

NORTH EAST

RACE EQUALITY FORUM

INFORMATION BRIEFING

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How far have we come? Lessons from the 1965 Race Relations Act

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This is the first of two Information Briefings kindly provided for us by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The first was written by Omar Khan from the Runnymede Trust and was first published on December 8 last year. Further information about the Runnymede Trust and the events and reports to which Omar Khan refers are available from the Trust at

<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

Today is the 50th anniversary of the first Race Relations Act in Britain.

The Runnymede Trust has held a **major conference** (link below) and today [\[https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/SpeakerBiosRRAMC.pdf\]](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/SpeakerBiosRRAMC.pdf)

publishes a **collection of articles** (link also below) examining how far we have <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/parliament/1965-race-relations-act.html> come since the 1965 Race Relations Act on this anniversary to mark this somewhat undernoted anniversary.

What more should we know about the 1965 Race Relations Act, and what are its lessons for today? In addition to better understanding our own recent history, we should reflect on why positive changes have since occurred for many ethnic minorities in Britain, but also why we haven't yet realised the promise of race equality for all.

In 1965 Britain, ethnic minorities were subject to overt and cruel racism, typically captured in the 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish' signs erected by white

British landlords. But what we note less is that ethnic minorities had no legal protection or recourse from discriminatory treatment; being refused service in pubs or places of public resort (as the 1965 Act puts it) were all legal until the 1965, while being denied jobs, access to services, and housing were still legal until the 1968 and 1976 Acts.



Furthermore, critics of the 1965 and then 1968 Act (extending legal protection to housing, and during the second reading of which Enoch Powell delivered his infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech) positively defended the rights of white English people to engage in such discrimination – such was the price of liberty.

In rejecting this argument that ancient English liberties included the freedom to racially discriminate, the Wilson government (spurred on by Roy Jenkins) achieved two things. First, the British government officially recognised the existence of racial discrimination against ethnic minority people, and the need for a democratic government to protect all of its citizens from invidious discrimination. In other words, it showed itself to be responsive to the minimal expectations and concerns of ethnic minority people

If one achievement of the 1965 Act was to express Government’s understanding of the experiences of Britain’s ethnic minorities, another was to signal to the white population that racial discrimination was clearly wrong and would not be tolerated. The 1965 Act could then be viewed as the first in a series of steps that might explain the lesser discriminatory behaviour among younger generations found in the British Social Attitudes Survey.

It may seem peculiar to focus on the attitudinal aspects of major legislation, but this is because it’s hard to be particularly celebratory about the actual content of the 1965 or indeed its consequences. The Act did not extend protection to housing, goods and services, or employment, necessitating further revisions in 1968 and 1976, a much more robust Act that introduced the idea of indirect discrimination and is a clearer progenitor for today’s equality legislation.

Two final lessons from the 1965 Act are: first, that change does not happen only because legislators or government show leadership, not least given the 1965



Act and all other Race Relations Acts were explicitly and publicly linked by the Cabinet with more restrictionist Immigration Bills. Black leaders in Britain including Learie Constantine, Claudia Jones and Paul Stephenson had all challenged discriminatory behaviour and demanded a change in the law, and their legacy deserves far greater celebration in our schools, by our politicians and in public debate and memory.

Second and lastly, while it is indeed important to articulate our fundamental social principles and values, and to give these content in legislation, the law by itself (especially a weak piece of legislation such as the 1965 Act) cannot make equal rights a reality. The Equality and Human Rights Commission's recently published Is Britain Fairer? (link below) is one of a number of documents outlining continued ethnic inequalities in 21st century Britain, despite undoubted progress since 1965. To ensure such inequalities do not persist in 2065, we need to follow our forebears who did not rest on their laurels following the 1965 Act but instead sought to improve legislation, implement effective policy, and finally support greater social and democratic pressure to make equal rights a reality for ethnic minority people in Britain.

Readers might also be interested in the EHRC's Is Britain Fairer? Report and other EHRC five-yearly statutory report on equality and human rights progress in England, Scotland and Wales

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/our-work/key-projects/britain-fairer-0>

Contact: For further information, back copies of Information Briefings or Research Briefings, or to join the Network, email gary.craig@galtres8.co.uk

The North East Race Equality Forum is a Network of around 300 individuals and organisations in the North East Region committed to promoting racial equality in the context of social justice. No one organisation is necessarily committed to every idea published in the name of the Forum. The Forum is supported by the 'Race', Crime and Justice Regional Research Network, which includes researchers from each University in the region.