Black and British

Britain is a multiracial country. Yet although Britain is reputed to be a country where ethnic minorities integrate easily, Britain's Blacks - also known as Afro-Caribbeans - certainly suffer from a degree of passive discrimination. And when times are hard, things often get worse.

Freeway magazine looks at the story of the Black community in today's Britain.

Section 1 Background.

In the nineteen fifties, Britain was a nation in need of men. A decade after the second world war, it was a country with lots of children, but not enough men to work in the mines, the factories and the public services.

Hundreds of thousands of young men had been killed during the war; who could take their place? There was an easy answer: men from the colonies! Britain was still the capital of an Empire that stretched to the four corners of the earth. In the developing countries of the Commonwealth, there were millions of young men, just looking for work. When the British authorities offered them the chance to come to Britain and work, thousands wanted to come.

Most came without their families; but soon, as they settled into their new country and their new jobs, they paid for their families to come over too. While a few came from Africa, the largest contingent of Black immigrants came from Jamaica and the other islands that make up the West Indies.

By 1960, "Afro-Caribbeans" and their families had settled in large numbers in several of Britain's cities — usually in the poorest and most unattractive parts. At the time however, the conditions they lived in in Britain were not too bad, and often better than those they had enjoyed in the West Indies. There were jobs, so there was money; there were schools for the children.

Thus, with its young families, but few teenagers, the Afro-Caribbean community lived quietly beside the White community in cities like London and Wolverhampton, and there was no tension. In reality, the two communities hardly mixed at all; there was little ethnic rivalry , because generally speaking there were enough jobs for everyone. In many cases, Black workers took the jobs that white workers did not want — bus conductors , railway porters, and other jobs that were not too well paid.

Around the year 1967, things began to change. Inspired by the civil rights movement in America, and encouraged by the liberal ideologies of the sixties, Britain's Blacks began to look for a new identity and a better status for their community. But at the same time, right-wing nationalist movements were starting to develop in some sectors of white society. A former Conservative minister, Enoch Powell, predicted violent conflicts between Blacks and Whites,

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and called for Britain's Blacks to be sent back to their countries of origin. He was expelled from the Conservative Party because of his extremist views .

Racial tension nevertheless began to grow in some working class districts of London and other cities. Once there had been jobs for all, but now a new problem was appearing: unemployment. More and more people, both Blacks and Whites, began finding themselves in competition for a falling number of jobs. Profiting from people's misfortune, new racist political parties came into existence. The National Front and the British National Party began recruiting young people, and encouraging racism. Here and there, gangs of skinheads began to write racist graffiti in public places; there were occasional incidents between black youths and skin-heads, but generally speaking, the overt racism of the National Front did not appeal to people in Britain.

In most parts of Britain, that is still true today. Generally speaking, Britain is a very tolerant society; but even in a very tolerant society, there are a few misguided individuals and groups who continue to judge people by the colour of their skin.

Section 2.

TODAY IN BRITAIN.....

In most parts of today's Britain, racism is not part of ordinary life. Most people do not judge other people by the colour of their skin. Groups like the British National Party are very marginal, and do not usually win any elections. The most ugly forms of racism, at least, have been rejected; and while Britain's Blacks still have many forms of prejudice to fight against, vicious racism is not usually one of them.

Nonetheless, although black and white communities live side by side in most British cities, and there are not usually visible tensions between ordinary people, from time to time serious racist incidents take place.

The most notorious of these concerned a black teenager called Stephen Lawrence, gratuitously murdered in 1993 by a gang of white youths as he waited at a bus stop. Almost every week, racist incidents are reported in the media, somewhere in Britain. Perhaps, in a population of almost 60 million people, that is inevitable, even in a country where the vast majority of people claim that they are not racially prejudiced.

Yet there are two sorts of racism: visible racism, and invisible racism.

Many Black people in Britain feel that they are regularly discriminated against in invisible ways. Unemployment is higher among Blacks than among Whites, and Blacks do not do as well at school as Whites - often because the schools that they go to do not have high academic reputations. (Asians , on the other hand, people from India, Pakistan or China, tend to do better than white pupils).

Black community leaders frequently complain about racism in the police, and unfortunately, some of their complaints are justified. In 1999, an official report into the (London) Metropolitan Police (the "Met"), following the murder of Stephen Lawrence, stated that "institutional racism" was widespread throughout the police service.

Since then, the Met and other police forces in Britain have introduced tough programmes to try to stop this form of invisible - though sometimes visible - racism. Though there has been no serious violence in black districts of British cities for over twenty years, people have not

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forgotten the violence that occurred in several British cities in the 80s. Even today, there is often tension just under the surface in places like Brixton, London, where poverty, unemployment and other social problems are high, and confidence in the police is very low.

Plenty of projects have been started, to provide jobs and training to young Blacks in the poorest parts of the cities. Some have been very successful, and lots of black teenagers do well at school, then go to university or do something else interesting, and become successful. They are, nevertheless , in a minority. Most Blacks in Britain today still live in the cities, or in the poorer districts of small towns. Sixty years after the first Afro-Caribbeans were first invited to come and work Britain, only a small minority of Britain's black community have really integrated into the mainstream of society.

Section 3:

YOUTH AND RACE

Generally speaking, young Blacks and young Whites get on together better than their parents' generation. A recent survey of teenage attitudes showed that 70% of british teenagers consider themselves to have "no racial prejudice at all", while only 2% admit to being racially prejudiced. The rest admit to being slightly prejudiced. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, today's youth are growing up together, in a society which is much more multi-racial than it was in the past. Many, if not most British people aged over sixty never sat in a school classroom with people from different races; today, on the contrary, there are few secondary schools in Britain that do not have at least a few Black or Asian pupils. Today's British teenagers, whether they are Black, White or anything else, share a large degree of common experience. They have been through the same school system, they eat the same food, they watch the same television, and to a large extent, they like the same music. In short, most young people in Britain today share a similar - though certainly not identical - culture, whatever the colour of their skin. Hopefully, that can only result in even better race relations among future generations.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES?

In America in 2014, the President is black. Black policemen are fairly common: so are black politicians, black mayors, black Marines, and to a lesser extent black businessmen.

In Britain however, there are still many professions in which Blacks have not yet managed to make much progress.

Although Blacks and Asians make up over 14% of the population of London and about 8% of the total British population, you won't often see a black policeman, or a black Royal Marine. For many reasons, Blacks have found it hard to enter a number of professions; and once in these professions, they often find it harder to get promoted than White people.

In 1981 40% of Britain's Whites worked in professional, managerial or clerical jobs, only 13% of Blacks held similar jobs.

Blacks do, nevertheless, hold some important positions in British life; in the media, the most trusted TV newsreader is Trevor McDonald, the former anchor of ITV's popular "News at Ten" programme; and on the BBC, Moira Stewart, also black, was one of the most popular newsreaders.

Many British employers now officially label themselves "Equal Opportunities Employers"; police forces are trying hard to recruit more black officers, and the number of black doctors

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and lawyers is slowly but steadily rising, as a growing - though still relatively small - proportion of black teenagers go on to university, and qualify for better jobs.

In 2009 there were five black MPs in the House of Commons, including David Lammy, who was Minister for higher education, and was brought up as a child in a poor quarter of London. Some people say that he is one of the brightest MPs in the Labour Party... and possibly Britain's first black Prime Minister... could we say Britain's Barak Obama ?

BLACK MUSIC

Black music has done more than most things to bring black and white cultures together.

Almost the whole of today's rock and pop music has its roots in black music: rock 'n' roll, the base of today's pop, developed out of the jazz and rhythm 'n' blues of black America. England's Blacks, however, have added their own specific contribution to contemporary pop music, in particular through reggae music, the music of the West Indies.

Reggae came to England in the late 60s through an innovative record company called Island Records. Island soon helped lots of black bands from the West Indies and from Britain, led by Bob Marley, to become popular with British youth of all backgrounds . Other record companies soon followed, and began signing up other black bands.

Before long, black British musicians were regularly finding themselves in the Top Ten, while white bands played more and more "black" music, and an increasing number of bands recruited musicians regardless of their colour.

Today, the world of music is one of the ways that young British Blacks dream of as a route to success. The band Sugarbabes - two black, one white - is the most successful British girl group of the 21st century – so far. Only a very small minority succeed, of course, in reaching the top, but in the world of music, as in the world of sport, the doors to success are certainly open. More importantly though, the virtual absence of "race" as an issue in most sectors of the music industry today (in Britain at least) has helped to bring young people of all colours together in a common culture and a common heritage that all recognise as their own.

SPORT

Sport is another sector in which black British stars have done a lot to improve race relations. When, in the 1980s, the first black footballers were signed up by top British football clubs, they met serious discrimination and sometimes hostility from the fans. Since then, most clubs have tried hard to eliminate racism from the game, and generally they have succeeded.

Today, with all but a bigoted minority of fans, Britain's great black footballers enjoy the same status as their white team-mates. The same is true in athletics; and everyone in Britain knows that without its black athletes, Britain would have brought back a less distinguished collection of medals from recent Olympic Games.

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