

An Optimistic future for a Diverse City?

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I would like to start by thanking ROTA for inviting me to write this article for its 10th Anniversary publication. ROTA has made a significant impact on the policy front, in matters relating to race in particular, for which it is to be congratulated.

City Parochial Foundation, a grant-making trust established in 1891 to benefit the poor of London is one ROTA's many supporters and funders. This article is written as a personal contribution so the views expressed are my own, and whilst I am grateful to my CPF colleagues Mubin Haq and Sioned Churchill for their comments and advice, this article should not be attributed to CPF. Having said as much, I am, of course, influenced to a significant extent by the applications CPF receives from voluntary and charitable organisations. I am similarly influenced by my own experiences: I am a migrant to Britain, an Asian born in Africa who moved to Britain as a teenager.

May 1997 saw the election of a new Labour Government. This was followed by an unprecedented period for a labour government to be in office. Tony Blair remained in post for most of that period with Gordon Brown as the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister in 2007. 1997 and the period thereafter ushered in, amongst other reforms, the independence of the Bank of England; a huge social welfare agenda including the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit; a neighbourhood renewal strategy to concentrate resources on the eighty most deprived wards in the country; a long-term commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020; a commitment to build 3 million homes by 2020; resources to bring health service expenditure to European norms; and incentives to establish 400 City Academies by 2010. The government announced an inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence out of which came the now widely accepted term 'institutional racism'. This was a landmark in race politics.

Lottery Funding, started under John Major's government, began to make a significant impact in the social welfare, health, sports and arts sectors.

Hate, war and strife were still present. No sooner had the former Yugoslavia ended its ethnic cleansing than the genocide began in Rwanda and Burundi. On the domestic front, riots, which a lot of people argued were race-based, took place in Britain's northern towns raising concerns of the lack of cohesion between communities. The Cattle Report was published and the well-known phrase 'sleep-walking into segregation' was added to the lexicon by the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. The Cattle Report found deep disaffection within both White British and Black and minority ethnic (BME) Communities who felt that their needs were being ignored.

11 September 2001, etched in our memories as 9/11 saw the world change before our very eyes. The sight of two fully laden passenger airliners smashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York was a

terrible and tragic, but brutal and iconic way for Al-Qaeda to bring Islam to the attention of the world. The invasion of Afghanistan followed with a 'war on terror' and a threat to deal with the 'axis of evil' by George Bush. The invasion of Iraq to neutralise the weapons of mass destruction, which didn't exist, took place and caused huge divisions in society, here and abroad. The deep scars still remain and British troops, along with those from other countries are still present in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The explosion of bombs in trains coming into Atocha Station in Madrid by Al-Qaeda left many dead and scores more injured, amongst both categories being a large number of undocumented migrants. This fact only became evident because some of the bodies remained unclaimed for a long time after the bombings.

The bombings in London on 7 July 2005 had the potential to create huge community conflict but this was avoided to a large degree by the sound and sensitive intervention of the Mayor of London and the Government. Also worth remembering, in case anyone has forgotten, is that the bomb went off the day after London won the 2012 Olympic bid, something that would regenerate a large part of the deprived east of London, traditionally the first port of call for new migrants to Britain. 52 people died on the 7 July: they reflected much that I believe is good about London; they were of varied ages, races, cultures, religions, sexuality and ability. Their deaths and the injuries to numerous others touched the lives of most Londoners in one way or another. Around that time we also had the End World Poverty Campaign concentrating on debt relief, aid and trade for the Developing World. July 2005 was indeed a memorable month for its emotional highs and lows.

The Boxing Day Tsunami in 2005 stunned the world with its destructive force. Millions of people across countries touching the Indian Ocean were affected. Thousands died and relief funds came pouring in from those glued to their television and radio sets as the tragedy unfolded.

More recently we have had the election of British National Party candidates in parts of London and in the north of England. 2007 saw the Northern Rock debacle in relation to the sub-prime market in America and the British economy seeming to falter after ten years of unprecedented growth. Economic growth over this period has, however, been accompanied by a broadening of the gap between the rich and the poor and unprecedented levels of migration in the form of people seeking asylum and others migrating for economic reasons. Due to the lack of any official routes of migrating to Britain, a significant number did so by clandestine means, leaving themselves vulnerable to exploitation. 2007 marked the bi-centenary of the abolition of the transatlantic Slave Trade by Britain and saw CPF launching a funding programme on Modern Day Slavery!

The accession of new member countries to the European Union led to the increased movement into Britain of people from Eastern Europe, adding to the already animated and vibrant debates on migration and community cohesion. Robert Putnam's book 'Bowling Alone' etched the terms Bridging Capital and Bonding Capital on the minds of anyone involved or interested in social

welfare issues. The death of Damilola Taylor in Deptford heightened the debate and discussion around young people and the use of knives and guns; an issue that ROTA is looking at in some depth. 'Black on Black Violence' seemed to reach new heights during the decade.

The above is but a broad sweep over the last ten years and I am sure I have forgotten many significant issues. For these omissions I offer my apologies. There are a number of themes to sign post for the next ten years. Unfortunately, they are not new.

The first is that poverty within and between nations remains an evil. It fuels exploitation, causes strife and war, jealousy and pain at an individual and social level. It is at the root of the forced movement of millions of people across the globe. At the global and national levels, the demands of the End World Poverty Campaign of aid, debt-relief and trade, only partially delivered by the G8 nations in 2005, must be continued.

At a local level, the huge inequalities that seem entrenched and generational must be fought. As ROTA has pointed out on many occasions, a significant number of these inequalities are race specific. For instance, stop and search laws are likely to be strengthened. Such laws were racist from their implementation and there is no reason to doubt that they will not continue to be so. Our mental health services, with a disproportionately large client base from BME communities remain under funded despite huge increases in the health services budget. We seem to be building more prisons and are likely to be incarcerating over 100,000 people by 2010, a disproportionately large number from BME Communities. Academic achievement by African Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani children continues to lag that of other communities.

Environmental degradation and the lack of environmental justice is another issue. Have you ever wondered why incinerators get built in poor neighbourhoods and not in leafy suburbs, given they are supposedly quite clean?

Our debates around community cohesion segregation/integration seem to concentrate invariably on how minority communities are not making the effort to link with 'majority communities'. Interestingly, debates around cohesion and making links with communities other than ones own tend to be racialised. At formal events in the City of London where I work, I am often shocked at the lack of diversity amongst the attendees/guests. And this in a city where even by the most conservative estimates, more than twenty five percent of inhabitants are from BME communities.

Am I optimistic or pessimistic for the coming decade and is race going to remain an item on the agenda?

I am optimistic about what London is capable of achieving. London has not had any race related riots in recent years despite the diversity of the huge number of people that have chosen it as their home. London seems to go against the grain of those who argue that diversity leads to less cohesion.

Migration will continue to be an issue, but one which I hope we will grow to be more comfortable about; after all we will need to start having a sensible and informed debate about how we intend to pay for our welfare services and pensions as the demographics change. Debates in the last decade have tended to concentrate on fears of a nation being 'taken over'.

On the child poverty front, I am hopeful that levels in inner-London, which have remained at around 50% of all households over a long time, will diminish. The End Child Poverty Campaign and the London's Child Poverty Commission should provide enough impetus to encourage the government to stay on course to meet its 2010, and thereafter the 2020 target.

The children from deprived areas, who will have benefited from the Sure Start Programmes will, over the next decade, start to make an impact on academic attainment levels, hopefully on inter generational under-achievement and poverty.

I remain positive about the 2012 Olympics, despite all the negative publicity around the astronomical costs and they will, I am sure, be a binding force for London and indeed the nation.

My balloon of optimism was burst as I was writing this article by the news of the damage to the Stephen Lawrence Centre by racist vandals only days after its opening in early February. Even here, however, I was pleased that the news was received universally as a tragedy, with people being genuinely disgusted by the actions of the racist perpetrators.

In conclusion I believe race is going to remain an item on the agenda and I am glad ROTA will be there to ensure that we all remain vigilant about the disproportionate impact of policies and processes on the different racial groupings, Black, Minority Ethnic, Asian, White British and the fastest growing category, Mixed Heritage. In that last category lies another story!