

**Speech by Professor Lord Bhattacharyya  
to the Birmingham Civic Society.  
Wednesday, 18 October 2006**



I am enormously pleased to be with you and offer a few thoughts to the Annual General Meeting of such a distinguished society.

I'm very grateful for your invitation - though I confess you had a close shave. As an engineer, I favour a collaborative approach to all endeavours. So I like to ask my team for thoughts on what to say in speeches.

I went to talk to a fellow engineer and told him I was going to talk to the Civic society and what did he think I should say.

Distracted from some pressing task, he thought for a moment and said - "just tell them that Honda make a damn good car".

I soon put him right. Honda make a good car, but Jaguar and Land Rover make better ones.

On reflection though, perhaps he wasn't that far off the mark. Like Jaguar and Land Rover, Birmingham Civic Society has always had a deserved reputation for high standards and robustness. You are the custodians of Birmingham's heritage, and you've done a great job in protecting that heritage.

You've shown a great independence of thought. You've been prepared to speak your minds and stand firm. Your members put time and effort into working for the betterment of our community.

Your excellent magazine reminds me that the word Civic, comes from the Latin civis, meaning citizen, and is related to the idea of the Civitas – the city-state. The Romans had a clear idea about the first duty of the citizen to the city. It was to get involved. To

have a view and to take action. They took it so seriously one of the highest honours Rome could bestow was the Civic crown.

Although I'm now a peer, It's not within my power to bestow crowns, civic or otherwise - but your Society surely deserves one.

Today I want to ask you to think about the role of the "Civis" – or the active citizen - today in Birmingham, and what should we be focussing on as we face the challenges of a changing economy, a changing community and a changing world?

Let's start by looking at our common heritage as a City.

In Julian Barnes's book "Arthur and George", there's an excellent description of turn of the Century Birmingham, as seen through the eyes of George Edalji, the scion of a Parsee family converted to Christianity and living in Staffordshire.

George is training to be a Solicitor at Mason college in Birmingham, and is impressed by the new Law Courts, the Hospital, the Chamber of arbitration and the meat market. He reads of the day half a million came to see Queen Victoria, without a single disturbance or casualty and marvels:

"The general opinion is that cities are violent, overcrowded places, while the countryside is calm and peaceable. His own experience is to the contrary: the country is turbulent and primitive, while the city is orderly and modern. Of course Birmingham is not without crime and vice and discord – else there would be less of a living for solicitors –

(Something that serves the Solicitors well to this day, I understand!)

"but it seems to George that human conduct is more rational here, and more obedient to the law: more civil."

I think the reason Birmingham was, and is, a civil society is its' sense of community, the bringing together of different people and finding ways for them to live together, in harmony, in prosperity and in comfort..

You know, It's easy sometimes to forget what a incredible thing a city like Birmingham is.

More than a million people, of different cultures, of different backgrounds, different educations, wealth, status, family background, all living together in a limited space.

It think that's why Cities have always been the natural home for reformers. It's not possible to neglect your neighbour in the city. You have to deal with him every day. It's not possible to ignore different views,- you have to recognise them, respond to them and convince them of your own. It's not possible to ignore poverty, or squalor, or poor education, or extremism, or decay.

In a city like Birmingham you cannot simply look the other way, because even if you try, you'll see something else you have to deal with.

So, in a city, problems can never be hidden, they have to be dealt with.

Speaking with my engineers hat on, I know that you only give your full attention to problems you absolutely have to solve..

So I believe Birmingham itself is much of reason why people in this room, and many outside it, show such generosity in giving their time, effort and wealth to dealing with the issues that affect Birmingham today.

They do it, because conscious of it or not, they realise that it is the duty of the civis, the citizen, to contribute to the city, the Civic society.

So that's the general, but what is it about Birmingham in particular that has produced such a strong civic society? In part it's because we like to do things in a genuine way in Birmingham, and people like to make a direct contribution to their community.

Of course another Birmingham trait is to be understated. People tend not to boast about their achievements – or their generosity.

Perhaps this goes back to the Quaker influence. It would be nice to think so.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that one of the original and best examples of the Civic society in Birmingham is understated and modest about it too.

Bournville still stands as a monument to the Cadbury family and to the very essence of civic activity.

2006 might have been a tough year for Cadbury's, but what matters about building a reputation for quality, for hard work, for generosity and for innovation is that it means people will stick with you when a tough time comes.

So I'm certain Birmingham will stand by Cadbury's. That's the legacy of a strong civic society.

Of course, Birmingham has always been, in the modern phrase “ a multi-cultural” city.

The Quakers are only one of the communities that have flourished in Birmingham. The Jewish community in Birmingham has always contributed to the whole of the City, Indeed, the first Jewish charity in the area dates back all the way to the 1820s. We've been fortunate to have such a strong and generous Jewish community here.

The same is true of the Irish in Birmingham. That tradition is still strong, with many like Steve Byrne, John Nolan, the Gallagher family still at the heart of transforming the physical environment of Birmingham.

So it's easy to see, with the Quakers, the Jewish community and the Irish families that have done so much for the city, that new cultures and new perspectives help make a city great.

It's something to be proud of.

After all, people come to cities for a reason.

They come for opportunity, to better themselves, to experience new things and to change the prospects for their families.

As long as Birmingham offers hope, prosperity and the chance of betterment, new communities will be attracted here.

So don't worry when people want to come here.

Worry if they stop wanting to come.

I speak with some authority here, as after all, it's the process I went through myself.

I came to Birmingham to work with Lucas industries and the University of Birmingham. I remember when I started at Lucas I was the only Indian on the factory floor. People would stare, but not for long. They had more important things to do. They had business to be getting on with.

Perhaps that's why I liked Birmingham. I liked the straightforwardness, the ability to take people as you find them, the lack of airs and graces. So, when Lucas asked me, I came back to Birmingham happily.

It's a sign of the rapidity of change that I'm still around and Lucas is mostly gone.

Actually, not gone but changed. There's TRW at Shirley for example, innovating in the Aerospace industry.

If that teaches us anything it's that change is inevitable, and the people who were attracted by Birmingham's openness to new people will help provide the businesses, the prosperity and the innovation that will keep Birmingham growing in the future.

So be optimistic about the new communities in Birmingham today, like the Somali community in the bottom end of Sparkbrook.

Think of how the Gujaratis, the Bangladeshis, and the Punjabis have moved over from being poor immigrants to being the shopkeepers open on a Sunday and now are large traders, creating jobs and bringing wealth to the city.

Now, none of this optimism should be unrealistic.

Another Birmingham trait is straightforwardness and realism. So let's not pretend that the mixing of communities is simple, or easy, or painless. It isn't.

Many of these communities are blighted by poverty. Nobody is owed a living in this world, yet when we see deprivation, we must do our best to stop it.

That doesn't mean giving people a hand out. It means giving them a path to follow. It means supporting education, for everyone.

When I say everyone, I mean everyone, by the way. It means putting effort into Aston and Bartley Green, Sparkbrook and Kingstanding. Handsworth and Kingsbury.

One of the biggest risks of reaching out to poorer, more vulnerable communities, is that it looks like you're neglecting existing needs. Everyone needs to be given help to progress, because if any part of our community stands still, it will in the end fall behind.

The advantage of this approach is that encourages an working with the whole community. I want to see asian, black and white lads playing football in the parks, not asian lads, black lads and white lads.

These are big issues- but we shouldn't hype them up. The best way of dealing with seperation is to encourage integration. To me, multiculturalism must be about integration, not assimilation. The danger is that, in showing tolerance to minorities and their culture, one can appear to have less respect for the culture of the majority.

It's why I'm a big supporter of integrated schools.

John Sentamu - the first ethnic minority Archbishop of York - said: "Multiculturalism has seemed to imply, wrongly for me, let other cultures be allowed to express themselves but do not let the majority culture at all tell us its glories, its struggles, its joys, its pains". I agree.

Let us be honest, striking the right balance is difficult. Our tolerance for minority attitudes and cultures should not be abused by minorities wanting to impose their values on the majority. That means avoiding separatism in our welfare, health and, especially, education systems. So I do not endorse or support exclusive religious schools.

In India, as a child from a Hindu family, I attended a Catholic school—most of the schools were Catholic. It was an excellent school. Despite or because of my education, I am still a Hindu, but with a much better understanding of Christians, the British and Western culture

On the one hand, none of us want cultural uniformity; but we want all our citizens to have the language skills and the cultural sensitivity to operate successfully in society and in the economy.

There's been a big debate about Britishness. To me the debate is misguided. We are all British. We all need to be part of the same community.

That's why I'm pleased that the Government will be looking at ways to make sure our religious schools are integrated. The last thing I want to see is a new community arriving in Birmingham and then cutting itself off- or being cut off- from the wider community that the city has to offer.

You know, change is constant for all of us. For people, For businesses- and as a result, for cities too.

For example, Birmingham was always associated across the world with Longbridge. Millions of column inches built and reinforced the association. Sometimes that was good for Birmingham. When things went wrong at the plant it could be very bad.

The loss of Longbridge was a tragedy for the workforce. At the same time, that change forces us to re-assess how we want Birmingham to be seen. Now Longbridge is closed we have no choice but to change. The only question is how.

There are many challenges. That's not new.

When Joseph Chamberlain was Mayor, the challenges for Birmingham were manifold. Clean Water, decent roads, gas and energy, parks, housing.

Chamberlain saw the task ahead, and knew what was needed. He took radical decisions. It's seems simple now, but every decision taken then was politically controversial.

Chamberlain himself was hated by many – when he first stood for election to Parliament he was accused of atheism and republicanism and had dead cats thrown at him. To be fair, that was in Sheffield where they are much more uncouth.

Through-out the controversies, Chamberlain's actions were radical and decisive. Whether buying the Gas and Water companies, setting up slum clearances programmes, or building schools and art galleries, he took risks, had failures and, because of his willingness to embrace change, he got results.

Chamberlain left Birmingham, in the famous phrase -“parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas & watered and improved”

The Chamberlain reforms were physical, concrete. They leave a wonderful landscape to our city to this day.

I won't be political tonight. But I can't help but noting that Chamberlain was a Liberal, then a Conservative.

Today we're again ruled by Liberal Conservatives, or is it Conservative Liberals? Yet I can't help but feel they have not yet provided the City with a Chamberlain.

I know there have been a few comments in the press lately about leadership. I'm pleased to know that the reports about a rift between the Civic Society and the Council leadership are false.

I have one appeal. Today we live in a global world. Every criticism is read by investors, businesses and decisionmakers. So we should carry out our own debates in a measured tone, constructively and with respect for each other.

There's an old American political expression "Politics stops at the waters edge".

Today thanks to Global warming, the water's edge keeps getting closer- So our debates should be less heated as a consequence.

So let me make a few constructive suggestions.

If the Chamberlain civic reforms were physical and concrete responses to poverty and disease, the next generation of civic reforms will be a response to the demands of the world for educated, confident, technically adept cities.

We will need a Birmingham at ease in a world where jobs, industries and knowledge move around the world with astonishing rapidity. Our reforms will have to be a response to a more cosmopolitan, but less rooted world.

Chamberlain left the city improved.

The next great civic reform may be to make Birmingham integrated, numerate, skilled, digitised and educated.

That will mean new buildings, new plans, new use of materials. It will mean leadership from the property industry, from business leaders, from the cultural quarter and from Advantage West Midlands.

The common factor of the next wave of Civic reform will be the connectedness of everything we do. A global city like Birmingham will not succeed without business, without educators, without cultural innovators and government all coming together and leading together. A cultural city without a business heart will decline, a business city without a cultural soul will be unattractive to those who we wish to stay.

We have exciting challenges ahead.

The first big challenge is to build a future for all the communities of Birmingham through supporting our children's education.

We need to give them a path to change their community for the better. I believe the best path is through science and technology.

Birmingham needs to be at the forefront of these changes. That's why I applaud so strongly the work you're doing to involve young people in the Civic life of the city

The challenge facing our young people is enormous.

They have huge resources:

Wealth we could barely imagine a generation ago;

An education system with good resources and improving teachers;

Families that increasingly understand the value of education;

Yet they face competition, not from their classmates, or even their year group, or even others in their city, but from Chinese, Indian and South African students, hungry for knowledge and a chance to improve their lives.

As a result their Universities, their Employers, their customers will all be more demanding.

We have to do everything we can to prepare them for this exciting but dangerous world.

For example, the Government has just issued a report, the STEM report, looking at how we can ensure more science, technology, engineering and maths education happens in our schools, how more colleges can attract scientist and how we can make sure more graduates leave university with skills needed by modern business.

C P Snow spoke of a division in elite society between those who knew what the second law of thermodynamics was and those who didn't.

Now anyone can find out the second law on google is a millisecond.

The divide of the future will be between those who have the skills to think of something useful to do with it and those who can't.

The second civic challenge is the fact that as the world changes, education cannot stop at 16, 18 or 21. So, in the short term, we need a library for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Birmingham. We need buildings that reach out and offer knowledge, learning and training at the heart of every community- and take Birmingham to the world.

The world is getting smaller. So we need to make sure Birmingham is easily reachable. Yes, we need a new railway station so people can reach us physically, (and I can't wait for that!) but we also need a totally digitised city.

A new Chamberlain might look at Birmingham and want to make sure every home had an internet connection, had a computer, had broadband.

He'd want a connected city not because it would be an end in itself, but because when that channel is opened you'd discover people would be making music, writing books, starting online businesses and creating wealth.

In twenty years time, if you aren't connected you'll be as relevant as the valve radio is to the I-pod generation. So we need to be ready.

The third challenge is the cultural challenge. As businesses move swiftly around the world and we move to follow them, we will feel more insecure and less rooted. That will make us more cosmopolitan, but it will make us less comfortable. We'll be constantly challenged with new viewpoints.

Birmingham is ahead of the game here. Our strong tradition of bringing together new communities means we see the excitement of cultural movement- from the Balti, to Bhangra or, only two decades back, the tradition of Black footballers in blazing a trail in West Midlands football teams.

But we also see the negatives. We can see alienation, closed communities. Sometimes communities live side by side, but don't know each other

So as civic reformers we need to think about how the physical, architectural, transport and entrepreneurial leadership of Birmingham tackles those challenges head on, and embraces with passion the idea that we must bring people together not let them live apart.

After all, Birmingham grew great on trade and manufacture, and you can't trade or do business with a community you don't understand or you don't know.

So, three big challenges to deal with- and that's just for starters.

I haven't even mentioned perhaps the biggest challenge- in a world where capital can move about as swiftly as a blink, how do you convince it's owners not just to invest, but to invest for the long term?

I think the answer to that is contained in the answers to the first three challenges.

First, you need an educated population, comfortable with technology, with change and with business and each other. You need learning to be something that happens continuously, not just at school and you need learning to be something accessible to everyone.

Second, You need a connected and accessible economy, integrated with education and learning, attractive to build in, invest in and to innovate in and well physically connected to transport, energy and digital links. That means a culture willing to take risks, to try new ideas and confident enough to accept rewards if things succeed and the brickbats that go with failure.

Finally, you need an exciting, cosmopolitan cultural world to live in, so that the workforce, the population, and the managers who go with it, will be attracted to the city, will feel energised by it- and will have a personal investment in wanting to stay.

Birmingham has done all this before. The Chamberlains knew how to tackle the big challenges.

Now Birmingham needs to do it again, and the people who can make it happen are in this audience.

The world opening up before us requires leadership, bravery and risk-taking.

It will require businesses, politicians, and educators to work together in new ways.

It will require the willingness to turn down wrong paths, because the only thing that will surely lead to decline is standing still.

The responsibility for this great city rests with all of us

We have huge challenges.

We have great resources - determination, pride, flexibility and straightforwardness.

We have high ambitions.

I'm confident we'll succeed.