

Britain: Bradford report shows dead end of racially-based politics

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Earlier this month, Bradford Council published the findings of a review into race relations in the West Yorkshire city. Entitled “Community Pride not Prejudice,” the report produced by Sir Herman Ouseley, a former chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, was welcomed by the government and the media for providing an explanation for the most recent rioting in Bradford, although the Council had originally commissioned the study after rioting in the city in 1995. Just days before the report by the 11-strong Race Review panel was released on July 12, Bradford became the latest city in northern England to be hit by serious rioting and clashes between Asian and white youth and the police.

Media attention has largely focussed on claims by the Ouseley review that Bradford had been “fragmenting along racial, cultural and faith lines” for some time, creating a “climate of fear”. But aside from utilising such statements for convenient soundbites, there was little effort to make a more critical examination of the report’s content and conclusions. This is crucial, however, as the document offers a limited insight into the failure of the strategies to combat racism championed by the Labour Party’s left-wing, the middle class radical groups and black nationalists. Moreover, it shows how “multiculturalism” and other forms of identity politics have played an essentially divisive role.

The report’s primary concern was to address how Bradford Council could repackage the city to attract outside investors. Like Rochdale and Oldham in the north west—scenes of earlier inner-city disturbances—Bradford was also a former centre of the textile industry, and all have relatively sizeable Asian populations. (18 percent of Bradford’s population are from ethnic minorities, with those from Bangladesh and Pakistan forming the largest ethnic minority group in the city.) The families of many of the Asian youth who were involved in the disturbances had originally come to the UK from the Indian sub-continent to work in the mills.

Mill closures and the general decline in manufacturing has left a legacy of high unemployment in Bradford, like many other British towns and cities. Combined with the cuts in public spending by successive governments over the past two decades, this has created large pockets of urban deprivation. According to the government’s *Index of Deprivation*, the city is amongst the top 20 percent worst-off districts in the country.

The Ouseley report complains that various regeneration schemes aimed at selling the city as a “uniquely” multi-cultural centre have been undermined by the growth of social and racial tensions. Inner-city deprivation has led to movements of middle class people out of the city, “leaving behind an underclass of relatively poor white people and visible minority ethnic communities”. Young people across all cultures see no future for themselves, the report states, and as a result many become involved “in anti-social behaviour, harassment and intimidation, violence, criminal activity and the illicit drugs trade. This is particularly so of young men of all cultural backgrounds.”

Based on a survey of the opinions of local residents, the panel found that previous regeneration policies had created “divisions and resentments”:

“Regeneration processes require communities and neighbourhoods to compete on ‘deprivation-deficit models’ which, in effect, means that to succeed requires arguing that your area is more deprived and dreadful than the next.”

Significantly the report notes that, since it is not explicitly an objective of such regeneration projects to “promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different cultural ethnic and faith communities”, the result has been the perpetuation of programmes “which are dominated by and benefit only one culture. As a consequence, this trend has served, indirectly, to foster resentment across and between different communities. The trend has also discouraged multi-cultural interaction between the diverse communities...”

The panel was told by all sections of the community that they had neither seen the benefits of regeneration programmes nor were they convinced “that there were any gains for community race and cultural relations”.

“So-called ‘community leaders’ are self-styled, in league with the establishment key people and maintain the status quo of control and segregation through fear, ignorance and threats. Community leaders tend to retain their power base by maintaining the segregated status quo even when unrepresentative”, the review states.

Under conditions in which “people at street level are rarely told what is really going on by politicians or leaders”, the panel continued, they “form misconceived or wrong views about other people...” White people “regard the minority ethnic communities as being prioritised for more favourable public assistance” whilst “simultaneously, the Asian communities, particularly the Muslim community... argue that they do not receive favourable or equal treatment and that their needs are marginalised by decision makers and public service leaders”.

In reporting the opinions of local people, the review contains many such damning criticisms of initiatives and policies tying social policy to issues of religion and ethnicity—precisely the so-called multiculturalism pursued by the Labour Party and a substantial section of the middle class radical groups for the last two decades.

In the 1980s, the assault by the Conservative Thatcher government on jobs and democratic rights, combined with its open racism and xenophobia, produced a radicalisation amongst broad sections of the working class and youth. The decade saw the outbreak of major strike struggles and a wave of riots in major towns and cities across Britain, involving black and white youth, inflamed by police stop-and-search policies under the notorious “Sus”[suspicion] laws.

An inquiry into these inner-city disturbances by Lord Scarman attributed them largely to a lack of cultural and racial awareness on the part of the police and the local authorities, ignoring the fact that they were the product of a conscious government policy aimed at undermining the social position of the working class.

Although the Thatcher government rejected Lord Scarman’s findings, many Labour-controlled local authorities, particularly those on the party’s

left-wing such as the Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone, embraced them. The emphasis on race in defining social policy was welcomed by layers of middle class radicals, who were sceptical, if not openly hostile, towards policies aimed at the independent political mobilisation of the working class. It became common coin in such circles to decry as “class reductionist” policies designed to tackle poverty, unemployment, racism and police harassment through promoting working class unity in the struggle for greater social equality—which allegedly ignored other equally fundamental racial and gender divisions within society.

Multiculturalism was hailed as a more sensitive means of promoting equality, because it recognised and celebrated the diversity of religions and cultures within Britain, as opposed to the right wing’s crude calls for compulsory assimilation, based on the supremacy of “British culture”.

To the extent they were able to do so, Labour-controlled local authorities began to promote identity politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation. Bradford, which contains one of Britain’s largest concentrations of immigration from the Indian sub-continent, became the centre of this political experiment. The application of multicultural policies has always been constrained to some extent in Britain by legislation that is meant to outlaw all forms of racial or sexual discrimination (either negative or positive). But as far as many working people were concerned, it was the political “left” that became linked with such policies.

This association has, in the end, played directly into the hands of the right wing, especially since differences—real or otherwise—based on a group’s ethnicity, religion or gender became the basis on which dwindling resources were allocated. As the Ouseley report was forced to acknowledge, these programmes became a gravy train for a small layer of well-paid minority advisers and so-called community leaders, while the result for the vast majority has been not integration but separation, as each group is forced to compete to prove it is more disadvantaged than the others.

Over time, as it severed its historic links with the working class and repudiated its previous reformist programme, the Labour Party leadership embraced multiculturalism as official policy. Under Tony Blair, Labour has come to advocate all forms of identity politics as a deliberate means of sowing divisions among working people.

The Ouseley review indicates the destructive impact of this approach in the crucial field of educational policy. Since the 1980s, both Tory and Labour governments have greatly increased selection within education, through publishing league tables of exam and test results, encouraging competition between schools. Moreover, state schools, and particularly those in the inner-city areas, often have to deal with the most socially and educationally disadvantaged pupils.

Selection has thrived in part thanks to official endorsement of multiculturalism. Rather than oppose the statutory teaching of religion of any kind in Britain’s state schools, Labour councils introduced multi-faith religious education. In 1988, a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) was set up in Bradford to advise schools on religious teaching.

In the early 1980s, the Local Education Authority also began to support “supplementary religious education”—religious schools that are supposed to compliment the teaching of the core curriculum by the state sector. More fundamentally, whilst being promoted as another example of celebrating diversity, this helped to ease the financial pressures on the state sector. Supplementary education could make up for a deficit in the provision of second-language teaching, for example. But as resources have been cut still further, supplementary schools—which in Britain are entitled to central government assistance—have “extended from religious teaching to providing support to students in mainstream subjects such as IT [Information Technology].”

Today there are 63 supplementary schools for Muslim children in Bradford, five Hindu schools, six Sikh schools and five Eastern and Western European schools. Those attending supplementary schools achieve a far greater degree of academic success than children in the state sector. In 1997, students at supplementary schools who entered GCSE examinations taken at age 16 achieved a 90 percent success rate, in comparison to inner-city schools where the rate can be as low as 15 percent.

The Blair government is now actively promoting single-faith schools—Bradford is the home of Britain’s first state-funded Muslim secondary school—which are entitled to government funding. Single-faith schools have existed for many years in Britain, particularly for Catholic children.

Ouseley reports that single-faith schools have contributed “significantly to the ‘polarisation’ of the community”. It has also contributed to a system of educational apartheid in the state sector, in which schools are increasingly “mono-cultural”, either all white or all Asian. Whilst children in state schools are now taught more about different religions through multi-faith classes, there is barely any mixing between the cultures, the review states. In this most ethnically diverse city, Asian pupils are now being bussed to white schools, and vice versa, to enable children of different backgrounds to play together. As with the “self-styled community leaders,” Sir Ouseley complains that little has been done to confront “all white and/or Muslim schools about their contribution, or rather lack of contribution, to social and racial integration”.

Despite its many critical statements, the Ouseley report does not provide any alternative to the identity politics of the last two decades. Whilst the review was obliged to report the concerns of local people, it blames public disenchantment on the misapplication of multiculturalism rather than the policies themselves. Even whilst acknowledging that Bradford’s problems are fundamentally rooted in the social disadvantages faced by many working class families and youth of all racial backgrounds—and that these common problems have been given a racial twist as the result of government and local authority policies—Sir Herman Ouseley merely proposes more of the same.

Whilst the criticisms of local community leaders will be used to root out those who are interfering with government policy in certain areas, the review does not call for any extra funding to resolve urban deprivation, nor does it advocate an end to state-backed selection policies in education, much less the development of social programmes based on establishing genuine equality.

If anything, Sir Ouseley’s proposals are even more divisive than those they are meant to supplant. His report envisages the creation of a “Centre for Diversity, Learning and Living” and “Equality and Diversity contracts”. The remit of the new centre will be to “influence and provide performance enhancement for institutions” as well as help conduct Independent Equality and Diversity Audits of all public bodies. These will be used to monitor the workforce and implement “positive action programmes” aimed at targeting recruitment, training, and promotion at those groups considered to be underrepresented in the public sector.

(For the first time, recent amendments to race and sex discrimination legislation introduced by Labour allows for “positive action”—a hybrid term drawn from previously outlawed positive discrimination or affirmative action policies.)

All public sector employees are to sit “diversity competency” programmes, covering their “knowledge about multicultural communities and programmes to bring them up to scratch”. Applicable to all grades of employees—rising in depth of knowledge the further up the scale—it includes testing on problems associated with gender, race, religion, disability and sexual orientation. The report also states that “Economic development, inward investment, support for local enterprise and job creation have to be prioritised and the Muslim community has to be

prioritised as ‘if the Muslim community fails, Bradford fails’”.

Such proscriptions will do nothing to prevent the growth of poverty, inequality and racism, but will only foster further resentment between black and white workers.

The review’s findings have been seized upon by the right wing to proclaim the death of multiculturalism and reinvigorate their campaign for the promotion of British culture. Moreover, Sir Ouseley’s recommendations provide fertile ground for the fascist right, who played the key role in provoking the most recent riots by exploiting social grievances in order to whip up racial tensions.

In the final analysis, the disturbances in Bradford and other northern towns are the end result of the systematic efforts to undermine a unified solution to the common problems facing working people. Only a programme based on the fight for social equality, uniting all workers in defence of their jobs, living standards and democratic rights, can provide a progressive way forward.



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