

Intelligence shows in what you say, not your accent

Peter
Trudgill



emca@newsdesk@archant.co.uk

The accent bigots are at it again. This time it's Angela Rayner who is their target. Rayner is MP for Ashton-under-Lyne, and shadow secretary of state for education. She comes from Stockport, Greater Manchester, and when she speaks she sounds like she comes from Stockport, Greater Manchester. This is normal and right and good.

The vast majority of people in the world speak with the accent and dialect of the village, town or area they come from. It's part of being human to signal your regional origins when you speak. People from Gothenburg speak a different Swedish from Stockholmers. Berliners don't sound like Bavarians. New Yorkers have a different kind of English from Californians. And people from Stockport don't speak the same as people from Surbiton.

This is a fact of linguistic life in every part of the globe, and one which is noted, accepted, and appreciated everywhere – except that in this country there are still those who attack people who have accents which, for reasons best known to themselves, they don't like. The further away your accent is from the south-east of England, and from the upper middle



■ Angela Rayner, shadow education secretary, is the latest target of the 'accent bigots'.
Picture: GARETH FULLER/PA

classes, the more vulnerable it is to such attacks.

Reports in the national press tell us that Angela Rayner has been the recipient of comments to the effect that her accent makes her sound "thick". What can one say? One can, for a start, say "No it doesn't".

The particular sounds of the vowels and consonants that form our speech have nothing to do with our intelligence. Anyone who thinks otherwise is being foolish and, well, thick. The trolls who are attacking Angela should realise that a person's intelligence is revealed by what they say, not by how they pronounce it.

In this country, accent bigotry is the last

major prejudice which is still expressed openly, without shame. We do still have racists, misogynists, and homophobes, but at least they mostly know they're not supposed to reveal these nasty little prejudices in public. But it's still felt to be OK to ridicule, criticise and show disdain for others because of their accents, even though our accents are as much a part of the essence of who we are as our ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, so the expression of these irrational prejudices is potentially demoralising and hurtful.

We will know that our society has truly matured when the overt expression of accent prejudice disappears from public discourse.