

Seminar with national specialised bodies to combat racism and racial discrimination

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Salle de la Direction

Interview with Sarah Spencer,
Deputy Chair of the British Commission on Racial Equality

Fighting racism in Britain: New responsibilities enable the Commission for Racial Equality to face modern challenges

According to Sarah Spencer, Deputy Chair of the British Commission on Racial Equality (CRE), the nature of racial discrimination in modern Britain has evolved towards less overt and more complex form of discrimination. Whilst some recent developments in race relations in Britain are disappointing, especially concerning the asylum seekers issue, the reactions from public authorities are much more encouraging today than they were twenty years ago. Importantly, since 2000 the legislation focus has also shifted from avoiding discrimination to taking more active steps to promote equality.

14.11.2003

Interview

Question: *The British Commission for Racial Equality was established by legislation in 1976 and hence is one of the oldest bodies of its kind in Europe. How has the role of your institution evolved over time to reflect changes in anti-discrimination legislation and nature of modern racism?*

Sarah Spencer: The Commission was established in 1976 by bringing together two existing bodies, one of which was responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination laws and the other for promoting good race relations. In bringing these two functions together we recognised that we can't have one without the other. At the beginning, we saw racial discrimination as an issue of colour racism but now we see it as much more complex than that, and that discrimination can be on the basis of culture, not only colour – for instance the experience of Gypsies and Travellers. It can also be on the basis of religion. In 1976 it was true to say that every minority was disadvantaged, which is no longer the case as there are clear distinctions between different ethnic minorities with some making more progress in education and employment than others. Furthermore, we have a far greater focus now on systemic and indirect discrimination than we had at the beginning.

Finally, a very significant shift in our work took place in 2000, when new legislation required public sector organisations to go beyond avoiding discrimination and to actively promote equality. As our commission oversees the implementation of this responsibility, it added a new dimension to our work, as we are now able to monitor 43,000 public sector organisations ranging from criminal justice to museums and libraries.

***Question:** How do you see the current situation in Britain in the light of the recent revelations of administrative racism in the police force and prevailing hostile climate concerning asylum seekers and refugees?*

Sarah Spencer: Indeed, in the last months we had the very shocking revelations about racism within police trainees and it was very disappointing to find a number of people with very overt racist attitudes in the police force. We are launching an investigation with a strong focus to prevent this from happening again. What was different about these revelations from those of twenty years ago however was the reaction from the police authorities. While in the past racism was considered an unfortunate reality, today senior police officers unequivocally condemn it as wrong and there have been a number of resignations.

As for asylum seekers, it's right to identify this issue of public hostility to asylum seekers as perhaps the greatest threat to race relations in Britain. There is a widespread feeling that many asylum seekers are not genuine and abuse the system. I would say that the public is very ill informed about asylum seekers and thus there exists a great need to deliver truthful information. As a result of the hostile attitudes and misinformation, asylum seekers suffer a lot of abuse and we consider the situation to be serious.

***Question:** How does the ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination apply in the British context?*

Sarah Spencer: The ECRI recommendation in many ways reflects the situation we now have in the UK. Our law says both direct and indirect racism is unacceptable and provides remedies to victims, but we didn't actually have legislation to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of religion until 2000, when religious discrimination in employment was outlawed according to the article 13 of the European Commission. We don't yet have any corresponding legislation on religion in service provision. Moreover, the absence of legal aid to take cases of discrimination is a barrier to justice. The other significant aspect is that the recommendation suggests the need for pre-legislative scrutiny and that legislation incompatible with anti-discrimination legislation can not be passed. We only have this provision in relation to compatibility with the Convention on Human Rights. More recently, according to the new legislation introduced in 2000, the government now has to conduct an impact assessment if it intends to introduce a new policy with a potentially significant impact on ethnic minorities.