

# *The Birmingham Post*

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## **Why human rights must never just be selective**

*There was a time when British 'phobias' towards foreigners were voiced in public. How far have we really moved on from that, asks **Dr Gözim Alpion**, Research Fellow in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham*

Are we politically correct in Britain? Perhaps – but not full-time. In this country you cannot simply rant about 'inferior' races and civilisations whenever you want. There should be a time for everything. Not long ago, Enoch Powell believed that April was the most suitable month of the year to hurl heaps of insults on immigrants.

Since then things have changed. Nowadays, we can put spring, especially the month of April, to better uses compared to the late 1960s. April is that time of the year when we decide to liberate certain spots in the Arab world from cruel dictators who at some point happen to be our closest allies in that region.

April is also a very convenient month for us to hunt for weapons of mass destruction in the Arab world (that's what the British and world public opinion is expected to think, anyway) and to achieve this noble goal we employ every means possible, including mass deception.

There is no way one can get publicity in the UK in April even if one writes the most bizarre and stupid things about any group of ‘loathsome’ foreigners. If we are not liberating Arabs or chasing phantom weapons of mass destruction, in April many of us spend our time wandering lonely or in the company of friends in green meadows and vales enjoying every bit of sunshine and the gentle touch of the fresh breeze, keeping an eye out for early daffodils, and of course, listening to John Cage’s silent composition 4’ 33’’.

Such pastimes explain why, apparently, no one noticed Robert Kilroy-Silk’s smearing article about the Arabs which appeared in the *Sunday Express* in April 2003.

But you cannot keep down an ambitious journalist like Kilroy-Silk, especially if he is convinced that what he has written is the real McCoy. As it happened, someone working for him, clicked SEND by mistake and – *Presto!* – the same article re-surfaces in the same newspaper on January 4 this year.

Most celebrities whine about bad luck and you cannot help feeling sorry for them. Kilroy-Silk too deserves our sympathy because how was he supposed to know that so soon after the festive season people would be sober enough to search in vain for some meaning in his, according to some, normally nonsensical writing.

But fate has been unfair to Kilroy even before. Making insulting remarks about foreigners is apparently one of his favourite pastimes. So, for instance, on January 16, 1995 he wrote in the *Daily Express*, ‘Muslims everywhere behave with equal savagery’, not to forget his derogatory remarks about the Irish.

Reading Kilroy’s articles about ‘inferior’ human races is a waste of time. If you do read his work, however, you run the risk of being misinformed, especially if your mind is still at the stage of, what Locke called, *tabula rasa*. That’s why

some would suggest that the best thing you can do about Kilroy's journalistic work is to ignore it. Some risks in life are simply not worth taking.

But even if you ignore Kilroy's column you are not completely out of the woods. Apparently Kilroy is not the only journalist who could misinform you and certainly not the only ignorant TV presenter in this country.

Some British newspapers are currently employing several Kilroys to write their columns. Nowadays, it seems anyone can be a columnist, anyone, that is, who works in television. It is bizarre, but we now seem to depend on some TV celebrities to enlighten us on almost any branch of knowledge.

That the celebrity-columnists are often clueless about the specialist topics they cover does not seem too much to bother newspaper editors or proprietors.

I can imagine how embarrassed and annoyed most hard-working, decent journalists in this country are with a colleague like Kilroy. And who can blame them?

Kilroy's apparent ignorance is bound to give the wrong impression, not only about them but also about the media industry itself, which is supposedly responsible for educating, informing and entertaining the public, not misinforming and insulting it.

Kilroy's articles about 'inferior' peoples are an indication of what one could label an appalling ignorance, symptoms of which are easily recognised in the work of several freelance and full-time journalists. This ignorance reflects, among other things, some serious flaws in our education system.

How can we blame poor Kilroy when as a little boy, perhaps, he was not told at school that planet Earth is inhabited not only by the British, the Americans and the Europeans?

And if you are not told such things at school, you most certainly won't find time to educate yourself as you grow older, especially if, like Kilroy, you enter politics with the purpose of becoming prime minister or, once this ambition is deemed as unachievable, you join the BBC.

Who said that Bob the builder can fix everything!

That's why it makes no sense to blame Kilroy for believing that 'we owe the Arabs nothing'. The poor chap, it seems, had no way of knowing that before 'we' (he may not know much but he certainly speaks like royalty) started 'providing them [the Arabs] with science, medicine, technology and all the benefits of the West', the forefathers of our contemporary Arabs and other races in that part of the world provided us in the West with social and legal institutions, medicine, astronomy and, above all, with the writing, which Kilroy – through no fault of his, of course – has yet to master.

Considering that Kilroy has been in politics and then in the employ of the BBC for quite a long time, one would assume that someone must have told him something about other civilisations, I mean at a social do or over a drink.

You can learn about the real world not only at school or from books, especially if you claim to be a journalist. It stands to reason, I would have thought, anyone employed by the BBC should know that the Arabs of today are not worthy only because of their rich tradition.

A quarter of a billion Arabs, which apparently Kilroy considers as ‘human debris’, continue to enrich the world’s cultural heritage now as much as any other race.

I have lived, studied and worked for seven years in Egypt but I did not find my Egyptian and other Arab friends ‘suicide bombers’, ‘limb-amputators’, and ‘women-repressors’.

Yet I do not blame Kilroy for this gaffe, because he apparently did not know, just as it makes no sense to blame President Bush for not knowing that *entrepreneur*, which he believes the French lack, is in fact a French word.

Most likely, the president was never given a chance to study French.

When I first read Kilroy’s account of the Arabs, I could not help thinking he must know something we don’t. Perhaps someone from NASA, I thought, had confided in Kilroy some details about a newly discovered race of aliens who happened to be called ‘ARABS’. My feeling that this could be the case was strengthened further when I read that some of Kilroy’s ‘green men’ were called ‘Iranians’.

Sure, I thought, Kilroy must know by now that the Iranians are not Arabs!

Kilroy’s articles reflect a disturbing discourse some employ in the West at times to portray and denigrate not only the Arabs, but also other distant ‘inferior’ races like the Chinese and the Indians or nations closer to home such as the Irish or the peoples in the Balkans, especially the Albanians.

We accept as normal the decision of some celebrities to sue a magazine for printing pictures of them eating cake.

We do not seem to bother enough to raise the voice, however, when whole cultures, nations and civilisations are presented as worthless. We seem to tolerate occasionally some stupid generalisations about certain groups of people for the sake of not infringing a couple of bigots' right to freedom of speech.

Journalists and people working in the media have responsibilities not only towards the readership in this country but also towards a more global audience.

The press should be free but the journalists should behave more responsibly as professionals.

Nothing should stop us from condemning cruel and corrupt regimes in the Arab world, or anywhere else on earth, for that matter. We should not be concerned about human rights selectively, however.

Nor should we think that the issue of human rights is something only we are worried about and something which only we can resolve. Our way of life does not have to be the only model which the rest of the world must be forced to copy.

Western civilisation is not essentially or exclusively European in nature. We are very much an offshoot of other civilisations, past and present, which we choose to talk about, promote, or condemn when it suits us.

Kilroy is keen to remind us, the ignoramuses, that while we have thousands of asylum seekers from Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries living happily in this country on social security, there is 'not one single British asylum seeker in any Arab country'.

Apparently Kilroy thinks that anyone from the Arab world in the UK, indeed any foreigner hailing from outside the EC, is here because they want to sponge on us. Little does Kilroy know, apparently, that there are thousands of Britons in the Arab world who have gone there not purely to enlighten the region but to earn a living.

These British immigrants are not any different from the many immigrants who have come to England. The only difference is that as British citizens we can emigrate and settle very easily anywhere in the world we fancy but are not willing to offer the same privilege (I would call it a basic human right) to many foreigners who call Britain home.

You can often find among those foreign ‘spongers’ brilliant doctors, lecturers, scientists and artists some of whom have little chance of finding a decent job here, have rarely been offered or even have lost hope that they will ever be given a decent contract in this country because of some dodgy and irresponsible employers whose perception of and attitude towards them are as misinformed as that of Kilroy.

Kilroy’s misinformed argument shows that there are still people in Britain who live stubbornly in the imperial past when we had appointed ourselves as the world’s judge and jury.

Powell and Kilroy are products of and exponents of a Eurocentric mindset that is refusing to accept that Britain and the world are changing. It would be wrong to think that if we shun a politician of Powell’s type or take off air a programme like *Kilroy*, we have addressed and solved the problem.

There are still many Powells and Kilroys out there (like Powell, Kilroy claims he has received many letters in support of his ignorance and bigotry) whom we

have to listen to, argue with and expose. If we do not engage with them, they turn themselves into martyrs, victims and fake champions of the free speech.

The worst that could happen is to see people simply as racists and non-racists. Such pure breed does not exist. No one is born either a racist or free from the bug of racism.

Our views towards each other reflect the circumstances in which we are brought up, educated and work. Some people in the West, as anywhere in the world, suffer from phobias towards 'strangers'. We in Britain have our own share of such phobias.

There was a time when they were voiced in public. Not very long ago someone at the pinnacle of the British political establishment was unhappy that Gandhi – that 'half-naked fakir' – had the temerity to meet His Majesty's representative.

We no longer, to quote George Orwell, classify foreigners 'in much the same way as insects'. We have really moved on, although some old habits are rather hard to beat.