

The Race Relations Act @ 50 conference Where were you?

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A British Academy Conference on 'The Race Relations Act @ 50' was held on 9-10 July 2015. The conference was convened by Dr Iyiola Solanke of the University of Leeds and Mr Patrick Maddams of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple.

The conference could easily have gone so very wrong. On Monday 6 July 2015, one of the speakers sent me a message about the planned London Underground strike: she wondered whether she could make it. On Tuesday 8th the strike was confirmed: a session chair withdrew. On Wednesday evening, after a superb pre-conference dinner at Inner Temple, buses were too full at 11pm to take any more passengers, and I started to wonder how many delegates, let alone speakers, would make it. At 7.15am on Thursday morning, when I boarded a packed bus that crawled through traffic-jammed roads, I was prepared to speak to an empty room. By 10am my fears had dissipated. Amazingly, most speakers and delegates arrived punctually; some had left home earlier than me to arrive on time. Their determination to be there indicates the importance of the conference.

Beginnings

I first started to think about the 50th anniversary of the Race Relations Act 1965 (RRA 65) in 2005. That year, I was awarded a doctorate from the London School of Economics for my socio-legal historical study on the evolution of anti-racial discrimination law in Britain, Germany and the European Union.¹ The study had taken me to the National Archives in Kew, the National Library and German Archives in Berlin, the European Parliament in Brussels, and the United Nations Library in New York. As well as poring over historical documents from the

1940s, 1950s and 1960s, I had interviewed academics, politicians, lawyers and activists. I discovered that the legal regulation of racial discrimination was envisaged as a key bridge from the colonial to the post-colonial and war to post-war periods. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) was the first international law of its type, and played a key role in nudging resistant national legislators towards domestic anti-racial discrimination law. I also discovered that, in the case of Britain, the influence of other jurisdictions was as important as internal right wing violence – racist politics in Smethwick (Peter Griffiths was elected using the campaign slogan of 'If you want a N***** for a neighbour vote Liberal or Labour') illustrated the urgency, while the Civil Rights Act in 1964 in the USA provided crucial guidance on the design of the RRA 65. Finally, I concluded that the RRA 65 would have been impossible without the existence of committed activists and 'cause lawyers' – lawyers who look beyond doctrinal texts to think about the impact of law on society. I wanted to bring all these facets together in an event that reflected upon the origins, the successes and the failures of British anti-racial discrimination law.

In practical terms, organisation began in February 2014, when together with the Inner Temple I drew up an application to the British Academy Conference programme. The British Academy chose the proposal as one of six conferences to be hosted in 2015. We envisaged an interdisciplinary and international rostrum of speakers, for which my previous activities stood me in good stead: interdisciplinary scholarship, research and academic events have brought me into contact with a huge range of talented people in many fields and countries. The conference line-up was amazing: we had two full days of conversation on race between the fields of legal practice, criminology, history, sociology, psychology, media and politics in the UK, USA, Hawaii, Sweden, Finland and Germany.² Delegates were as diverse, coming from additional places such as Switzerland and Australia. To be there was therefore to savour an international intellectual feast!

1. Iyiola Solanke, *Making Anti-racial Discrimination Law: A Comparative History of Social Action and Anti-racial Discrimination Law* (London, Routledge, 2009).

Recognition

As a Black British woman I have come to think of the Race Relations Act almost as a soundtrack to my life. Without the norms that it (to some extent successfully) introduced into British society, my life would not have been the same. That is not to say that everyday racism has been eradicated (Ama Biney, Shirley Tate and Rita Chadha illustrated eloquently that this was not the case in general, in higher education institutions or in government), but to say that at least here in Britain there is official recognition that racism is a problem. This recognition is not to be taken for granted, especially when compared to Germany where, as Cengiz Barskanmaz explained, the problem with race is denied to the extent that there is a movement to remove the word from the German constitution. It is as if politicians have publicly given up on the campaign for racial equality and decided that, as it is too hard a nut to crack, there is no need to acknowledge it. If for no other reason, this is why Black Britons should celebrate the RRA 1965.

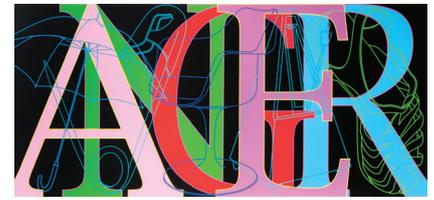
It was therefore a huge privilege to hear from the woman who was a leading figure in lobbying for the RRA 1965. Dame Jocelyn Barrow's life is littered with 'firsts'. She was the first black woman in teacher training in Britain, and it was she who founded the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) in 1965 to persuade the government to prohibit racial discrimination legally: she described it as her mission. I was very moved when Joseph Harker, Assistant Comments Editor at the *Guardian*, gave a personal and heartfelt thanks to her for making his life and his work possible. He spoke for every black person in the room. It is clear that without her work, we would have no Act to celebrate, and Britain would be a very different place for its black citizens. Yet much literature does not mention her – like many a female pioneer, she has been overlooked in the archives of history. Her presence at the conference was thanks to Sir Geoffrey Bindman, who worked with Dame Jocelyn in CARD and subsequently became the first legal advisor for the Race Relations Board – he encouraged me to find her. It was well worth the effort.

Friends

It was also a very special moment when – as they say in the USA – I 'met my bibliography'. Critical race theory pervades my work, and it was a joy to meet Professors Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda and Kumea Shorter Gooden, each incisive, poetic and elegant in their work and writing. I cite them regularly and was thrilled to bring their ideas to a wider audience. I sensed that the audience lapped up their words. However, I suspect that it was also an eye-opening experience for them: while we Europeans know a lot about race and racism in America, the converse is not true – they may have been surprised (and dismayed) to learn about the similarities between the UK, Europe and USA.

Thus as I looked around the conference room, I was

Figure 1
This silkscreen print, *Anger* (2008), by Michael Craig-Martin, has been on display in the British Academy's auditorium in recent years.



pleased to see the faces of new friends from near and afar, as well as old friends and colleagues, such as Judge Stephen Keevash, Professors Diamond Ashiagbor, Aileen McColgan and Colm O'Conneide, Councillors Paul Abbey and Momodou Jallow (each recently elected in Finland and Sweden respectively), Claude Moraes, Louise Whitfield and Michael Bates. *Anger* may have been written (literally) in bold letters on the wall (Figure 1), but contrary to popular stereotypes about black women and men, there was nothing but friendship and curiosity in the room.

More to say

Aside from the fact that I was busy ensuring that all ran to plan, it is difficult to reflect objectively upon the two days. Comments from participants affirm that it was a huge success, that the speakers were all fantastic, and that all present learnt something about race, law and society from a different perspective. Some also commented that it was refreshing to see such heterogeneity at the British Academy and at the pre-conference dinner generously sponsored by the Inner Temple. A common regret was that we had only two days – our conversations seemed to be just beginning when we had to stop! The more we talked, the more there was to say. I therefore laughed when a few days later a colleague asked if there was anything left to discuss. There remains not only much to say, but much to do – the Race Relations Act is also a call for race-related action. As racial lines harden in battles across the globe for public space and resources – whether in relation to policing, immigration, employment, housing or education – there is an urgent need for development of international and interdisciplinary alliances that can lobby effectively for racial justice.

Given the continued difficulties in securing funding for race projects, both the British Academy and Inner Temple are to be highly commended for supporting this landmark event. It commemorated a key moment in British legal history, a moment worthy of the question 'Where were you on 8 December 1965?' Perhaps, however, the more relevant question is: where will you be on 8 December 2015? Why not join us at Leeds University School of Law for a legal panel reflecting upon this groundbreaking piece of British legal history and its consequences? For example, without the Race Relations Act 1965 there would possibly not be an Equality Act today securing rights for women, religious minorities, the differently abled, LGBTQU individuals, and workers of different ages. Wherever you may be, spare a moment to think about/talk about the brave and determined people both here and abroad who made the Act a reality. Or perhaps just sit quietly and say 'Happy 50th Birthday, RRA!'

2. The full list of speakers can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/RR1965