

Eric Reginald Lubbock, 4th Baron Avebury

29 September 1928–14 February 2016



Lord Eric Avebury at an Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance-led protest outside Parliament on 4 March 2013 supporting legislation to outlaw Caste-based discrimination in the UK © 2016 Santosh Dass/Swing 51 Archives

Ms Santosh Dass MBE, Vice Chair Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA), President Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK (FABO UK), remembers Lord Avebury, a giant in the struggle to outlaw Caste-based discrimination in the UK.

I first met Lord Eric Avebury on 11 November 2009 at the official launch of the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA)'s report [Hidden Apartheid – A voice of the Community](#) that he willingly hosted for us in the House of Lords. He was the first parliamentarian to respond to ACDA. That report and that historic meeting would help shape Parliamentary consciousness to do with Caste-based Discrimination (CBD) and legislation during the following, critical months.

At the time I had no notion how Eric would become my mentor, one of my dearest friends, and – after my father, Hans Raj Sidhu's death in June 2012 – a father figure. He proved generous both with his time and advice. His calm determination and communication (it

continually amazed me how quickly he acted on emails or letters and returned my phone calls) always gave me the strength to carry on. This applied especially when there appeared very little hope of progress on CBD law. His dignified approach was inspiring. He mightily influenced our campaign in ways hitherto unimaginable to us..

In an exclusive interview for ACDA with the writer Ken Hunt in May 2013, as yet unpublished, Eric spoke about becoming aware of Caste. *“I suppose, to be perfectly frank, I was not aware of it until the Equality Bill as it then was – it became an Act in 2010 – when there was a first opportunity to doing anything about the issue of Caste. I don’t remember that, prior to that, there had been any question of it being added to the list of protected characteristics which was finally included in the Equality Act. Before that, the policy of successive governments was to deal separately with issues of discrimination. And only gradually did it become apparent that there were common features between all the aspects that we now deal with under the Equality Act – gender, race, sexual orientation and so on. Prior to that, it was the custom to treat them as if they were separate issues.”*

On mobilising opinion on action CBD law, he offered, *“I think it’s always an uphill battle to get the media interested in Caste. There have some notable successes, not least the Newsnight programme.”* He was referring to the BBC Newsnight programme, hosted by Jeremy Paxman, with me up against Mr Arjan Vekaria of the Alliance of Hindu Organisations. When Ken asked him what he thought of the programme, he grinned, *“It was brilliant; it was absolutely wonderful. It exceeded my fondest hopes. [Laughter] I think though it will be a beautiful piece of ammunition. I hope people have got it recorded and it’ll be played at lots and lots of meetings so those who don’t know anything about Caste could get a quick education in a few seconds.”*

On 6 November 2013, he made possible an ACDA meeting on parliamentary premises. Having [Navi Pillay](#) from the United Nations’ High Commission for Human Rights there as the chief speaker helped a little. Eric was ever the idealist grounded in pragmatism. He knew the significance and signals her supporting the UK’s Caste-based discrimination would send

around the world.



L-R Front row: ACDA's chairman , Raj Chand, Navi Pillay, Eric Lubbock and Jeremy Corbyn, Parliament, 6 November 2013 © 2016 Ken Hunt/Swing 51 Archives

In a letter following the meeting Eric thanked Ms Pillay *“for taking the time to speak at yesterday’s meeting at the House of Lords organised by the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance to discuss caste discrimination, and for raising the matter with MoJ [Ministry of Justice] Ministers.”* He stressed, *“It has been an uphill struggle getting this Government to use the power we inserted in the Equality Act 2010, to make caste a protected characteristic. We thought we had won after they were defeated twice in the House of Lords, but as it turned out, they have launched a cumbersome process that was not applied to any of the existing protected characteristics, taking implementation to the other side of the 2015 general election. So it gave me immense pleasure to hear your forthright words about ‘strong, swift implementation’, [End closing quote inserted] and to know that you were taking that message to our Government.”*

By June 2015 in an essay I invited him write for the second annual meeting on Dr Ambedkar’s Life and Works at that House of Lords hosted by Lord Harries of Pentregarth, he was much more reflective: *“I suppose I had as good an idea as most native English do of the nature of caste and how deeply embedded it is in the cultures and subliminal thought*

processes of people in south Asia before I read The Annihilation of Caste and Arundhati Roy's introductory essay The Doctor and the Saint. But I still find it hard to understand how groups of people can be brainwashed into a state of hatred for the 'other' that leads them to commit the most egregious crimes against members of the 'other' such as are related in the story of Surekha Bhotmange and her family at the start of Roy's introduction."

A committed Buddhist, Eric wrote, "How is it possible that humans, naturally filled with loving-kindness or metta as it is called in Buddhism, should conceive a murderous hatred and contempt towards those who are slightly different? The division of people into separate categories which are readily identifiable, and which are assumed to be capable of passing on the characteristics which assign them to each of those categories, is the root of the mischief."

Eric fully supported FABO UK's initiative to turn 10 King Henry's Road in north London – a house, already with a blue plaque commemorating Dr Ambedkar lodging there from 1921-1922 – into a memorial to political activism. He recognised the historicity of the building and was confident how *"it will become a 'focal point to spread Dr Ambedkar's message about equality, human rights and social justice."* Amplifying he continued, *"These messages are desperately needed in the world today, and personally I'm convinced by the evidence that the more equal societies are, the happier and less vulnerable to social ills they become."* He added, *"The presence of an Ambedkar Centre in a house where he lived in London should help us all to confront the evil of caste prejudice, as we did against racism a generation ago."*

Never forget, alongside the Caste law campaign Eric lobbied hard and long for human rights and the rights of Gypsies and Travellers.

Over the years he and I talked, met on a professional and personal level and had discussions on many issues including art and literature. I shall never forget him reciting from memory the marvellous German absurdist poet Morgenstern's 'Das grosse Lalulā' ('The big lalula') in German. (*Die Galgenlieder* or 'Gallows Songs' from which it comes was on the family bookshelf.) I will hold dear memories of moments with him including the afternoon with him and his wife Lindsay, his son Lyulph and his daughter-in-law Sue at the London Apprentice overlooking the Thames at Isleworth Ait in the summer of 2014.

Eric and I both shared a passion for eating mangoes. When I introduced him to Alphonso mangoes it brought out the boy in him. He was hooked. Each year we eagerly looked forward

to the short Alphonso mango season. It was a delight to see him eating them – juice dripping down his chin! Each and every subsequent season I shall eat them and think of him.



With Eric at his home in May 2013. © 2016 Ken Hunt/Swing 51 Archives

Eric was one of the most dedicated and hardworking members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Dalits. His death has left a huge but inspirational hole in our movement. More pertinently, his remarkable contribution to the campaign to outlaw Caste-based discrimination law since 2009 remains unshakeable, unquestionable and unassailable on the historical record. Whether we call him 4th Baron Avebury, Lord Avebury or Eric Lubbock, his record on human rights is peerless. His legacy will endure, inspire and spur on generations to come. Eric Lubbock was one of the great reformers,

My last words to Eric were, “I will continue to fight for a law to outlaw Caste-based discrimination.” He would have expected nothing less.