Our shrine to respectability

The West Indian Front Room was a walk down memory lane

DIANE'S DIARY

By Diane Abbott
MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington
newsdesk@gvmedia.co.uk

LAST week I went to an exhibition called The West Indian Front Room organised by Michael Macmillan at the Geffrye Museum in east London.

If you are not West Indian the title will mean nothing to you. But those of us from working class West Indian backgrounds brought up in Britain in the 60s, 70s and (even the 80s) know exactly what Michael was talking about.

For West Indians of that era the 'front room' was a shrine to respectability and upward social mobility. It was kept for the best and there were certain key elements: a three-piece suite often in imitation leather (but I remember the excitement when one of my family's friends got one in bright red Dralon – this was considered the height of luxury); there was always a carpet with multicoloured swirls; there was a glass fronted cabinet where china and gold-rimmed glasses were displayed (which were never actually used); there was a cocktail cabinet (ideally one which opened up at the top to reveal a glass lined compartment for glasses and a little ballerina that went round and round); there was a coffee table with an imitation marble finish and there was the radiogram.

EXHIBITION

Almost as important as these were the accessories: bunches of plastic flowers; prints of the Last Supper; painted glass fish; plastic ice buckets shaped like pineapples and the crocheted doilies. These crocheted mats deserve an exhibition of their own.

You could take me into a West Indian front room blindfolded and I could tell you that West Indians of a certain age furnished it just by feeling those doilies.

Hand crocheted by the lady of the house, they reflected the handicraft skills of respectable girls brought up in the rural West Indies. Mostly white (but sometimes in pink blue or beige) they were carefully starched so their frills stuck out and were placed on every available surface: the coffee table; the television and the cocktail cabinet.

> *"I could tell West Indians of a certain age furnished it by feeling those doilies"*

I remember when my aunty Norma, having saved for months, acquired an electric mixer. We were all awestruck. But there was no question of actually using it. She displayed it in the front room on the mantelpiece, nestling on a frilly crocheted mat all of its own.

Michael Macmillan's exhibition captured every detail including the Jim Reeves music (did anybody but West Indians listen to him?) and the paraffin heaters.

EXCITED

I went on the final day and it was packed with excited black people. For all of us the exhibits brought back memories. Black people in Britain in the 21st century, whether they come from Africa or the Caribbean, owe everything to that post-war generation from the West Indies.

They broke down doors that we have been able to walk through. I myself cannot even crochet. But I still keep a room for my best things. And, even though it is actually at the back of the house, I always call it the front room.

40 years after the Race Relations Act, where are we?

OPINION

By Tess Finch-Lees
newsdesk@gvmedia.co.uk

'NO blacks, dogs or Irish': Forty years after the Race Relations Act, what progress have we made?

Growing up in Ireland I was fed a staple diet of potatoes and fireside stories, washed down with a glass of warm milk straight from the cow.

One story was to define me forever. The tale of my parents' courtship in London in the 60s. They both fled hardship in rural Ireland, met in north London, fell in love and got married. A few months later, when my mother became pregnant they needed to move. With a tear in her eye my mother recalled how, while heavily pregnant and weary from walking the streets in the bitter winter weather, she was shooed away by a landlady who sneered, "Are you Irish, so thick that you can't even read." Gesticulating at a sign she read it aloud... "No blacks, dogs or Irish".

When I came to London some 15 years ago, I was determined to make a stand wherever I came across bigotry and prejudice. But the landscape has changed. Being Irish and/or a dog is quite fashionable in contemporary Britain but there remain manifold establishments wherein blacks are still not allowed.

Whilst the manifestations of racism have become far more subtle over the years, the scourge itself is every bit as pernicious as it was 40 years ago. Nowadays it's not so much about outlawing the use of the 'N' word (except in the BBC where they think it's OK) as it is about who gets promoted, what type of person 'fits' and crucially, who are our leaders and what do they look like?

Racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination against marginalised groups is firmly embedded in societal systems, processes, structures and has become taken for granted in normal cultural practice. If you don't look for it you won't necessarily see it.

DISPUTE

But there's no disputing the facts, which are pretty damning. We have no black executive directors in the FTSE 100 and of the six black directors, none are British. These statistics are not surprising when we consider that there are a disproportionately higher number of black people living in poverty, black boys are three times more likely to be excluded than their white counterparts from school and there is a disproportionately higher representation of black people in prisons. Conversely, black and ethnic minorities have a disproportionately lower representation in positions of power and authority, be it in boardrooms, politics, law or the media.

PROGRESS

Why the lack of progress?

The greatest impediment in the struggle to eradicate racial inequality is that of lacklustre leadership.

> *"If Phillips is not convinced of the case (business or indeed ethical) for racial equality, what is he doing as head of the CRE?"*

For inclusion to work it requires a much broader distribution of power and this is possibly the single biggest threat to those who have historically enjoyed positions of privilege, criteria for which are often being the 'right' colour, class and sex.

Diversity and inclusion is the nemesis of the status quo. It's like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas. Some level of backlash is therefore inevitable if the ambassadors of racial equality are effective, as measured by the progress we have made over the past 40 years. As progress has been reprehensibly slow, surely it is time to review our strategy, or lack thereof, and hold those charged with furthering racial equality to account.

It seems any discussion about racism brings with it a sombre inevitability of running the gauntlet of prejudice peddling and scare mongering. One might expect this from right-wing politicians and press but it is of deep concern when reckless rhetoric emanates from someone charged with championing the promotion of racial equality, i.e. Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE).

At a CBI diversity conference a few months ago Phillips opened by saying he wasn't convinced of the business case for racial equality.

INDUSTRY

Here was an opportunity for the champion of racial equality to challenge British industry as to why we have no black British directors in the FTSE 100 and why they are not tracking ethnicity or setting targets to redress racial inequality. It was an opportunity squandered. If Phillips is not convinced of the case (business or indeed ethical) for racial equality, what is he doing as head of the CRE?

Why is Phillips not talking about integration in the workplace, and specifically in the boardrooms? What about the integration and sharing of power in politics, law and in the media? Given the negligible progress we've made in the last 40 years, there is an overwhelming case for exploring positive discrimination as an option, starting at the top table.

Positive discrimination, handled well, can help in creating a level playing field where there is a historically under-represented group. Examples where it has worked well are in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, South Africa and parts of North America.

PRACTICES

In reality though, positive discrimination has existed in the UK for years, but because it has historically favoured white males, no-one questions it. Practices such as recruiting for boardroom positions, not on merit but via a tap on the shoulder, have become so culturally imbued that we take them for granted.

This assertion is corroborated by the Higgs report in 2003. It severely criticised UK Plc for the lack of diversity at board level. Almost half of the non-executive directors surveyed were recruited through personal friendships, only four per cent had a formal interview and only one per cent had obtained the job by answering an advert.

Let's make 2006 the year to shirk the mantle of complacency and get tough on racial and other forms of discrimination.

Tess Finch-Lees is an international anti-discrimination specialist and regular contributor to the press. She recently featured in a BBC Radio 4 special reviewing 40 years of the Race Relations Act.

DO YOU HAVE ANY WEST INDIAN FRONT ROOM STORIES TO TELL? EMAIL NEWSDESK@GVMEDIA.CO.UK