

Two Cheers for Democracy

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'Two Cheers for Democracy' is E M Forster's book of essays, broadcasts and articles between 1936 and 1951. He discusses politics and ethics, people, places and the arts; he states his tolerant personal creed.

I was speaking a few nights ago at E M Forster's Cambridge. As I walked late back to the railway station, I passed some of my initiatives for cycling and for cyclists all those years ago when I served as transport minister. One included specifying that the cover of the new edition of the best-selling Highway Code, should show a walker together with two wheelers. Our roads are not solely for motorists; getting the balance right takes time, consultation and clear thinking about our shared objectives and how to achieve them. This is a work in progress presently in Worthing and we need to be patient and open to assessing how we can make this new initiative work in the interest of all.

One undergraduate stopped me to say mine was the most inspiring talk they had heard at the university: perhaps it was their first week. Others emailed one hoping one day to be able too to talk in a way that others would consider wise. In 50 years' time he likely will have more wisdom.

A self-proclaimed staunch leftist welcomed my words on honest debate and on being prepared to change opinion on issues, adding that there was intolerance in his political group when he suggested alternative ways to understand a situation.

An officer in an overseas students' association wrote about their first experience of open debate and the cheerful criticism (by others) of government.

What I said and how I spoke was in part inspired by E M Forster's rebuke to John Steegman's disobliging comments about the suitability of the university to ordinary students from ordinary schools, and about his appalling sentence about women (except for college founders - the Lady Clare, the Countess of Pembroke, Queen Margaret, the Lady Margaret and the Countess of Sussex).

Stay calm while reading: 'The most serious indictment of the women students, apart from the fearsomeness of the women which these students almost always become unless they marry quickly, is the complete pointlessness of their being there.'

E M Forster's riposted: 'And I know so many women who have retained their learning in spite of marriage, and their charm in spite of spinsterhood.'

With others, I strive locally to be inclusive of diversity, to accept that whole human beings can be female and male, able to choose and to be happy as they wish to be in life. It has been a common endeavour.

We have to forgive ourselves and others for the time it often took to accept and to understand and to support difference.

I had spoken particularly of how each person at the debate could next time bring a fellow student who had not previously come to or tried speaking in a debate.

In encouraging others into fuller lives, we can grow in our own. Do please join in developing our supportive welcoming communities: we can be enriched together and we can enrich each other.

In 1946 E M Forster talked on *The Challenge of Our Time* when it was clear the world was in a terrible mess. He felt like shouting at a big black cloud. As the PM announced new local restrictions yesterday, we might also feel we are 'shouting at a big black cloud' – Covid-19 is truly the challenge of our time. We could learn much from Forster's beliefs shared in Victorian liberalism: smaller clouds, benevolence and philanthropy, free-speech, little colour-prejudice, belief that individuals are and should be different and with a sincere faith in the progress of society.

He said we can combine the new economy with the everlasting real parts of morality that recognises the spirit and individuality in each of us. We are being asked to dig deep and recognise again the sacrifices and the Best of British courage we need to fight this new war.