

European report condemns British racism and xenophobia

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A report published by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) calls upon the UK to “address the hostile climate concerning asylum seekers and refugees.”

The report published April 3 was adopted on June 16 2000 and follows a report last month which described Britain as the most hostile European nation towards political refugees. The executive summary of the ECRI report says that while certain legal changes were made in the aftermath of the 1993 racist killing of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, “Problems of xenophobia, racism and discrimination, however, persist and are particularly acute vis-à-vis asylum seekers and refugees.”

Speaking of a “xenophobic and intolerant coverage of these groups of persons in the media”, the report also condemns the “tone of the discourse resorted to by politicians in support of the adoption and enforcement of increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration laws.”

If further notes that “Racial prejudice in the police continues to constitute an element of concern. Criminal and civil law provisions are not always effective in countering racist, xenophobic or discriminatory behaviour.”

The report is the second in a series of country by country assessments undertaken by the ECRI. The first report into the UK was dated March 6 1998 and published in January 1999. In the period between the two reports, the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry was published on February 24, 1999. The Inquiry found that “institutional racism” had played a part in the flawed investigation by the Metropolitan Police Service, notably in the treatment of the family of the victim, the failure of officers to recognise a racially motivated crime and the lack of urgency and

commitment in some areas of the investigation.

“Institutionalised Racism” was defined as “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

The ECRI calls for close monitoring of reports on stop and search as required by the Lawrence Inquiry and calls for “the British authorities to specifically address... the issue of over-representation of ethnic minorities in deaths in police custody.”

The ECRI conclude that in terms of policing policy, the recommendations of the Inquiry have been taken onboard and their assessment is largely favourable. When it comes to the treatment of immigrants, however the ECRI report takes a much more condemnatory approach.

In a section headed “Vulnerable groups”, the report notes that “As in most other European countries, Roma/Gypsies and Travellers in the United Kingdom suffer from discrimination and disadvantage in vital areas such as education, employment and housing... ECRI also expresses concern at reports of forced evictions of Roma/Gypsy families from illegal sites.” The authors note, “such evictions reflect a shortage of legal camps” and appeal for the “British authorities to ensure that local authorities make adequate provision of campsites throughout the country.”

At a number of points in the report, the ECRI expresses its “concern at the appearance of racist or racially inflammatory material in the printed media.” It says, “particular concern is expressed at the consistent inflammatory attacks on asylum seekers and migrants

coming to the United Kingdom, which have appeared in local but also some national mainstream newspapers.”

The treatment of asylum seekers is given specific attention in Section II of the report, “Issues of particular concern”. Section N deals with the, “Effects of changes in immigration and asylum policies on the situation and the public perception of asylum seekers, refugees and minority groups.”

The ECRI expresses concern at the “general negative climate concerning asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom.” Citing the high opinion poll rating of immigration as an issue of concern in the British electorate, the report again attack the media as contributing to “creating such climate.” But the report continues, “However, ECRI considers that the frequent changes in immigration and asylum policies designed to increasingly deter these categories of persons from coming to the United Kingdom have played a fundamental role in this respect. The tone of the public debate on issues of asylum and immigration generated by such changes in recent years has also had a central role... regrettably, many politicians have contributed to or at least not adequately prevented, public debate taking on an increasingly intolerant line with at times racist and xenophobic overtones.”

In reality, politicians of all parties have not only contributed to or allowed such discussion, they have lead it. As the ECRI report says, “Public statements have tended to depict asylum seekers and ‘economic migrants’, explicitly or by inference, as a threat to security, economic stability and social peace.”

The report cites instances of racial attacks and harassment, particularly against Roma/Gypsies, as indicating some of the dangers arising from such a climate. It continues, “it is unacceptable for politicians to direct the general public's feelings of insecurity on one specific group of persons, irrespective of whether these persons have a valid claim to remain in the country or not.”

The report, says the ECRI, “strongly believes that politicians should not only avoid promoting the general assumption that most asylum claimants are not genuine, but also the vilification of those who are considered by the authorities not to have valid asylum claims and are sometimes defined as ‘economic migrants’ ‘economic refugees’ or ‘bogus asylum-seekers’.”

Noting the contrast between what it sees as “the efforts undertaken by the British Government to improve race relations among people living in the United Kingdom” and “the adoption of increasingly restrictive measures in the fields of asylum and immigration and the tone of the debate around the adoption of such measures,” the ECRI cite the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) as introducing measures “as a means to make the United Kingdom a less attractive destination for ‘economic migrants’, with obvious negative repercussions on the general climate of opinion concerning this group of persons.”

In this context the report cites the introduction of food vouchers in place of cash payments, the billeting of asylum seekers in areas of the country with no support facilities and the use of detention for asylum seekers.

The report also condemns the increased powers given by the Asylum Act to immigration officers, allowing them to enter premises, search and arrest people suspected of immigration offences. The Asylum Act also makes it a criminal offence for employers to take on employees whose immigration status prevented them from working in the UK. The report says such a measure gives “an increased likelihood of racial discrimination at the point of recruitment.”

The recommendations contained in the report are unlikely to be fulfilled, given that they are directed at the very representative of the business and media establishment whom the author's condemn. Government spokesmen rubbish the report, claiming that its authors had spent hardly any time in Britain and so were unaware of the real situation facing immigrants, minority groups and asylum seekers.



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