

'Rivers of Blood' fifty years on: Enoch Powell's rhetoric of blame and exclusion



It is five decades since Enoch Powell told a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham that soon "the black man will have the whip hand over the white man". [Judi Atkins](#) analyses the rhetoric of that speech and concludes that, although Powell's notorious prediction of a race war has not materialised, his rhetoric of division and blame still forms part of British public discourse.

On 20 April 1968, Enoch Powell delivered his now-infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham. In an article for a forthcoming special issue of *The Political Quarterly* to mark its 50th anniversary, I analyse Powell's address through the lens of [epideictic](#) (or 'display') rhetoric. This branch of rhetoric is traditionally associated with praise and blame, but scholars have broadened its scope to encompass the affirmation of a common identity.

At first sight 'Rivers of Blood' is antithetical to this conception of *epideictic* rhetoric, given that its purpose was to unsettle and divide. However, the application of a framework proposed by [Celeste Michelle Condit](#) shows that Powell's speech is best understood as an example of the *epideictic* of blame and exclusion.

According to Condit, *epideictic* rhetoric serves three functional pairs. The first is display/entertainment, whereby an orator's eloquence may 'entertain' their listeners. Meanwhile, the second pair is definition/understanding, which refers to the speaker's power to explain a troubling situation and so to provide reassurance. The third is 'shaping/sharing of community', which acknowledges the role of rhetoric in constructing a collective self-image and reinforcing a shared identity.

Powell began the speech by seeking to establish his authority. Thus, [he told his listeners](#) that 'the supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils', the discussion of which is 'the most unpopular and at the same time the most necessary occupation for the politician'. The unspecified 'evils' are, of course, the consequences of immigration and, by confronting this contentious issue head-on, he came across as a lone voice in the wilderness, warning the nation of the dangers ahead. By 'saying the unsayable', Powell did not so much entertain his audience as provide gratification by articulating their deep-seated concerns. Consequently, the speech acted as an (albeit temporary) outlet for the built-up resentment he believed was felt in areas that were experiencing high levels of immigration.

The ability to define a situation enhances the authority of a speaker, and Powell devoted much of his address to setting out the nature of the problem as he saw it. In particular, he predicted that unrestricted immigration would lead to 'whole areas, towns and parts of towns across England [being] occupied by sections of the immigrant and immigrant-descended population' by the year 2000. A key contributing factor was the government's decision to allow an annual inflow of around 50,000 dependents, a move that Powell claimed was akin to 'watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre'. This definition of the situation offered no reassurance to those concerned about immigration, while Powell's vivid portrayal of a dystopian future served only to heighten public anxiety.

The shaping/sharing of community is achieved through public affirmations of communal identity. However, by emphasising some values and traditions over others, a speaker can exclude individuals or groups from their definition of community. So, to this end, Powell contrasted the nation's treatment of immigrants with that of its own people:

While, to the immigrant, entry to this country was admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought, the impact upon the existing population was very different. For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country.

To illustrate his argument, Powell claimed the native English 'found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places ... their plans and prospects for the future defeated'. Though he never stated it directly, [Paul Chilton](#) notes that the audience can plausibly infer that 'the agents of change ... are either the politicians criticised by Powell or the immigrants themselves' [p. 123]. Irrespective of culpability the consequences were the same, namely the displacement and victimisation of the existing population, which fueled the in-group's hostility towards immigrants and their fears for the future.

A striking feature of Powell's rhetoric of exclusion was [his use of](#) the 'anecdotal testimony of an "ordinary" person ... as an authority and as a proof of a more general political point'. Thus, he repeatedly praised the 'ordinary, decent, sensible [English] people' who had voiced their concerns about immigration, and treated their stories as representative of what 'thousands and hundreds of thousands are saying and thinking'. In one such conversation, Powell reported, a constituent said he wanted his children to settle abroad, claiming that 'in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man'. This view was consistent with Powell's prediction that unfettered immigration would result in large swathes of England being 'occupied' by an 'alien element'. In turn, the claim that the existing population would be subjugated served to foster division by presenting these 'others' as a direct threat to the nation and its way of life.

The legacy of Powell's speech is mixed. His most notorious prediction – that unrestricted immigration would lead to a race war, which would see the streets of Britain 'foaming with much blood' – has not materialised and, according to [Sally Tomlinson](#), the 86% of the settled population of England and Wales identified as 'white' in the 2011 census 'presumably still [holds] the "whip hand"' over the 14% who identify as Asian, Black or Mixed Race.

Nevertheless, the arguments of the Leave campaign prior to the EU referendum contained strong echoes of 'Rivers of Blood'. A notorious example is UKIP's 'Breaking Point' poster, which showed a winding queue of Syrian refugees in Slovenia in 2015. As [Jonathan Jones](#) explains: 'This tide of faces summons up exactly the same swarms and rivers and hordes of otherness and racial difference that Powell spoke against in 1968 and that so many have tried to evoke since'.

Campaigners also reiterated Powell's argument about the impact of immigration on the existing population, with [Priti Patel](#) claiming that 'the shortage of primary school places is yet another example of how uncontrolled migration is putting unsustainable pressures on our public services'. This rhetoric of division and blame was widely condemned but, with rising anti-immigrant sentiment and the uncertainties surrounding the UK's departure from the EU, it is likely to feature in the public discourse on 'race' and immigration for some time to come.

Note: the above draws on the author's forthcoming article for *The Political Quarterly*, entitled "'Strangers in their own Country": Epideictic Rhetoric and Communal Definition in Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" Speech'.

About the Author



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