

6 – Nostalgia, change and political correctness in Blackpool

I headed north, bound for Blackpool, where I wanted to think more about British culture and the country's relationship with its past. There had been heavy storms the night before, and as the train trundled along, the two women in the seats next to me complained about the weather.

"Might see some flooding," one said.

"Yeah, maybe," said the other.

The ticket inspector came past.

"Two returns to Blackpool," one said.

The inspector issued their tickets, large print-outs with a scannable code.

"They're the new kind of tickets," the inspector explained. "Not exactly saving the planet but they'll get you through the barriers. Just scan them like you would at the airport."

"I never go to the airport," one of the women said.

"Well give it a try," said the inspector, "or just ask the staff at the station and they'll help you".

"I guess that's what progress looks like," said the other woman as she looked at the ticket with disdain.

I was in Blackpool to look at British culture and identity and James Bamford, a man in his thirties, had offered to take me around the town.

As we drove towards the seafront, we went past the Comrades Club, a former club for service personnel, now boarded up, and an old church which was being knocked down. We reached the promenade which was packed with cafes, sweet shops and amusement arcades. Fish and chips were advertised for £2.95, while the Merry England was selling pints of McEwan's for £1.95.

"Everyone thinks of Blackpool, they think of the front," James said, "and it is a nice place to go for a walk, look over the Irish Sea and the Bay, see across to the Lakes, North Wales. It's just when you go a few streets back that it gets a bit grim – terraced streets, B&Bs and whatever. A lot of it is very dilapidated."

"As long as you look that way," he added, indicating towards the Tower and out to sea, "it's lovely."

We parked and walked onto the Promenade. It was a cold, sunny Saturday in November, and there was a buzz around the town with a local football derby against Wigan that afternoon and *Strictly Come Dancing* filming in the ballroom at the Blackpool Tower that evening.

At the Tower, the police were out in force as the BBC filmed the programme's judges getting into a gilded horse-drawn carriage and setting off on a trip down the seafront. A police officer shivered in the cold. A car drew up and one of the presenters, Tess Daly, got out and waved to the crowd. While Remembrance Sunday had passed, many of the people watching on still sported poppies.

"Nice to have a bit of glitz and glamour," a woman in the crowd said to her friend. I went over and asked who she was supporting.

"Ed Balls," she replied firmly.

James told me he was a big fan of the show.

"Dancing is a big part of British heritage," he said. "That's what you did on a Saturday, you went to the local dance and that's how you'd socialise. And that way of going out has been lost – it was a bit more of a nicey-nicey affair than in the nightclub after ten shots. But that's what you did, you wanted to try to ask a girl out, you went to the dance."

"*Strictly* mixes that old and new," he went on. "It brings older and younger people together, which I think is important. I watch with my mum, which is a nice way to spend time with her – the classic British thing of all the family watching telly together."

"It's escapism, isn't it?" he added. "You know, if things were different, Ed Balls could be Chancellor living in Number 11. Instead, he's in Blackpool in a sequin shirt, having a great time."

I asked what escapism meant to him.

"Everyone's got things in their lives," he said, "and if they can escape from it for a few hours that's good; whether it's watching *Strictly* or playing football or reading a book, you need a way just to switch off. It doesn't mean the world is going to change or stop. Everyone needs an escape – the glitz and glamour and the showbiz, all that kind of stuff, bit of nostalgia, that's it."

Thinking back to my conversations in London, I asked about his reflections on nostalgia.

"You should celebrate your past," he said, "and learn from it too, because if you don't learn from the mistakes from the past, that's a worry isn't it? You know, airbrushed history, that's not a good thing and obviously Britain's history is not exactly very glittering, and you wonder whether a lot of British people really know about history and our empire-building."

I suggested a lot of people would talk proudly about Britain's history.

"Mmmm," he said, "because their understanding wouldn't connect with the reality that we invaded and took over and said 'here's our flag, we're in charge, thanks very much'. We don't mind imposing on other people but we don't like being imposed on ourselves."

“You saw that in the referendum campaign,” he went on. “These are emotive issues and these are what drive a lot of people to vote. They see it as a threat to their way of life – whether that’s true or not I don’t know. Obviously in this area it’s not because there aren’t different cultures living here. I think having people from all over the world to meet, different ways of life, different beliefs, that’s a good thing – better than being insular.”

The word ‘insular’, literally describing being ‘like an island’, struck me as I looked out to sea at the edge of Britain. I wondered if he thought nostalgia was dangerous.

“No-one’s perfect,” he said, “everyone makes mistakes. The question is do you learn from mistakes or do you repeat them? That’s when education comes in – you’ve got to make sure that youngsters know about the mistakes so that when they grow up and are running the country, they won’t make them.”

I asked how he thought that was going. He laughed.

“Not very well,” he said. “Maybe the people who are running the country now are clinging on to the Empire days. It’s not right, but people buy into it because they have insecurities and identify with it, so they vote for it.”

“It is very emotional,” he added, “because we’re all human, we’re all stories in the end.”

I said that ‘we’re all stories’ was a nice way of putting it.

“It’s from *Dr Who*,” he said, “but it’s true, we’re all stories. The Empire, that’s a story: it’s history, but it’s a story. Was it Churchill who said ‘history is written by the victors’?”

“We’re all humans,” he added. “That’s the point, and all this time spent putting imaginary borders on the ground... the question is ‘who’s going to have the balls to change something?’”

I decided to talk to people on the Comedy Carpet, a pedestrian area on the promenade under the Tower where the jokes and songs of comedians who had performed in Blackpool in years gone by were inscribed on the pavement. By a pavestone with the inscription, ‘Britain, Britain, Britain, it’s been called heaven on earth and it’s easy to see why’, I met a couple from Coventry who had travelled up for a soul music weekend. They told me they felt that Blackpool comedy was an important part of British national life and I asked them why.

“It’s history, it’s tradition,” the woman said. “It’s like the old-fashioned postcard humour.”

“Everything’s dying out,” her husband said. “Everything’s being put on the tablet or the internet now. You sit in a pub and all you see is people on their tablets and they don’t talk. Whereas this, it’s brilliant. I’ve walked round and laughed me head off at almost every one of the jokes.”

I asked whether they felt that the music hall comedy of the past had been sexist and racist.

“That’s down to you,” the man said. “If you go into one of them shows, like Joey Blower, you’ve got to go in there with a sense that you’re going to get the piss taken out of you, and if you don’t, you’re going to be offended. If he spots you, he’s going to have a go at you and you’ve just got to ride it. If somebody took the mickey out of me, I’d give them as good back as what I got – see if they said something like ‘oh, you’re little’ – because I’m five-foot-four – I’d have a crack back at them and take it as a joke. I’d enjoy the banter.”

I asked about jokes which had been told which had suggested women couldn’t play a full and equal role in society. I wondered if they were troubled by that kind of comedy.

“I think people like that are dying out,” the man said. “I think that’s the kind of thing people like Bernard Manning would do. I think women now have a more equal equality – but then again, it’s down to the same thing: if it’s meant to make you laugh, you’ve got to not be offended by it.”

“There’s that many channels on the telly,” his wife said, “if you don’t like it, don’t watch it. Turn over.”

I asked whether they felt that humour contributed to wider social attitudes, for example jokes against Irish people contributing to a situation where Irish immigrants had been treated as second-class citizens.

“Things have changed a lot now,” the man said. “You can’t pick on the races now.”

“I think it was yesterday,” he went on, “I saw a Scottish Chinese, I couldn’t believe it when she opened her mouth. She was as Chinese as you can imagine, she had the slanty eyes and everything. But then she opened her mouth and she had a Scottish accent and I thought ‘I’ve seen it all now’.”

“It’s the same as *Porridge*,” he went on. “You had that Glaswegian on there, coloured fella – it had never been seen before. And when he come on and everyone went ‘they don’t have them in Scotland’. But they do.”

“It was accepted then,” the woman said. “Like the old comedy programmes. You know like, what was that one that was always abusive? Alf Garnett. That just wouldn’t be accepted now. And, people watching it now, I can see what they mean, but in our day it was just accepted.”

I asked if they thought it was a good thing that times had changed.

“I do,” the man said, “because Bernard Manning, in the day, he sold out – people wanted to hear that kind of stuff.”

“But equality has just gone wild,” he went on. “You’ve got to watch what you say and watch what you do, because one little word could offend somebody. I think it has got a bit sad because sometimes you could have a laugh but now you have to watch what you say because some people find it abusive. Comedy shouldn’t be like that – comedy should be ‘if it makes you laugh, then listen to it’.”

“Kids now probably wouldn’t laugh at what we laughed at in the sixties and seventies and eighties,” he added. “They wouldn’t get half the jokes, because they’ve grown up with the idea that the coloureds and the Irish, you’ve got to treat them equal, where in our day it was totally different. You weren’t biased against the Irish, but the Irish got the mickey taken out of them the whole time and it was accepted.”

I suggested that that was unfair on Irish people.

“It probably wasn’t fair,” he said, “but you never heard any of the Irish people I knew complaining. And you’ve got thingy now, *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, and that programme is absolutely hilarious. It’s a bloke playing a woman. Absolutely brilliant.”

“It’s a generation thing,” the woman said, “because I love soul music, that’s all I bought, and my dad used to say to me ‘for God’s sake, is there not a bloody white person you can listen to?’ And that was offensive to me, and I said ‘no, I love their music, I love their dancing’ so that again is a generation thing. My dad was biased and proud of it, he was English through and through, and he was prejudiced and proud.”

“When we were little,” she went on, “we never went to Wales. ‘We’re never going to bloody Wales’ said my dad. That’s how he was. And you know when you filled forms in and you were supposed to put British, he’d cross it out and put ‘English’. You know, if my dad said to you, ‘when is St George’s Day?’ and you didn’t know, you’d be out.”

I asked whether there would be any changing in her father’s attitude.

“No,” she said. “He’s just turned ninety and he’s got dementia, but he’d still stand there and tell you, if you’re offended, tough.”

“He’d call a spade a spade,” said her husband.

As they spoke, three women wearing hijabs and carrying large suitcases came along behind them. They put down prayer mats ten yards from where we were standing, and on a tile which read ‘Samantha’s going to spend the evening licking the nuts off a large Neapolitan’, they prayed towards Mecca.

“Obviously,” the man went on, oblivious to what was happening behind him, “when he was born and brought up, there was no foreigners in England and you could walk from one job to another. So to him, this is all wrong, the influx. He thinks we’re not English any more, not through and through English and he’d never back down.”

“If he had his faculties about him,” the woman said, “I don’t know what he’d do.”

“I think dementia is the best thing for him,” her husband said, “because I don’t think he’d cope with it. He’d probably say ‘what’s this world come to?’ To him, England is ruined.”

I asked the couple if they felt that England was ruined.

“No,” said the man. “I don’t agree with all the foreigners coming in, but it’s the way the world is. Because we give everything for free, you get a lot of people over here – that’s just one of these things, you’re never going to stop it.”

“But it doesn’t change the comedy,” he went on. “*Morecambe and Wise, Only Fools and Horses* – if people don’t laugh at those programmes, they must have had a sense of humour bypass. I watched an episode of *Only Fools and Horses* the other day and Trigger said ‘my dad died a couple of years before I was born’. I just sat on the floor and wet myself laughing.”

He laughed again, and they were gone. I was left thinking about the woman’s father and what he would have made of Muslim prayers on the Comedy Carpet. I thought about change and whether one simply had to wait for people to die in order to move forward or whether people could be persuaded that things had to move on.

Seagulls swooped and dropped as people took photos and selfies. A group on electric bikes cycled through and children played on skateboards. A man on a Segway went by.

Nearby, I met a couple in their sixties, Len and Dawn, and told them I was writing a book about Britain after the EU referendum. I asked for their views about the Comedy Carpet.

“We were brought up with that sense of humour,” Len said, “and I see no problem in it whatsoever.”

I asked him what he would say to those who said such humour was racist and sexist.

“Well, in this day and age it probably is,” he said, “but it’s very difficult when you’ve been brought up in that way, and I honestly believe some of these things have given rise to what’s happened with Brexit, insofar as I think people are concerned about protecting the old traditional values. I wanted to stay in Europe, but it didn’t shock me that much, because there are a lot of people, particularly the elderly, who didn’t like what’s happening in this country.”

I asked how this linked to the Comedy Carpet and the EU.

“What I’m saying is that they’re resisting a change,” Len said.

“It’s like if you went to the Midlands and talked about Brexit,” Dawn said, “the first word would be ‘immigration’. Definitely.”

“And we’ve got friends and relatives,” Len said, “and I’m not saying they’re racist, but quite a lot of the emails are racist, quite a lot of the jokes are racist, so it still exists and I don’t know how long that will exist for, because it seems to be people in my age group and slightly above and slightly below, who feel this way more than younger people.”

“It’s the same with the comedy,” he went on. “If you look at some of the TV shows that were on in the sixties and seventies – *Love Thy Neighbour, Till Death Us Do Part* – very racist by today’s standards, but honestly, they were the most popular comedy programmes of the day.”

"*Love Thy Neighbour* was dreadful," Dawn said. "It was about two families next door to each other, one was white and one was black. And I can't remember what the white person used to call the black person but it would make someone like you cringe."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it won awards, though," she added, "because it was one of the programmes of the time, but unfortunately, a lot of people stay in that time."

"People just don't like change," Len said, "and what you've got now is something that is so totally different to what you had twenty or thirty years ago that I think some of the people don't like that and have rebelled against that via the Brexit situation. In other words, they want to keep the things that they believed in in the past. I don't think they're bothered about the fact that Brexit has caused all sorts of problems, pound against the dollar and so on..."

I said that the people I'd talked to in London saw diversity as enhancing people's lives rather than as something to be resisted.

"Here in Blackpool," Dawn said, "I don't think there's any coloured people at all. But in Nottingham, if I speak to some people from there, they'll say 'we're the only white ones in the street' and they resent that. They don't see it as broadening their lives."

"And I think some of the resentment is as a result of the customs that these people bring to this country," Len said, "which they find it difficult tolerating, because some of the customs are sort of alien as far as we're concerned, they're not the sort of thing that we would expect. And rather than trying to understand and adapt, I think they just want to resist."

"It's like queuing," he went on. "There's nothing so bad as being there first at the bus stop and other people pouring on in front of you. And it does build up some sort of hatred against that individual. And again, it's their customs – they're happy when they're surrounded by people that they appreciate and know more about than people they don't know much about."

I wasn't completely sure whether he was talking about migrants or majorities when he said 'they're happy when they're surrounded by people that they appreciate and know more about' and 'rather than trying to understand and adapt, I just think they want to resist', but it occurred to me that in some ways it didn't matter: whether it was the established population or a migrant population, I felt the instinct to stay within a 'tribe' was natural but problematic in terms of creating a shared culture and building community cohesion. Whether there was greater onus on minorities or majorities to reach out and adapt was a theme to which I would return, but for now, I wanted to understand the resistance to change which I was finding on the Comedy Carpet, as I was really struggling to understand why people found it so difficult to accept that some things in the past – like racist and sexist comedy – had been wrong. I asked Len and Dawn for their thoughts.

"It's a bit like what happened with some of these pop stars and TV presenters," Len said. "All these people who have been accused of groping young girls or whatever it is, things that went on in our day were accepted are not acceptable now."

"You wouldn't go to a boss and say anything about it," Dawn said. "We had a guy who we worked with, and the females did not want to go into his office on their own, so you went with somebody else. It was accepted that he was like that."

"And it wasn't just the men," Len said. "I can remember being chased round the office by girls. And I do have some sympathy – not when it's rape or it's young girls – but in terms of behaving in a manner which is very much inappropriate now but in our day it wasn't seen as inappropriate, it really wasn't. I'm not saying that it was right but it was accepted in those days."

Dawn nodded in agreement.

I was surprised by what they were saying, and I suggested that many of the changes we were talking about – from an end to workplace harassment, to pop stars being challenged for harassment and abuse, to racist comedy being stopped – seemed to me to be hugely positive. I wanted to know why people would resist a change away from that.

"It's embarrassment," said Len. "I just think it is difficult for people if they've been brought up that way, it's difficult to then be told it's not right."

"Say for example," Dawn said, "when we were growing up and the newsagent changed hands, somebody would say 'a Paki's going in' and that was accepted, which you obviously wouldn't do now. Now some people would say it nastily, like 'they're taking over the place' ..."

"...or some people would just have said it as a matter of course," Len said, "not intending any offence whatsoever – it was just the culture in those days to talk in that way. I don't honestly believe that it was done in any nasty way whatsoever."

"I think it's about time," he went on. "It's only a matter of time until there are fewer people who are affected by what happened forty years ago. Not everybody, because some people will always believe what their parents believed, but I think it will become less and less over time."

I wondered whether what they were describing was simply a natural human cycle and if the comedy that I myself enjoyed would one day be seen in the same way by future generations.

"I hope it wouldn't go that far," said Len. "I think there's a lot of feeling of 'political correctness gone mad' and there's a lot of support to that comment, including from very well-educated individuals and some younger people as well."

"Whether it's in their culture or whatever, I don't know," Dawn said, "but there's certain communities, and they'll have a new settee, and they throw the old one on the street. And we wouldn't do that, would we?"

"I don't know," said Len, "I think there are some people round here who would do it..."

"Well precisely," said Dawn, "but a *decent* person wouldn't do that, but if somebody knocked on the door and said to them, whether the council or what have you, 'that isn't what you should do', then perhaps we could all get on better. But if they're seen to be overtaking, people don't like it."

I asked what 'overtaking' meant.

"Being the only white one in the street," she said.

"And the problem you've then got is that you haven't got a community," Len said, "or not your sort of community. If you've got a lot of people who don't speak a lot of English, and all of a sudden they take over a community, then the English people would I'm sure feel 'we've lost our community' because we can't even talk to our neighbours. And that's one of those things where in time, providing that immigration doesn't take over, will actually improve - if more and more people who have come into this country learn to speak English and use that as their native tongue, then that's going to improve relations surely."

"I think society and TV is trying to help in this respect," he went on. "I mean the number of times we watch and we say 'ah, there's the statutory gay person on the quiz programme' or 'the statutory coloured person on the gameshow', so you've got a much more multicultural society in terms of the gameshows and things like that, so that can't do any harm can it?"

"I'd never thought about it," said Dawn, "but the fact that you have coloured people doing things like *Bake Off* and the fact that Nadiya's won... but if you don't judge people on the colour of their skin then you probably don't notice. You don't think, 'Oh God, she's Bangladeshi' if you're not like that. Like Nadiya, for example, it's her personality that has shone through, so that's why people have taken her to their hearts, and that's why she's doing more TV work, because people are engaging with her. It's not because she's coloured."

"I think rightly or wrongly," Len said, "you look well upon people who have improved society and improved your country, but unfortunately what people do is look at the negative side - they look at the people who are coming along and not doing much to help your country, those who come along and contribute and make the country a better place to live, then that's far more acceptable than the people who come along and don't do that."

As we drew to a close, I felt like I had got closer to understanding why people found cultural change so troubling. As Len had said, many people wanted to 'keep the things that they believed in the past' and they felt uneasy where there was a sense that new people coming to the country didn't contribute. I asked Len and Dawn whether they felt change should just be allowed to happen naturally, or whether it should be pushed through by politicians and the state.

"Well that's the 64,000 dollar question isn't it?" Len said. "If people wanted to take up the Comedy Carpet and say that's all sexist, that's all racist, that to me would be destroying history, and I think that's wrong. You have to say to people 'that might have been ok ten or twenty years ago, but we've come a long way since then'. I think it's a matter of explaining it properly rather than dismissing it."

As the light began to fade, I saw two sisters in their fifties skip-dancing on the carpet in the style of Morecambe and Wise. I went over to them and told them I was researching a book.

“Oh,” said one of them smiling, “and there was me thinking you’d talent-spotted us.”

“We’re available for casting,” her sister said, laughing.

I asked whether they had a view on whether Blackpool comedy was offensive.

“I certainly do,” she said.

“Ooh, she’s very opinionated,” said her sister, “you can be spokesperson.”

“Comedy is exactly what it is,” the spokesperson sister said. “It makes you laugh. It doesn’t make you laugh because it’s prejudiced, it doesn’t make you laugh because it’s dark or rude or anything like that, it makes you laugh because you’re a human being and when you’re laughing, you’re laughing at yourself as much as the comedy. Because all comedy is human – it’s human language and it’s human antics and it’s what we all get up to, whether you want to admit it or not in this age of political correctness.”

I asked what political correctness meant to her.

“Political correctness is being aware of cultures and society around you and not stepping over the line of deliberately upsetting other people,” she said. “But comedy doesn’t deliberately set out to upset people, it sets out to engage people and make the barriers of that political correctness less blurred, so you’re all laughing together.”

I suggested that there were a lot of jokes directed towards women that could be seen as offensive or demeaning.

“I’m a woman,” she said, “and I laugh about it. I recognise within the comedy the fact that we can all behave like this at some time or another. It doesn’t mean that I’m an unkind person or that I’m nasty or anything like that, it means that I’m an ordinary human being that’s capable of laughing at the smallest things in life, which makes the bigger things easier to deal with.”

I suggested there might be a continuum between attitudes towards women promoted in the humour on the Comedy Carpet and deeper prejudice and abuse.

“Well,” she said, “when I was being abused by my husband, none of it started it as a joke, and a joke would have just been the excuse for the behaviour. It’s not the catalyst, it’s the excuse for the behaviour – I don’t think it makes the behaviour normalised or anything like that.”

“There are obviously grey areas,” she went on, “and I mean if you’re looking at jokes about, say the slave trade, that’s a little bit too difficult, because it affected people directly, so that’s really difficult for those people to listen to jokes about it. But equally, I’ve been abused and I can still laugh at a joke, and within that laughter, you learn to deal with your own pain in your own way, and it’s more therapeutic than sitting down in front of a therapist years later. And society has the danger now of removing itself, because of political correctness, from the ability just to have a really good laugh and a chuckle and just to let it go.”

“Comedy is escapism, isn’t it,” her sister said. “It isn’t supposed to be taken seriously. But there are cultures in the world that don’t get comedy and especially don’t get British comedy.”

“We’re all eccentric at one level of another,” she went on, “and I think that’s what a lot of people don’t get. And I think that the more people that come into the mix, the more difficult it is for them to understand that because of their cultural backgrounds, because what we laugh at in this country, people in other countries might look at it and think ‘why are they laughing about that?’”

I asked whether that meant it was the responsibility of the people who came to the UK to learn more about the customs of the country.

“If I go and live in France,” she said, “I’d learn about that culture, about the expectations, what’s accepted behaviour and what’s not accepted behaviour, but you also want to influence the behaviours that are accepted and the norms, because society has to grow, hasn’t it?”

It seemed to me that she had set out beautifully a model for an integrated, multicultural society, where people who came in were expected to learn about and adapt to the culture, but where at the same time the culture was open to being influenced by those who came from outside.

“I think we’ve lived through a curve haven’t we,” said her sister. “We’ve gone from like where women couldn’t do anything: we didn’t have the vote, we were treated like second-class citizens, and then you had the Suffragettes and now we’ve come through to like empowered women who are independent, work and so on, so we’ve travelled that journey haven’t we?”

“But,” she went on, “there are lots of areas of society that are trying to keep women from speaking out, from having an education, from mixing with the men, from having to do all the different things.”

I asked who she meant.

“Well,” she said, “certain areas of ISIS, interpretations of various texts, whether it’s the Bible or Catholic. Various religious beliefs.”

“Does comedy have an influence on that,” her sister asked her, “or is it so far removed from it that it has no influence?”

“I think if ISIS engaged in comedy,” her sister said, “women would have more of a say about following men, what dress they had to wear and all the rest of it because the comedy would challenge the authority.”

“Now you’ve got stories coming out from the First World War,” she went on, “of views written by German and British soldiers and the views are remarkably the same, because at the end of the day, they’re human beings. And when people saw the humanity in that situation, they got up and played a game of football on Christmas Day and gave a dying soldier a drop of their water, even though he was the enemy. And I think that if you don’t have the ability to look outside the

box, which I think is what comedy is, then I think you lose that ability to have that kind of reaction to things, and you're more concerned about stepping over the line, so you don't."

As they went on their way, I reflected that I had agreed with much of what they had said. I believed that efforts to address prejudice in society were hugely important, but I agreed that fear of causing offence could be holding back the development of healthy human relationships in which people were able to both laugh with and challenge one another. I also agreed that British society had been through a 'curve' as they had put it, an evolution through which values such as equality had become increasingly central. It seemed reasonable to imagine that people coming from other cultures might be at another point on the curve – or on another curve altogether – and that there was therefore a need for people coming to the country to understand and accept the way in which British society had developed. I felt this was particularly important for people coming from cultures where principles such as equality were not as embedded as they were in Britain. At the same time, I believed that British culture was far from perfect and, just as the sister had said that she would want to contribute to the culture of her new home if she was to move to another country, so Britain should remain open to development and learning from people coming to the UK from other cultures.

As night started to fall I got talking a man called Sam who was selling comedy magazines on the promenade. He told me that he was a former construction worker who was trying to make money selling the magazines and joke books to tourists. I asked him if Blackpool comedy was outdated.

"I'd say the comedy is made for a type of audience which is dwindling away now," he said. "It used to be that you'd got mining places and the mill towns, and the whole town would close down and they would all come here. So they wouldn't be used to any other comedy, because the majority of people were one colour – white – so it wasn't seen as anything wrong."

"The sad thing as well," he went on, "is that this has changed dramatically, where we're standing now, and it's a lot better, but there's less people coming."

I asked why he thought that was happening.

"I don't know," he said. "The weather maybe, or maybe they get better deals going abroad. And it's just like when you've had a taste of something nicer, why would you want to come here?"

"There's Poundland on the seafront right by the Tower," he went on, "and it's just a reflection of the way things are going. And if you go into Blackpool, the town has got a big population, but it's probably the poorest town in the country, and you've got children in really bad poverty. It's Dickensian – you've got whole families in bedsits and I think that's got a lot to do with why the tourists aren't coming."

"The communities that did come along," he continued, "they're dying off just because of the age that they are. Them people aren't here anymore because of their age. You know, people who

come now aren't going to laugh at the Morecambe and Wise type of things because it's not there anymore, they're not on TV, so people under 30 wouldn't understand all these people here."

"I think people have fond memories of Blackpool from when they were younger," he added, "and that's what's kept it going. You remember things from when you're young and it's always nice. It's always glossed over."

I thought back to what James had said about nostalgia and what Len had said about not making people feel judged. I reflected that people did tend to remember the past fondly and accepting that things which they had enjoyed in years gone past were now considered wrong could be really difficult. Sensitivity to that was, it seemed to me, the key to moving forward.

"This area now is alright," Sam said, pointing towards the promenade and the seafront, "but you go a few streets in and you realise what it's really like... it's like they've painted on rust."

"It's had its day," he added, preparing to leave. "I don't think there's anything dramatic about it – it's like everything, something else will come along."

He went on his way, and I reflected on the conversations over the course of the day. They had reminded me that the issues Britain was grappling with were not simply about immigration, and that part of the cultural challenge the country was facing was that the values and norms of people born and bred in Britain had evolved at different paces, creating a significant tension between people on different points on what the sisters had called 'the curve'. Through the conversations I'd had on the Comedy Carpet, I'd got a strong sense of just how hard it was for people to accept that the culture they had been part of was now seen as 'wrong' and while I didn't think that difficulty meant standing in the way of upholding modern British values like gender equality, I agreed with Len that making people feel embarrassed and judged was not the way forward. "It's a matter of explaining it properly," he had said, and that seemed reasonable to me.

As I left, the Tower lit up in the colours of the rainbow, the *Strictly Come Dancing* glitter-ball flag flew overhead, a busker hummed on his harmonica and the town's Christmas lights shimmered in the dusk.