

“Show Me Better and I Must Change”

Capsule: Instant Opinions

As the 2017 UK Election campaigns intensified, and within a week of the bombing atrocity at the Manchester Arena, the Shadow Home Secretary Ms Diane Abbott (Labour) made a statement on the Andrew Marr Show (BBC1 TV, Sunday 28 May 2017) in response to



Andrew Marr and Diane Abbott

questioning about her change of views on terrorism. She said:

“...what I’m saying to you is this. It was 34 years ago, I had a rather splendid afro at the time. I don’t have the same hairstyle and I don’t have the same views. It is 34 years on. The hairstyle has gone and some of the views have gone.”

Repeatedly questioned by the interviewer, Abbott did what politicians like to do, she repeated as follows:

- *“It was 34 years ago and I’ve moved on and the hairstyle is gone, the views have gone. We’ve all moved on, haven’t you Andrew?”*
- *“It was 34 years ago. I’ve moved on.”*
- *“It was 34 years ago and I’ve moved on.”*

Following on the Abbott interview, Marr interviewed the Home Secretary, Ms Amber Rudd, who commented on the Abbott segment as follows:

“What I would say to Diane Abbott is that I’ve changed my hairstyle a few times in 34 years as well. But I’ve not changed my view about how we keep the British public safe.”



John Maynard Keynes. © Mike O’Donnell

Press response was generally negative to Ms Abbott’s comments and, in particular, to her reference to her hairstyle changes. Social media participants, as always, reached for the usual instant opinions and tirades which are a feature of that medium.

For example, [The ‘Steerpike’ column of The Spectator Website](#), which carried the relevant interview segments, and (inaccurately) quoting both interviewees, interjected that:

“Happily, Amber Rudd was on hand to put Abbott’s hair comments into perspective;”

before quoting the comment above.

Two related questions arise as to whether Ms Rudd’s ‘response’ really put Abbott’s hair comments “into perspective” and whether the general condemnation on grounds of trivialising a serious matter by reference to changing hairstyles was valid. The presumed answers should be tested.

There is another way of looking at this interchange in which Rudd’s position, generally accounted the ‘winner’, as these things are presented in the media, is less clear and, indeed, may come out on the wrong side.

If we start with a statement and question attributed to John Maynard Keynes:

“When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

then Rudd’s position does not look so tenable and Abbott’s position looks less untenable.

The facts of terrorism have changed, and changed very dramatically over three decades. The nature of terrorism threats to the UK – from the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – is fundamentally different now. Indeed, in themselves, the use of ordinary vans to murder people by running them down, suicide killers and no warning bombings, are obvious indicators of the change.

Despite the great changes, Ms Rudd is saying that she has not changed her view about how to keep the British public safe over 34 years. This is hardly encouraging. Without being an expert in terrorism or counter-terrorism, it is not believable that the same methods as were used thirty years ago would work to protect against today’s entirely different threats.

On the other hand, Ms Abbott, implicitly acknowledged that situations changed over three decades – the facts changed – and, accordingly, she changed her views, presumably to correspond to the new facts (threats), just as Keynes held was required (Her unfortunate use of ‘changing hairstyles’, metaphor, although giving the press and social media something with which to whip her, is neither here nor there so far as the issue of terrorism threats is concerned).

In so far as the important matter of how to hold opinions is concerned, the Abbott position is correct and the Rudd position is wrong.