



WELFARE & WORK

Race and local government

Consultative committees attached to borough councils are doing excellent work in educating areas against race prejudice

Janet Stewart

Race prejudice has been receiving pessimistic attention. In fact, a lot of very practical work is being done in Britain to eradicate the causes of racial friction in housing, work, education and social life generally. Among efforts on the part of individuals, voluntary and statutory groups, the work of the consultative committees, set up in conjunction with local authorities (though often not at their instigation) to deal with race relations has perhaps had the largest impact on the practical problems. One of the most interesting things about them is the fact that a few enthusiastic people can change the atmosphere of a whole borough, and a surprisingly small number can implement the essential actions. There is room for experiment with methods and constitutions, and there is also, by now, a helpful library of documentation for the use of new committees: that of the Immigrants' Advisory Committee of the London Council for Social Service, which also coordinates the consultative committees of the area.

Why associate the delicate task of smoothing race relations with the borough councils, who have a political structure and feel the limitations to freedom of movement of any statutory body? And a common local objection is (after "there isn't any race problem about is (after "there isn't any race problem here") "why set up a local government committee to look after a minority, when they should be safeguarding the interests of the community as a whole?" The committees point out that the problems of any group, no matter how small, are the responsibility of the elected local government. When immigrants are not accepted as full members of British society (which they are in law) it is the community as a whole which is demoralized and degraded. The sponsorship, or at least the public blessing, of the local authority sets the seal of representative approval and community participation on the work of the committee. In any case, a consultative committee, including Borough Councillors as members, with Town Hall facilities and a grant out of the rates (possibly conditional on supplementary fund-raising) does not prevent the work of voluntary action or pressure groups.

But the backing of a local authority does not mean that these committees have political sponsorship. Racial prejudice cuts right across party lines in this country (regretted though this is by party leaders) and formulated party attitudes have not yet grown up, at least not in the rank and file. Chetots, violence and housing discrimination occur in areas of every political colour, and total community representation is essential for

any committee which wants to deal with these. All the six consultative committees in the London area are as broadly based as possible, with not only the political parties represented, but, typically, members from welfare organizations like the CAB or the National Assistance Board, the high commissions, the trade unions, the local churches and so on participating.

One third of the West Indians in Great Britain live in Greater London, so the London boroughs present good examples of how adaptations to and by the immigrant community have been made. Of the five boroughs which have over 7,000 Commonwealth immigrants, Kensington, Lambeth, Hackney, Paddington and Willesden, the last three have consultative committees of long standing.

One of the first was the Hackney Council for the Welfare of Coloured Immigrants, set up early in 1959 by the Mayor. All the major interest and welfare groups are represented, with the exception of the police, who were asked to send someone but did not.

Later in the year a West Indian Information Officer was appointed to the Borough Council's Public Relations Department. He is a full time officer, while the committee meets once a year. The advantages of placing the immigrant officer in the public relations department, even though he is usually a trained social worker, are important. He represents the image of the new committee to the press and he is able to see to it that any comment is well informed—an extremely important factor in the community's reaction to race news. He can also examine housing, educational or industrial problems without stepping too far from his brief, and is directly responsible to the Town Clerk. But in Hackney he cannot easily militate in person—publicly: this may have to be done by an entirely voluntary group. If he is asked to write a letter about some discriminatory practice, he may have to consult the Town Clerk. The committee itself, which could, and in other cases does do this kind of thing, is not a working committee; its function is in practice only to review what the information officer, often on his own initiative, has been doing during the year and to make suggestions for the future. This could put an enormous pressure of work on one man, with no staff, so that he would only have time to deal with individual cases of real hardship; he could not easily set about the business of fostering real integration which is the underlying purpose of the committees. He could not get clubs going, or guide his committee into action in visiting local industries, for instance; he must be a curer rather

than a preventer.

The way the Willesden International Friendship Council, also set up in 1959, works is rather different. Here the Executive Committee of the Council meets once a month, and the agenda is likely to cover all kinds of individual action by members, who are approximately half West Indian and half English. It was thought of before the Notting Hill riot, but this gave it some impetus. They began their work with a survey, made by a research worker in the Citizens' Advice Bureau and financed by a grant from the Borough Council, to discover who felt hostile to coloured immigrants, what the objective reasons were, and how much social mixing would be acceptable. They then brought out, over the past three years, booklets on their activities and on such subjects as buying houses, including information on tenants' and landlords' rights, a subject most unfamiliar to many of the new landlords.

In 1961 they appointed a Liaison Officer, responsible to the committee, rather than to the Town Clerk, which gave him great freedom of movement. Recently, however, the committee has felt that the position should be more established, so he too is now part of the permanent staff of the Borough Council. As in Hackney, he works in the Public Relations Department, and since his appointment, local press coverage of matters affecting the coloured population has been more careful and less sensational.

LIAISON JOBS

His working day might include these heterogeneous tasks: writing to a solicitor who wants help in settling a housing dispute out of court, or to a hospital which does not know where to send an elderly patient whose relatives in Jamaica cannot support her; visiting a couple who have been referred by the CAB and want to bring over their 19 year old son to England, but have run into trouble with the categories of immigrant specified in the Act; advising on tax relief for supporting children abroad. In the afternoon he might arrange for a pair of girls to be invited to social clubs; give a talk to school leavers about the world they will encounter; take up one case history, of refusal to work, perhaps. He will not be helped by the Ministry of Labour, which says, "where, however, an employer exercises discrimination on any of these grounds (race, colour, sex or belief) . . . we are obliged . . . to assist him to obtain workers other than those of the type to which he objects". He might end his day moving costumes for a drama group rehearsal, and looking in on adult education classes.

One of the most interesting Willesden work is the initiating groups. Any group thinking of consultative committee which migrants' Advisory Committee will be told that it is important idea of "welfare for West India". There is a young people's travel club, adult education most engaging of all, a Jazz I This was begun by the Friend (the Liaison Officer was its first and then left to go its sturdy deny. It is now a member national Association of Ballet Franklin White of the Royal pany is its president. Last summer best attendance of all the outdoor in the borough, better evening. It is thoroughly mixed, decree of its parent council, happened naturally and incident.

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Working day might include these strenuous tasks: writing to a solicitor who wants help in settling a housing dispute out of court, or to a hospital which does not know where to send an elderly patient whose relatives in Jamaica cannot support her; visiting a couple who have been referred by the CAB and want to bring over their 19 year old son to England, but have got into trouble with the categories of migrant specified in the Act; advising on relief for supporting children abroad. In afternoon he might arrange for a pair of glasses to be invited to social clubs; give a talk to school leavers about the world they will encounter; take up one case history, of refusal to work, perhaps. He will not be helped by the Ministry of Labour, which says, here, however, an employer exercises discrimination on any of these grounds (race, colour, sex or belief) . . . we are obliged . . . to assist him to obtain workers other than those of the type to which he objects". He might end his day moving costumes for a drama group rehearsal, and looking in on adult education classes.

One of the most interesting parts of the Willesden work is the initiating of clubs and groups. Any group thinking of forming a consultative committee which asks the Immigrants' Advisory Committee for its help will be told that it is important to avoid the idea of "welfare for West Indians".

There is a young people's social club, a travel club, adult education lessons, and, most engaging of all, a Jazz Ballet Group. This was begun by the Friendship Council (the Liaison Officer was its first chairman) and then left to go its sturdy way independently. It is now a member of the International Association of Ballet Clubs, and Franklin White of the Royal Ballet Company is its president. Last summer it had the best attendance of all the outdoor entertainments in the borough, better even than wrestling. It is thoroughly mixed, but not by decree of its parent council: integration happened naturally and incidentally.

Another key society is the Willesden Social Action group, which decorates the homes of the old or infirm, or tidies their gardens. It was begun by the first chairman of the Friendship Council, and now has as its (voluntary) secretary a typist from the Town Hall typing pool who became interested in the memos she typed and had always liked interior decorating anyway. This group had a close link with the Willesden Old People's Welfare Committee, which suggests people who might need a hand about the house. At most 20 volunteers carry out more than twelve projects a year. The housing sub-committee has been trying to instigate multi-racial housing co-operatives, and a "conciliation panel" visits tenants of racial friction. At the request of either the tenant or the landlord they call in twos (one white, one coloured) to see if the trouble can be talked out or practically accommodated.

Paddington Overseas Students' and Workers' Committee is also very strong on clubs. There is one for workers, one for students, and one for mothers. They have brought out booklets for the education of the white population in race relations, and have local neighbourhood meetings. This attention to detail is also reflected in their working sub-committee, which studies newspaper reports in order to press for more accurate and fair reporting, as well as general problems of community relationships. The police are represented, and efforts are made to improve relationships with them. On the housing side, they take part in the work of the Metropolitan Coloured Housing Association, which in fact began in Paddington as an attempt to rehouse local families.

The consultative committees also sponsor conferences around their practical problems. Paddington ran one on "Growing up in Paddington; the young immigrant—citizen of tomorrow"; Willesden arranged one on housing, and invites lectures from time to time (last spring's was by Hilde Himmelweit, and was on the formation of racial attitudes in children). Their public library has also prepared a reading list on race relations and social anthropology, for the use of the committee and anyone else interested.

Housing is probably the most acute problem which a committee must deal with. The conciliation panels method is still not clearly evaluated and may be superseded. For one thing, it is not always easy or helpful to identify the racial element in the time-honoured British practices of landlord-baiting and tenant-teasing. A running battle usually

goes on with the "no coloured" accommodation columns of the local papers. This is probably a matter which could only be dealt with by a law. As to the rights of the homeless individual, some West Indians say they would rather be turned away by a person than by an advertisement. At least it gives them the chance to make a favourable impression.

In spite of this concentration of tension on housing, there are disadvantages in appointing the immigrant relations officer to the Housing Department. When one considers the confidential nature of the disputes, obvious conflicts of interest would arise. But the new provisions of the Housing Bill offer a most intriguing opportunity to the race relations officer. Under clause 32, it will be immediately possible for the local authority to take over the administration of a house in multiple occupation if the living conditions jeopardize the "safety, welfare or health" of the residents. There will undoubtedly be test cases on this before the courts, and conjecture will be satisfied as to how far the local authority can intervene when the itching powder begins to be scattered. There may also be a new role for the experimental conciliation panels.

LITERACY LACKS

One immigrant problem, however, does not seem to be dealt with in any fundamental way by the consultative committees. Many adult immigrants are not fully literate—this applies as much to immigrants from Ireland as from the West Indies, and to those from India and Pakistan who do not even have English as their native language. The Evening Institutes take many such people for remedial courses, but there is a sizeable proportion which never gets that far. In one borough, the employment officer estimated that one in five of all the immigrant applicants can not fill in their forms properly. Few things, other than colour itself, could possibly separate groups in modern urban England more than extreme differences in this most basic of primary skills. It would surely be appropriate for Employment Exchanges to direct anyone who they see needs help to whatever classes are available, with the help of the immigrant relations officer. Social and political participation on the part of the immigrants depends on this elementary form of communication.

The idea of consultative committees is spreading. Wood Green, Islington, and, opportunely, Southall and Hayes have set them up, and informal discussions have started at Croydon. Wood Green has followed the Willesden pattern of also electing an Executive Committee which meets once a month, and of concentrating on inter-racial community activities. They are preparing a booklet for new Commonwealth citizens with information on neighbourhood facilities as well as voting and other rights. Southall's International Friendship Committee was launched last September to a packed first public meeting. In this case the initiative came from the Hayes and Southall Trades Council, who feel responsible for the large number of Indian workers in the local factories, but the initiative can come from any direction. Launching has usually been smooth—despite the odd anonymous or not so anonymous letter. One newspaper—the Wood Green *Herald*—remarked coldly "well-wishing is one thing, experience is another. Colour prejudice can extend in more than one direction." But it extended its

approval to the method: "the only way to do it is by getting down to cases." Indeed, the consultative committees so far in existence seem to be filling a real need. As the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council said in their report to the Home Office, "we feel that local authorities, and the Government, have an obligation to do something more." After all, like the United States, we also originated as a "nation of immigrants".

NOTES

THE COMMUNITY

Old people and clubs

In 1961 the National Old People's Welfare Council appointed Miss Emily White as its first national adviser on leisure time activities for the elderly. The appointment was made for the first two years to Lancashire, the third to Derbyshire. Helped by Manchester University social science students she has surveyed a Lancashire area to find out how the elderly spent their time, and what part clubs played in their lives. Of the 206 people interviewed 126 were women; 17 per cent aged 60-69, 71 per cent aged 70-79, and 12 per cent 80 or over. Of the 80 men, 6 per cent were aged 65-69, 74 per cent aged 70-79, and 20 per cent 80 or over.

Much of value was discovered: of home activities, domestic chores took most time (cooking, housework, decorating, gardening and handicrafts), television or the radio occupied twice the time spent on reading—there was no detailed information as to whether they read books or newspapers—and the interests of family or friends, which often meant looking after someone, occupied the least time. Outside activities showed that shopping, sitting in the park, chatting to friends were the important factors. None had been to a course or class run by the education authority during the year prior to the survey, and only one person had ever attended such a class. In fact, only 13 per cent knew of the services.

In the area there are 24 mixed clubs and two women's clubs, meeting weekly in hired or borrowed premises, and providing entertainment, outings, visits to factories and holidays. There are also 13 veterans' clubs for men meeting every day; interests here are bowling and indoor games. The welfare department estimates that 20 per cent of the total retired population are club members.

The survey found no significant difference between club members and the rest of the sample in social background or education; in marital status, or whether or not they were living on their own or with a family. Fewer club members confessed to boredom or loneliness, but the difference was slight.

In other groups the possession of a television set has been shown to be a strong factor in keeping people at home, but it was found that club members were, if anything, more interested in television than the non-members. The mixed clubs meet during the afternoon and members could have their evenings set aside for television.

It was found that 9 per cent of the whole sample had been club members but had ended their association for various reasons: health made up nearly half, but others had lost interest or complained of gossip, cliquishness and personal difficulties. Some had left at the time of a bereavement and were unable to face the difficult first visit to the