

### Has Racism Changed?

So how *has* Britain changed, according to the interviewees? The reply was totally theirs to structure: no hints, no promptings. By far the most common topic that sprang spontaneously to mind—mentioned by three-quarters of the immigrant generation and by two-thirds of the British-raised—was the topic of racism. And of these, all the British-raised and two-thirds of the immigrants felt that things had *improved*: that racism was still there, yes, but that it was not so blatant (and therefore not so immediately personally hurtful) anymore, that those white British who espoused it kept it under wraps more than in the old days. I am not at all sure what I expected from these answers beforehand, and I am aware that those I interviewed are a “successful” sample of black Londoners who may not be typical, but this finding helps me continue to feel hopeful, to feel that we are not talking unmitigated societal tragedy here. Alan Maycock considered that “England has done very well over these last thirty years in a way. You think of all the trouble, the violence America has, and they’ve been trying for three to four hundred years.”

Nigel Pilgrim mused, speaking as both a young black (aged twenty-four) and as an Englishman (for the latter he did consider himself, “just about”):

“I can see it from both sides of the fence. I might say England’s a richer country than the West Indies, but as long as we’ve got poor people here [England], you just can’t expect to be able to say to half a million people, especially black people, to come over and get some of the good stuff. But that doesn’t mean they weren’t treated poorly. It wasn’t right . . . but I can see why they [the English] did it. People don’t give up power like that. People aren’t like that.

“There was a lot of ignorance around then too. Did white people believe they needed to *know* about black society? Un-thinkable!”

“You mean,” I asked, “they assumed there couldn’t be any value in it, culturally?”

“Of course not.”

“Is there less of that now?”

“Well, whites are not comfortable with us. They don’t feel guilty though, not like American whites do over slavery. (Nigel has visited America.)

“Now, in York there were few blacks. I said that to you, that it was like going back twenty years. I was something to look at and to be treated slightly different. Whereas in London people just tramp over you, it doesn’t matter who you are. . . .

“The main difference is that black people are now part of the community. So the question has become not ‘Can we stay?’, but ‘What role are we going to play?’ . . . It’s easier for us than for the Asians: we mix better, speak the same language.”

Dorreen Bannister was sure things had improved:

“One of the first times I went to the greengrocer here [Enfield], people were waiting about to see me, to see what would happen. I was in the shop, I came out, a woman was staring at Colin in the pram [baby carriage]. She was so intent on him she didn’t see I’d come back, at first. She said to me, ‘But he looks so clean, I don’t know what people are goin’ on about!’

“And for instance, when I first moved here, no one spoke to me. There was a man at the corner out in the garden, he did say, ‘Good morning,’ and his wife said, ‘What the hell are you doing?’ to him. After a few weeks, that lady wouldn’t stop talking to me! Another one came and knocked on the door and said she was prepared to talk with me, even if the others weren’t.”

“That was very grand of her,” I said sarcastically.

“Yes, it was *very* nice of her,” said Dorreen, in a sincere reply. I felt more than a little like a mean-spirited smart aleck; I was being made to realize that maybe it *did* take some courage on the part of that white Englishwoman to proffer neighborliness back in those days. Dorreen continued: “She and Barbara [Dorreen’s daughter, born in Enfield] became very good friends; she’s very old now. . . .

“All that’s gone on this street now.”

Eulie Eastmond was positive too.

I can only speak for London—I don’t know about “Britain.” Attitudes *have* changed. Now we’re accepted quite easily, at least superficially. None of that touch-your-hair stuff like in the early days. I don’t think there’re many places that’d openly snub you now. You can walk in and get a loan from a bank manager, no problem. Certainly I think that any black person who *really*

wants to get ahead in London can do it now. You can see blacks at higher positions: doctor, headmaster, managerial positions.

Joan Springer knew that advances had occurred, but that there was still a long way to go:

Brian's changed a lot. People are getting on better [materially], take me for example," (she chuckles at her own presumption) "I've come a long way, and West Indians in general too. But we West Indians still have a long way to go to integration, we're light-years away. You can hear it in the way they talk, I feel it in the streets, and the way they look at you. . . . The whites think of you as inferior, and it hurts. . . . It just don't seem as though it [integration] is going to happen—it's sad, very sad.

Colin Jemmott wanted the record quite straight on these delicate, controversial matters:

Now I must say this. Black people are not innocent either. They're hurt . . . they're prejudiced . . . um . . . I want to choose my words if you're taking this down. . . . Some black people are not even capable of giving the white man the benefit of the doubt. We get it wrong sometimes, I've seen it.

Trevor Brathwaite, Jr., said: "The racial mimicry, the novelty factor has gone. We haven't seen the rivers of blood<sup>4</sup> that Enoch Powell said." Catherine Brathwaite interjected, "We're the bullies now."

Catherine here implies at least partial agreement with the widespread contemporary stereotype of criminality pinned on British black youth. One of them, Nigel Pilgrim, observed with a dash of humor that

a lot of people assume young blacks are criminals or something. Eight times out of ten the last seat filled on the bus is the one next to me. So I travel lounging out, you get to enjoy it, it's quite handy!

My dad [Nigel gives a big laugh] and his friend used to do the same thing in the trains in the old days when they were all compartments. One would sit next to the window, one would spread himself next to the door. They could usually keep the whole thing for themselves!

If a Pilgrim from each generation offers instances of white circumspection and fearful avoidance of blacks, then by contrast nearly all of the migrant generation have vignettes to retail of small acts of immense kindness and understanding shown to them by native English a quarter century or more ago. Unfortunately, today, Charles Eastmond claimed, you go to ask

the way from a white person on the streets of London and they think you're going to rob them.

This last sentence is perhaps a trifle exaggerated, but even so, something very serious has happened here. Taken-for-granted images have been refashioned; of the Afro-Caribbeans on the one hand, of the "London bobby" on the other. Some regressive cultural alchemy has been worked: blacks have become criminalized; and the police—almost without exception white persons<sup>5</sup>—are more often seen nowadays as corrupt or inept bully-boys. It is not just the moral panic of the London tabloid-inspired "mugging" scare of the 1970s, nor the violence of the Brixton and other riots of the 1980s, nor the turnover of the black generations; it is also social changes that have little to do with racial matters—like the policing of the 1984 coalminers' strike—that have dissolved forever the Jack Warner image of an amiable, comfy, dependable "Dixon of Dock Green."<sup>6</sup> But the alchemy is felt with particular sting where skin color seems to be involved. As Stuart Hall, who has discussed such matters with great insight, writes,

At one time . . . the black population was specifically identified by public authorities in this society as being astonishingly law-abiding. It requires some social explanation as to how a particularly law-abiding population in the 1950s became a characteristically and stereotypically illegal and lawless population in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

The expectations young blacks and white police officers hold of each other evidently add volatility to their encounters. Joan Springer, the sweetest of women, surprised me with the vehemence with which she accused the police of using inappropriate force on certain occasions: "I've seen them on the Underground, when I've been on duty. They're really far too *rough* on some young blacks, they pick on 'em. I call them [the police] the Boverver Boys<sup>8</sup> in Blue!"

George Farley, perhaps with some embroidery, tells a more disturbing tale in which he, a bus conductor physically attacked by a drunk and truculent Scots passenger, finds himself then verbally attacked by the policeman called to deal with the incident:

"We stopped the bus. A young copper soon turned up, I was at the top of the stairs, the Scot at the bottom shouting he was really going to get me, the copper shouts 'Get down the fucking stairs' to me. I couldn't believe it."

"You were in uniform?"

"Of course. . . . 'Get down the fucking stairs,' he yelled again. I was scared, I thought he was going to go for me, I put

my fists up ready. Then the passengers upstairs, a dozen or so of them, one shouts out, 'It wasn't the conductor, that fella was hassling him.' And the policeman didn't know I had all those witnesses upstairs, he couldn't see. And then the sergeant arrives and pulls the young policeman back a bit and then my driver, an Irish chap, tells the sergeant that I was being hassled and only doing my job. So they let the Scot go."

"They let him go! No charge?"

"No. If he'd've been a black they'd've taken him down to the station and knocked out a few teeth. It was a good job the passengers took my side. Anyway, my garage manager phoned them up the next day and talked to the sergeant about the behavior of the young copper. The sergeant was quite rude. Then my manager told him he was a JP,<sup>9</sup> and the sergeant changed his tune and got much more polite."

"Did you ever get an apology?"

"Oh no, you never get an apology. The police were only good on one occasion. It was a Pakistani woman. She was trying to pay less than full fare, pretended she couldn't speak English. I said, 'You got on at Piccadilly Circus, you paid me 10p, that gets you to Aldwych, now we've got to Ludgate Hill, you've got to pay more.' She called me a black bastard."

"Not so very clever of her if she was pretending ignorance of English!"

"Right! . . . I went towards the stairs to go down to tell my driver, she followed me, I turned round and she hit me in the face with her shoe. We called the police. One came. *Then* she started speaking English. But the passengers represented<sup>10</sup> me, she got booked on a number of charges there and then on the bus, before we started again."

Contemporary mistrust of the police contrasts in most cases with appreciative memories of years ago. Recall Charles Eastmond telling his tale of the Shouldham Street rent-strike attempt and how, when in trouble (1957), he went and found a policeman—who resolved the matter with aplomb, with class. Recall the sympathetic defensiveness of the policeman who in the 1958 Notting Hill white riots indicated to Trevor Brathwaite the possible uses of bricks.

Police-immigrant relations were not all rosy in those early days, however. Austin Pilgrim recalls:

Another time I was attacked by a dozen white guys after the pubs closed. They hit me, kicked me on the ground, I'm lying there thinking no, I'll fight, nothing to lose, so I knocked one down really properly, hit a second away really hard. The police came,

held me, took me to the station, my face was bleeding. "Why did you hit those blokes?" I told them, "Self-defense." I don't think they ever arrested them. And the police let me go with a "Don't you ever hit a white man."

Twelve on one, I found myself thinking, even if the one is the only one sober. Hmm. Exaggeration? Then I glance at Austin today. He too was a weightlifter then, an athletic cricketer. His arm muscles and barrel chest still make themselves evident through his cotton shirt: a powerful physique. And when I met him at his door for the first time in January 1988 he was forty-eight; I met a smooth-faced man who at first glance appeared perhaps to be in his mid-thirties, and I was not sure if this was Austin Pilgrim . . . or his son Nigel. Yes, the story might be pretty true.

Austin today has dealings with the police in different circumstances. As manager of his Underground stations he has had to call on them for aid. Sometimes he portrays them as good professionals doing a tough job, on other occasions as racists. Sometimes they respond with solidarity toward a black Underground manager, sometimes with great if not insulting indifference. The ambiguity of the relationship—the uncertainty that such a pillar of middle-class Establishment values as Austin Pilgrim feels toward those who guard the civil peace on his and supposedly everyone's behalf—is disconcerting. He is never sure, he says, which way they are going to jump. But he's ready to give credit when, in his eyes, credit is due—as when the knife-wielding Rasna was efficiently disarmed (chapter 5), and on an occasion when a policeman was a co-hero.

This, Austin's most dramatic tale, was of (as the station announcers on the London Underground so blandly render it in explaining delays) "a person under the train"—that is, a suicide attempt.

She jumped. We called the police and the ambulance. I took charge, overriding the policeman who wanted to move the train. I know what to do—I've been trained. You short-circuit the live rails [i.e., turn off the current]. Then I climbed down under with the ambulance man. They have a special kind of stretcher, you can clip two halves together under a person without moving them. The policeman's right down under there too. The wheels had sliced the woman's neck right open, a great chunk of flesh had sort of folded out, just held by skin, you could see her vertebrate, the neck itself wasn't hit yet. I picked up the flesh and folded it back into place, as directed by the ambulance man, while he put a bandage around it to hold it. "Wow," said the policeman, "you've got guts." "Now we can move the train," I said. "Keep your head down and absolutely still else it'll slice your head open."

So we got out, and the policeman said admiringly I was quite a guy and why don't you join the police force! And I said, "Man, I'm too old now." And the woman survived—she'd just had a big argument with her husband—and they gave me a public commendation for bravery. Funny thing, I did the same thing back in 1969 and I heard *nothing*.

It was not shown to me then, but in May 1989 when I visited the Pilgrims I noted, not placed at all prominently among the various framed plaques on the wall, the Royal Humane Society's award, presented in 1984 by the Hon. Mrs. Angus Ogilvy, that is, by Princess Alexandra, cousin to the Queen.

Austin's experiences over thirty years range from rejection and insult and brutal physical assault to the bestowal of honor from the highest official level. To attempt to encapsulate all this contradiction into a simple calculus of whether English racism has become "better" or "worse" does feel a trifle leaden-footed to me. All of the other interviewees have contradictory experiences in this domain too, in greatly varying degree. But to talk of ambiguity and contradiction and to leave it at that also seems to duck the question. Indeed, most of the interviewees themselves did come down on one side or the other, without any prompting. And, to reiterate, in toto three-quarters of those who referred to racism felt that things had improved over the years.