

Racial justice, refugees and the election

Committee for Community Relations
Office for Refugee Policy

The **Macpherson Report** (Stephen Lawrence Inquiry) highlighted the issue of 'institutional racism' and made it a subject of continuing debate in the run-up to a General Election. **Refugees and asylum seekers** is another controversial issue that has come up for scrutiny. The Catholic bishops of England and Wales welcomed the Macpherson Report and asked the Catholic community to reflect seriously on the challenge it presents. They have also spoken out on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees. These are two of a number of questions regarding marginalised people which Catholics will want to consider and raise with candidates as a General Election approaches.

Background

Ethnic minorities make up 5.5 percent of the population of Britain. Out of a total population of 55 million, just over 3 million are of Asian, African or Caribbean origin. The vast majority of Black and Asian people in Britain are either British citizens or permanently settled here. Nearly half have been born in this country.

Although some members of ethnic minority communities are well off or moderately well off, many are poor or struggling to avoid poverty. They also face prejudice and discrimination in their everyday lives. The Rowntree *Inquiry into Income and Wealth* (1995) documented **the growing gap between the rich and the poor**. It also pointed to the particular vulnerability of ethnic minority communities. The report indicated that more than a third of the non-white population was in the poorest fifth of the overall population, that more than 60 percent were living in the poorest neighbourhoods, and that ethnic minority unemployment rates had increased much more rapidly than the rest of the population. The worrying rise in incidents of racial violence have also become a matter of public concern.

In November 1999, the government introduced a **new *Asylum and Immigration Act***. The Act provided for a new system within which asylum seekers are dispersed around the country, housed in temporary accommodation and provided with vouchers for their basic needs. The Bishops' Conference and a wide range of specialist bodies, including the Refugee Council and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, warned that inflexible implementation of these measures would hit the poorest and most vulnerable who have come here seeking asylum from persecution. *Far from Home* (January 2000), a study by Shelter, found asylum seekers living in appalling and often dangerous properties owned by irresponsible landlords. The Audit Commission said of the new system: 'to date, the needs of asylum seekers have not been addressed in a systematic way ... many barriers to services and inequities in service provision persist.'

Issues for reflection and questions for candidates

1. *Conduct in elections*

There is broad agreement in principle across the main political parties that no party or candidate should pander to the racist emotions of a small proportion of the electorate. In practice, however, this is not always adhered to. Some issues (asylum, immigration, affirmative action, street crime, policing, etc) can be articulated in such a way as to have racial overtones.

- How would you work to eliminate both overt and covert racism from public life and especially from the conduct surrounding local or national elections?
- Are you and your political party willing to adhere to the Principles of Good Practice and Conduct for Political Campaigners, put forward by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE)?

2. *Inner cities and urban priority areas*

A significant proportion of the Black and Asian population, and of refugees and asylum seekers, live alongside poor white people in inner city areas and on deprived housing estates. Programmes that effectively improve the quality of life in these areas will also alleviate the disadvantage and marginalisation of these groups.

- What initiatives would you support to regenerate inner cities and poor estates?

3. *Education for all*

Many children from Black and Asian families do very well in school. However, there is concern about underachievement and about the number of exclusions among Afro-Caribbean boys. Children from Pakistani and Bangladeshi families have language and cultural difficulties to overcome, and children of asylum seekers often have to cope with the effects of trauma and displacement. Schools in poor areas struggle with these and other problems that schools in more affluent areas seldom face.

- What extra resources and support do schools in poor areas need to enable them to cope with the many problems and disadvantages which they face?
- What particular arrangements should be made to ensure that all pupils achieve their full potential?

4. *Discrimination and disadvantage*

Ethnic minorities still face discrimination in employment, housing, education and other areas. The Race Relations Act 1976 makes direct and indirect discrimination illegal.

- How can we make the letter and the spirit of the Race Relations Act more effective?

5. *Violence against minorities*

In May 1994, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee published a report, *Racial Attacks and Harassment*, which pointed out that racial incidents reported to the police had increased from 4,383 in 1988, to 6,359 in 1990, and 7,738 in 1992. Only 1 in 16 such incidents are reported. The British Crime Survey suggested that between 130,000 and 140,000 racial incidents occur each year. In response to the increasing racial attacks on asylum seekers, the Association of Chief Police Officers has agreed

new Guidelines for Meeting the Policing Needs of Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

- What more should be done to eliminate from our streets violence against minorities?

6. Institutional racism

Even where organisations and institutions do not wish to discriminate, they may nonetheless fail to offer an appropriate service to the whole community. This is what the Macpherson Report calls 'institutional racism'. The bishops have accepted 'institutional racism' as 'a form of structural sin'. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 addresses this by imposing a duty on public bodies to promote equality of opportunity and good race relations.

- How can we insure that all organisations and institutions working in or with the public sector are offering an appropriate and professional service to the whole community, including minorities?

7. Vouchers for asylum seekers subsistence

Asylum seekers have to live on vouchers worth 70 percent of basic income support and can only use these vouchers in designated shops. This means that asylum seekers with their limited resources cannot shop in the best value shops that people on low incomes use to make ends meet. In addition, these shops will not be allowed to give change. This 'no-change' policy means that asylum seekers will end up paying more for their shopping than anyone else.

- Do you agree that the voucher system, besides being a humiliating experience, is unjust and sends out negative messages?

- How would you change the system to make it more congruent with other government strategies on social exclusion and race relations?

The Church's Involvement

The Committee for Community Relations is an advisory body to the Bishops' Conference on England and Wales on issues of race relations, urban poverty and community development.

In 1984, the bishops approved the establishment of a new and independent Catholic organisation - the Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ). CARJ (a registered charity) is an organisation working for justice and the empowerment of ethnic minorities in Britain.

The Office for Refugee Policy (ORP), set up with the assistance of CAFOD, advises the Catholic Bishops' Conference on matters of refugee and asylum policy. ORP in partnership with ecumenical and professional bodies monitors refugee policy and practice in the UK and European union.

The bishops speak out

The bishops' have made a series of statements, over more than twenty years, dealing with ethnic minorities and asylum seekers. These include [figures refer to Briefing volume and issue numbers]:

Concerning the Revision of British Nationality Law 1979 [9/30]
'Guidelines on Equal Opportunities 1987 [17/13]
'Statement on the need for black teachers 1989
'Bishops' response to the Charter of the Congress of Black Catholics 1990
'Statement on the Asylum and Immigration (Appeals) Bill 1991 [21/24]
'Statement on racial violence 1993 [23/9]
'Statement on the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers 1993 [23/22]
'Statement on the rise of racist political parties in Europe 1994 [24/8]
'Statement on the declining standards of protection in the European Union 1994 & 1997 [24/8 & 27/12]
'Statement on the withdrawal of welfare support from asylum seekers 1995 [25/12]
'Statement on the Asylum and Immigration Bill re vouchers system and forced dispersal of asylum seekers 1999 [29/5]
'Jubilee for Refugees - a reflection on the plight of refugees at the millennium 1999 [29/7]
'Serving a Multi-Ethnic Society: guidelines for a review of Catholic organisations and institutions in the light of the Macpherson Report 1999 [29/12]
'Statement welcoming the Government's programme to protect asylum seekers from social exclusion and harassment 2000 [30/6]

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