

A West Indian Looks at Race Relations¹

by Dr. David Pitt

There is a great deal of discrimination in Britain against immigrants, and it is essentially discrimination based on colour. Discrimination must not be confused with prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude of mind. Discrimination consists in giving expression to our prejudices by positive action; in this case by excluding one person from some benefit or opportunity, and not taking the same action against another person with the same qualifications.

I have always held that discrimination, from which the native-born coloured suffers as much as any coloured immigrant, was based on colour, and this has been confirmed by the P.E.P. report. In carrying out their survey P.E.P. used an English person, a West Indian, an Indian, a Pakistani, a Hungarian and a Cypriot. If you accept the reaction to the English person as the norm, the findings were quite clear. For example, on one occasion forty places were tested for jobs. The Englishman was offered thirty jobs, the Hungarian twenty-seven, and the West Indian three. This shows the extent to which discrimination is based on colour. It is a fallacy to think that, as most coloured people are newcomers, discrimination will cease, since after a generation or two they will be absorbed. It is much more likely that discrimination will have become greater and segregation will have begun to be confirmed. The P.E.P. report has disclosed that people who have skills which they obtained in this country suffer greater discrimination than others; in fact 70 per cent of the coloured people who have British qualifications suffer from discrimination.

Another myth the report explodes is that coloured people tend to have chips on their shoulders and see discrimination where it does not exist. In fact the report shows that they tend to underrate the extent to which there is discrimination. The most illuminating case was that of a coloured man who was used to test a motor-hire firm. It so happened that, without the organizers knowing it, this man had used the hire firm on many previous occasions, and had never thought that they discriminated. It was not until the test that he discovered that the rate they normally gave him was much higher than the one offered to the English person used in the same test.

¹An interview with Dr David Pitt by Bro. Louis-Bertrand Fergus, O.P., who is a native of Monserrat, West Indies. Tape-recorded on 27th August, 1967.

The Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) has carried out a large number of similar tests, and in these we invariably use coloured people who are better qualified than the whites. In Manchester last year a test was carried out of thirty offers of jobs taken at random from the local paper. We sent two youngsters, one coloured and one white, making sure that on each occasion the coloured man had the better qualification. And though the coloured man was always sent first, he got the job only on about three occasions.

Discrimination in housing is just as bad and has been tested by CARD many times. Speaking personally, I had an interesting experience in 1960 when I decided to sell my house in Teignmouth Road and buy a flat in Hampstead. I had previously fought Hampstead as a Labour Candidate and found little discrimination then, except for a few lunatic groups which could be ignored; but when I actually came to look for a flat to rent, I met with the greatest difficulty, so much so, that in the end I had to buy a flat.

In my opinion the Commonwealth Immigration Act is itself discriminatory, since it sets a limit on the number of immigrants that can come here annually from the Commonwealth, but there is no ceiling for immigration from any other source. There is control, but no ceiling, and the control is based on the number of jobs about which you could say: 'There's no English person available for this job.' If immigration is to be controlled, it must be on the basis of economic need, otherwise an official immigration policy of discrimination will be reflected in the general attitude of the people. Commonwealth immigration has a limit of 8,500 annually, of which 1,000 must come from Malta. The quota is divided among those with special skills and those who have a job to come to. If you take the 1964 figures you find that 5,100 people were issued with vouchers because of their skills, and as less than 100 of these came from Malta, if you add the 1,000 from Malta you have 6,000, leaving only 2,500 from the rest of the Commonwealth. As it stands, seen in relation to alien immigration, the present form of immigration control can only do harm. What is more, as used by the opponents of integration in the immigration issue, the word control simply means not wanting more black people in this country, lest we become a nation of half-castes and misfits, as Mr Duncan Sandys seemed to suggest recently. As a West Indian, this seems to me laughable. West Indian society is a mixed one, and we at least think that it is quite a good one, and very far from being one of misfits.

The situation at the moment is extremely delicate, as the rise in unemployment is bound to hinder good race relations. People worry about their jobs, and when Englishmen find themselves out of work while immigrants are working, friction is caused in two ways. First there are those jobs which in the '30s were called 'safe jobs', for example transport, and these are precisely the jobs that are filled

today by immigrants. On the other hand, since coloured persons will have been the last to be employed by many firms, they will be the first to become redundant: so that their unemployment rate will tend to be higher than that of the community as a whole. The consequence is that quite a few of them will be seen at the Labour Exchange and National Security offices. This is bound to create annoyance and criticism on the part of the host community. It is therefore important that the community as a whole recognizes the true situation, and the forces at work.

The Church could play a part here, but I think that it has failed to do its job, especially where the West Indian is concerned. A very high percentage of West Indians is Catholic, and what's more they are church-goers at home. When they first arrive they go to church, and it is a great pity that the Church does not make efforts to welcome them and to help them to play an active part in parish life. If this had been done, there would already have been areas that were demonstrating the value of integration, black and white working and worshipping together, showing the rest of society that this could happen. There may be some substance in the allegation that West Indians do not like their own priests, but prefer foreign or white priests, but I feel some effort should have been made to have a few West Indian priests to help West Indians. First, since by just being there, saying Mass and preaching, this black man, as an important member of the Church, would serve to reduce some prejudice, and be a status symbol for West Indians. Also he could advise and help West Indians to become more stable members of the community, as Irish priests have helped their people.

The Church should also give full support to activities aimed at removing discrimination. It is true the Cardinal preached an important sermon on race relations, but the subject should also appear in ordinary parish sermons. The Church should also support the campaign to get legislation against discrimination. I regard such legislation as the essential pre-requisite for any successful fight against discrimination. One needs legislation to set the norm, to declare that society's norm is non-discriminatory, and to say to people at large: 'This is what we want in this society, it is up to you to play your part in helping us to achieve it.' This is important because for one person who is actively prejudiced and a supporter of segregation, you meet fifty who defer to what they assume to be the prejudices of others. Many estate agents simply assume, without asking, that a vendor does not want to sell his house to a black person. People simply assume that others are prejudiced, and shape their actions accordingly. This is also shown in the P.E.P. report, when it gives evidence that employers assume prejudice in their employees, and workers in their fellow-workers. But, of course, legislation is only the first rung of the ladder one has to climb to reach the goal of a society free from racial discrimination. One cannot just leave it to the children, in the hope

that it will be alright in the next generation. The children may play **well together** at school, but if they come out of school into a society **that discriminates**, they will gradually drift into accepting that as the **norm** of adult society. In each section of society the battle has to be fought. Within the trade unions, for example, there is still a fair amount of opposition to legislation. But there are signs of gradual conversion. Frank Cousins was the first to support it, and then Jack Cooper writing in *The General Municipal Worker*, after the appearance of the P.E.P. report.

In spite of the difficulties, I am not pessimistic. I believe that we have to tackle discrimination with vigour and intelligence; but now, and not next year. When all is said and done, we have the basis of a good society here in Britain, at all sorts of sensitive levels. Take a bus-conductor. A good sensitive West Indian conductor can do a great deal of good for race relations. Black and white work together in the same factories and on the benches. Even in my profession you have many black doctors; in fact 40 per cent of the junior doctors in non-teaching hospitals are coloured. It means if you go to a non-teaching hospital, the chances are two in five that the doctor who attends to you is coloured. Just by being a good doctor he can make his contribution to reducing race tensions. The same applies to nurses, and also in the very sensitive sphere of child-birth, many coloured women are delivered by white midwives, and white women by coloured midwives. Then there are the schools, so that there is a number of fields in which the basis of good race relations is being laid.

My view is that we have to build on it. The reason why I make all this fuss about having coloured priests is that I believe that you need coloured people at all levels of society. This is why I try to play so many roles. I haven't really the time to do the various things I do, but since there are so few coloured people doing them, I feel I have to. I believe all this can help to break down prejudice and improve race relations, and if we set about working on this deliberately, we will make the grade. The one thing we must not do is to drift, or say it will take care of itself.