

Anti-hate Policy: all talk, no action

Cilius Victor looks back at government and police responses to hate crime over the past two decades and sees many changes, but little improvement.

On a summer's day in 1980, in East Ham in the London borough of Newham, a small troop of white adolescents propelled by youthful bravado, perhaps boredom, but undoubtedly nursed within a culture of racism, slew Akhtar Ali Baig. Akhtar had a knife plunged into his chest – the result of a five-pound bet. Twenty-one years later in May 2001, 3000 people took the body of 34 year-old father of two Shiblu Rahman to a waiting grave in Forest Gate, Newham. Shiblu Rahman was attacked outside his home by four white men – a 12 inch blade ripping open his abdomen. Both of these killings took place in the very hub of communities where black people live, work, gossip and pray.

In both cases, the community response to these acts of savagery was rapid, organised and determined. Not only did people respond to the murders themselves and rally support for both families, but simultaneously looked to the wider issues. The action committee that was established to co-ordinate a community response to Akhtar's killing gave rise to the formation of Newham

killings of Stephen Lawrence act as reference points on the timeline of black community struggles, and delineate for better or worse the 'before and after' political and social credentials of public bodies, officials and politicians. Institutional amnesia comes easily for many of these entities who conveniently brush aside the fact that not so long ago racial attacks could be safely ignored. Such attacks were considered crimes against people who were not really supposed to be here. To counter this charge, the current refrain from many a researcher, journalist or politician is often "but that was twenty years ago, we have changed, things have moved on for the better". From NMP's perspective it is the wrong response.

The "we have changed" chant is imbued with the presumption of change always being progressive. Is that really so? In 1983, NMP wrote:

"In our experience, cases are only reported to us when they have reached an unbearable level. Most of the victims find it difficult to even remember the countless instances of harassment they have suffered in their time in this country. They have lost count of the number of times they are told 'Pakis go home',

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Monitoring Project (NMP), an east London community based organisation providing independent help and support to members of the black community who are on the receiving end of racial and civil injustice.

The death of Shibu Rahman and all the assaults and abuses of the intervening years is uncomfortable proof of the deep roots of racism, how little they have been disturbed and sadly, how much goodwill and effort has been wasted and cynically sabotaged. One need only to look at the application of so called 'hate laws' to clearly see that they have made zero difference in reducing racial harassment in east London. In fact, such laws have made it more difficult to secure even appropriate charges let alone conviction for what is after all an assault on a person, assaults for which we already had adequate laws – only inadequate officials to implement them.

So how have the issues of racial harassment changed and been reflected in the lives of black communities in east London these last two decades? The public inquiry and subsequent report into the

or the number of times they have been spat upon, from a 5-year old child to a 60-year old women; the times stones have been thrown at them; the times they have been pushed or been rude to when shopping; the number of times they are told that blacks smell, etc. The reaction of the police appears to have changed very little in spite of numerous reports on racial attacks in Newham and the employment of police Community Liaison Officers." (NMP Annual Report 1983)

In 1999 the Joseph Roundtree Foundation reported on the wide-spread and debilitating effect of daily 'low level' racism, the kind that few black people even consider reporting until it reaches saturation levels (Chahal and Julienne, 1999). The same 1983 NMP annual report comments on the over-the-top police response to a domestic incident, the arrest of a 40 year old diabetic woman and the charges against her for assaulting two police officers. In March 1997, police responded to another domestic incident in Newham, and yes, things had indeed moved on for the police responded by spraying CS gas at close range on a

shackled Ibrahima Sey. An inquest jury judged that he had been unlawfully killed. No arrest has ever been made. No charges brought. The same for Oluwashiji 'Shiji' Lapite two years earlier who sustained a crushed larynx, most likely from an illegal neck hold, and was dead within 30 minutes of contact with police officers from the infamous Stoke Newington Police Station in east London. Again, another unlawfully killed inquest verdict – no arrests, no charges.

But the response to years of campaigning by families, communities, NMP and other groups yielded change. Unashamed denial of the existence of racial attacks and to a lesser extent police harassment of the black community was no longer tenable, at least for public officials. During the '80s in east London, as in other metropolitan areas where the majority of the UK's black communities live, local government authorities established equal opportunities units, equalities units or race units, different names for essentially the same task. The primary purpose of these units was to present the local authority in the best possible light — all other considerations were secondary. We were given happy photogenic faces promoting equal opportunities that had precious little positive impact on the daily lives of black people in the real world. If black communities managed to extract some positive benefit from such institutions it was either because of enlightened thinking from a handful of

of the police have improved considerably since then.

Today in east London racial harassment policy continues to be determined by economics and not the quest for social justice. Such dialogue that exists is done with those holding Master of Business Administration diplomas. In 1997, Newham Council attempted to wash its hands of direct responsibility for responding to racial harassment on its housing estates by outsourcing such responsibility to Estate Management UK Ltd, described then by the local authority as a 'Corporate Racial Harassment Investigation Support Provider'. What the hell is that? No need to respond to difficult searching questions from NMP or the public when you can hide behind the shield of the 'commercial sensitivity' of business agreements. This nonsense continues still.

Once again we must justify our existence and be schooled that we ourselves are the problem. Racial attacks happen because we are not good citizens. We must learn to be good citizens for our good citizenship will protect us. For 'citizenship' today replaces the 'assimilation' or 'integration' of the past – things do indeed change.

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individual officers rather than from the systems they worked in; by accident; or because of tenacious, collective community-rooted action. Dare it be said, that fear of riot and rebellion also played a part.

Racial attacks as an issue for public institutions were diluted from being a political concern where strategies for change could be based on harnessing the strength and resilience of the community, to being an issue solely of process management. What followed were multi-agency forums, ethnic monitoring, case conferences, 'specialist' police officers in 'specialist units' to deal with racial attacks, local authority police committees and police community consultative committees that did not have gums let alone teeth. Media friendly and empathy-trained officials would be in attendance to absorb any critical response. All these initiatives made little impact on the level and extent of racial harassment. But things are always changing. In August 1994, Chief Superintendent Bernard Taffs of Hackney gave an astonishing written response to an NMP letter ending with this gem of wisdom: "May your sporran never catch in your bicycle chain". It was a public relations disaster for him and his division. The media management abilities

References:

NMP (1983), *NMP Annual Report 1983*, Newham Monitoring Project.

Chahal, K., Julienne, L. (1999), "*We can't all be white!*" *Racist victimisation in the UK*, YPS.