

WORKING TOGETHER, DESPITE THE POTHOLES.

'Road closed' is a reality for many of us, as it is a metaphor for life. Many have felt excluded in the past, due to gender, ethnicity, social class and other elements of their identity. Some of this bias has been overt, whilst other biases have been covert, and even unconscious, as people have regarded something as being 'the norm', and, therefore, not open to question. One example I learned of recently was that Switzerland, which one might have assumed was a liberal, open-minded country, did not grant women the right to vote until February 1971. Apartheid in South Africa did not end until 1994. The Oxford and Cambridge Club in London only allowed women to become full members in 1996. There are many more examples, of course, including social class, with just under 6% of the current population being educated privately, with 65% of the current cabinet having gone through this system.

This is not to make a political point, but to reflect on the roads that are open, and which have been open, to people in the past. To extend that metaphor, there have been those for whom the road has been completely closed, such as black people in South Africa and women in Switzerland. There have been others, who have been allowed to proceed along a road, despite the terrain offered to them being full of potholes.

In the last week, I was part of a conversation in which two friends spoke about their upbringing in London in the 1960s. They spoke about gangs and threatening behaviour, and the rules they had to follow in order to avoid putting themselves into dire circumstances. This was very different from the world in which I grew up.

As part of that conversation, another friend reminded me that he was a student at St George's Roman Catholic School in Maida Vale when, in 1995, the headteacher, Philip Lawrence, was stabbed when trying to break up a fight. Stephen Lawrence, no relation, of course, was just 18 years old, when he was stabbed in a racially-motivated attack in 1993. His family, led by his mother, Doreen Lawrence, continues to work hard to bring about change, in memory of her son.

When we drive our cars, becoming increasingly frustrated by the number of 'Road Closed' signs we encounter, often unaccompanied by any signs of anyone taking any action, perhaps we should remember how those metaphorical roads have been closed for others, directly and indirectly, and how, in certain awful circumstances, their road on Earth have been closed forever.

If temporary road closure means that potholes have been filled, so that everyone, despite their vehicle and their background, may proceed in safety along the way, then we should, as empathic human beings, be grateful.

The next time I drive towards a 'road closed' sign, I shall think about the real reason that I am being inconvenienced, and reflect on the more serious issues that this metaphor reminds me of.