to control the situation and distract people.

You need to sow division within the communities and thus weaken them.

Our different human characteristics provide fertile ground for this sort of division. Jackie Ashley, writing in *the Guardian* on Monday this week, talked about labelling people; once that is done it is difficult to see beyond the label and appreciate difference as a positive rather than a negative force.

The popular media, which has an important role in supporting the system as it is profit making, seizes on the label and dishonestly caricatures it (young black men are dishonest and lazy, Muslims are more likely to be terrorists, women are not capable of logical thinking and so on).

Readers will then tend to divert their anger about real problems and attack the labelled group – occasionally even physically.

Even if they do not do that there is a subliminal reflexive impact and it somehow becomes acceptable, for example, to hold the view that “most” disabled people who claim benefits are “scroungers”.

Those who are being exploited in this way become socially and culturally excluded, often poorly educated and having to take low paid, low skill jobs. In this position they feel doubly precarious and subjugated, not just by the ruling elite but by those much closer to them in terms of income.

Let's have a look at each group in turn and how their social position is still affected by their characteristic.

Starting with women, as this is the Pankhurst lecture, it is instructive to note that we still have a significant gender pay gap in the UK, particularly in the private sector where it hovers around 16 per cent for full time women workers.

As we are very much defined in life by our job this is very serious. Forty two years after the Equal Pay Act became law women are still being paid less than men for jobs of equal value. A society that values the work of a car mechanic (nearly always a man) more highly than that of a childcare worker (nearly always a woman) is not a society that has got its priorities right.

There are still numerous other ways in which institutionalised gender discrimination puts women at a disadvantage – virtual exclusion from some professions, eg, the judiciary, senior jobs in medicine and of course the leaders and officiators of many faith groups – and jobs. There is also the denial of reproductive rights and objectification of women in much of the media for example.

We are also still occasionally electing horrors such as the MEP Godfrey Bloom, whose views of women are now well documented, including the best known comment of his that the economy would only improve once women had got back to their place cleaning behind the fridge instead of going to work.

Things are changing and women are gradually achieving social and cultural equality – not because men have handed it over to them but because of the activities of women such as Sylvia Pankhurst, who refused to accept permanent second class status.

After all, why would men readily hand over their power in the home and in society? They may have to go out and be a wage slave but at home they have ruled the roost and been waited on hand foot and finger.

Even when women increasingly went out to work, mysteriously they still did the majority of household work and childcare at home. A recent survey showed that this is still the case.

This is a classic example of divide and rule; let men do their own bit of exploitation and this will give them a measure of empowerment that they do not otherwise get and keep them quiet.

I do not have to remind you of the horrific distortion of this power in some households where men are violent and abusive towards their female partners, seeing this as a further legitimate manifestation of their power over women.

We all know too that rape is an act of violence and an exercise of power, not simply a matter of having sex with a woman who doesn't want to participate, bad as that is. Until recently rape within marriage was not recognised. Forced sex was one of the husband's conjugal rights. The system was patriarchal and endorsed abuse of women, at least within marriage.

Too many men in positions of power still believe in biological determinism when it comes to women; they believe that women are periodically incompetent because of their menstrual cycle; they are programmed to look after babies whereas men are not; lesbians are just women who have not yet experienced sex with the right man; and so it goes on, drip, drip, drip, producing a cumulative pressure on women to conform to their views.

Women are not only divided from men but are encouraged by the popular media to compete with one another, particularly in terms of their appearance.

When women get together they are accused of gossiping or reviled as unattractive dismal feminist losers. We all know of course that when women get together, particularly when they are united against a common enemy such as attacks on their reproductive rights, they are a powerful force.

So many achievements for women in the past hundred years have been achieved by solidarity and the power of collective women's voice.

So far this talk has been Euro Centric. Moving to look at race it is instructive to recall that some of the greatest liberation struggles in the world have been achieved by black people working together to overcome the oppressors (usually colonising Europeans) and take power over their own lives.

One of the most civilising developments within this context was the determination of the ANC in South Africa to systematically move their society on from the crimes of their white oppressors through the Truth and Reconciliation programme. That took real courage and a huge and generous inclusive approach to building the new South Africa.

Rather less civilised is the constant attack on immigrants that we see and hear on TV, radio and particularly, once again, on the pages of popular newspapers. Instead of seeing another human being we are encouraged to see people from other countries, particularly but not only, black people as a threatening alien species.

Instead of seeing the real economic reasons why there is an acute shortage of affordable housing for example we are taught to blame those who have recently arrived in the UK.

The reporting rarely includes important facts, such as the fact that many immigrant workers accept far worse pay and conditions than the indigenous population and are therefore very welcome to ruthless employers.

Disabled people throughout history have sometimes been coupled with black people in terms of discrimination; the Nazis were proponents of the “Final Solution” for the “racially impure” and disabled people, not forgetting lesbian and gay people too. Women were told that their position was “children, kitchen and church”.

The horrendous eugenicists of the early 20th century suggested that all “degenerate and feeble” people should be weeded out of the human stock so that their “deformed” genes could not be replicated. Those unfortunate enough to be alive already should be shut away somewhere until they died. (This happened to include relatives of the royal family interestingly).

Today it is constantly suggested that disabled people who cannot work are often scroungers and malingerers. There is little doubt that this approach has been fuelling the recent bout of disability hate crime which included the murder of two people with learning difficulties recently.

When disabled people are not being hated they are still frequently patronised – “does he take sugar?” is still often the attitude. “Nothing about us without us” is one of the greatest liberation slogans ever devised. It is the voice of disabled people working together to challenge the view that they are “feeble” or second rate.

Discrimination against people because of their sexuality is one area where liberation struggles have made huge inroads. Almost gone are the days when illegal same sex relationships had to be hidden away and lesbian and gay people were encouraged to seek a cure for their “deviant” behaviour.

Note though the recent activities of far right religious groups in the US with their homophobia and “cure” theories.

Fascinatingly capitalism has started to embrace the LGBT agenda. Some rich people and some extremely influential people have come out and encouraged others to do so.

The market has responded of course by discovering that there are profits to be made from supplying gay-friendly products and services – the pink pound and commercial sponsorship of UK Pride.

That is not to say of course that the ability to come out and be proud was won by major retailers – as with other groups it came from a long fought liberation struggle by self organised groups.

Older people, increasing numbers of whom are affluent today, are also stimulating a “grey” market. However, once again substantial changes to the law to ban discrimination on grounds of age did not emerge from the High Street but were campaigned for by groups at both ends of the age range – pensioners and students in their organisations, not just in the UK but across the EU and indeed the wider world.

Of course many people are not just defined by one “different” characteristic. Women may be black too; gay men may be disabled; Jewish people grow old. Where you have more than one “different” characteristic it may be hard to tell what particular prejudice someone may be exercising against you. What a shame that this Government has repealed the legislation brought in by Labour that allowed people to pursue dual discrimination claims at Employment Tribunals.

Of course some semantic abusers link several offensive terms – “mad old cow” manages to hit three buttons at once for example. Semantics are important because our words do reflect our deeds and our thoughts.

Whatever characteristics we have there is one common link between us – we are all human beings, different but equal.

After the horrors of Nazism and Fascism before and during the Second World War, the International Convention on Human Rights was agreed by the majority of nations.

The underpinning principle is that all human beings have basic rights to live their lives with dignity and be treated as equal.

It may be a “custom more honoured in the breach than the observance” but it is critically important that it is promoted and upheld if we are not to descend once again into barbarism, slavery and subjugation.

Governments that lampoon or caricature the Human Rights legislation are on the slippery slope to devaluing it at a more fundamental level; for that reason it has to be defended. Indeed it could be improved.

There are some signs that the rich and their friends in this Government are beginning to feel insecure about the vast polarisation of wealth in our society. Why else have they started to talk about social cohesion and the big society?

They can see that there is a real danger of ostracism for those at both ends of the social spectrum and that this could have a dangerous downside for them if social structures started to disintegrate. Witness the horrified reaction to the riots last summer.

They say that this new found community initiative is aimed at disparate communities, defined for the most part by inherited racial characteristics, who are dangerously detached. Not only does this conveniently ignore why young white working class

men may feel alienated and rejected but it blames “others”, those who are “outside”, and orders them to get back in line.

They are swimming in dangerous waters though – it only takes organised community groups and trade unions to work harder on bringing people together in their own collective interest, instead of the interests of the wealthy, and the balance of power will start to shift.

This is radical talk but radical solutions are needed; we should not sink back in despair at the scale of the problem but remember the words of Shelley – “we are many, they are few”. If we let them go on dividing us along gender, race, disability, belief, age or sexuality lines we will be dissipating all our collective energies and the problems will remain.

We have to stretch out the hands of friendship across the lines drawn by gender, race and all other characteristics, appreciating and valuing the differences between us, not fearing and hating them.

In the last few decades there have been huge efforts made by different liberation groups to work together to tackle the common enemy – discrimination. It is not easy, as it is also necessary to continue to give each group enough space on their own to develop their strategies. It has been painful for groups to recognise that they may be discriminating against other groups. There are still many issues to be resolved.

Here is a very old saw but it is a great one to end on – “united we stand, divided we fall”. Sylvia Pankhurst knew that and we owe it to her never to forget it.