



## In Focus

### Race Relations Act 1965: 50 Years

#### Summary

The Race Relations Act 1965 came into force on 8 December 1965. Introduced by Harold Wilson's Government, the legislation followed lobbying from groups such as the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) and members of both Houses of Parliament (including Lord Brockway, who had introduced a number of unsuccessful private member's bills aimed at addressing the issue whilst sitting as an MP).<sup>1</sup> It has also been suggested that the legislation was a reaction to certain high profile incidents such as the Bristol Bus Boycott, and was intended to reduce tensions during a period of concern over the levels of immigration from the Commonwealth.<sup>2</sup>

The Act prohibited discrimination on grounds of race in "places of public resort". This term was defined in the Act as including places such as: hotels and restaurants; theatres, sports facilities and places of public recreation; vehicles, vessels and aircraft used for public transport; and any place of "public resort" maintained by a local or other public authority. However, although such discrimination was originally drafted within the Bill to be a criminal offence, this was altered during its progress through the House of Commons to an approach based on "conciliation" and backed up by civil law. This was said to be aimed at avoiding "bringing the flavour of criminality into the delicate question of race relations".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Act instead introduced the Race Relations Board to secure compliance with the prohibition, and to resolve any "difficulties". Upon receiving a complaint of discrimination, the Board was tasked with undertaking inquiries with the individuals concerned and attempting to resolve the complaint. If a resolution was not possible, it could report to the Attorney General, who could then bring proceedings for the awarding of an injunction restraining the accused from committing further acts of discrimination. The Act also introduced the criminal offence of incitement to racial hatred, covering the publication or distribution of written material or the use of words in a public place or meeting that were threatening, abusive or insulting and likely to "stir up hatred" on the ground of ethnicity, race or national origins.

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#### Reaction and Further Legislation

The Act was described within Parliament as making a "contribution to integration", with the Home Office Minister, Lord Stonham, stating at second reading of the Bill:

[F]or two thousand years we have welcomed to these shores—and sometimes it has been a welcome too warm for comfort—the people of many races. They have broadened and enriched our economy and culture. They—and it applies literally to all of us—are an integral part of our democracy and the British way of life. In recent years we have welcomed perhaps a million Commonwealth citizens who are easily distinguishable by their colour. They have made an important contribution, and will make an even greater one. Their coming has created problems

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in our crowded island, problems which are being and will be solved by the good will and sense of our people, assisted by measures towards integration promoted by local and central Governments. This Bill will make its contribution towards that integration [...]<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, concerns were expressed over whether the Bill went far enough, with some criticising the legislation for not covering discrimination in housing and employment and for not making racial discrimination a criminal offence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Institute for Racial Relations reported that:

The Race Relations Act [1965] was in fact derided by activists, for whom it was a great let-down. Many people like [Indian Workers' Association] organiser Vishnu Sharma, who had lobbied through CARD, described it as 'toothless'. [Ambalavaner] Sivanandan [of the IRR] in an interview called it not just toothless, but gumless.<sup>6</sup>

Set up in 1966, the Race Relations Board reportedly received 309 complaints up to 31 March 1967, with only 85 falling within the scope of its jurisdiction.<sup>7</sup> Following continued criticism that the legislation did not go far enough over the next decade two new Race Relations Acts were passed, the first in 1968 and the second in 1976.<sup>8</sup> The 1968 Act extended provisions so as to cover housing and employment, gave further powers to the Race Relations Board and set up a Community Relations Committee. Subsequently, the 1976 Act built upon the legislation further, including provisions targeting indirect discrimination and access to industrial tribunals.

Although the original Act was criticised for being weak, and concerns over racial inequalities are ongoing to the present day, it is still considered by some to be an important step in eradicating overt prejudice against ethnic communities.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the former director of the IRR, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, although critical of the 1965 Act, described the legislation introduced in the 1960s as an attempt to change public attitude and to pave the way to integration.<sup>10</sup>

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## Further Information

- Office for National Statistics, [Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales 2011](#), 11 December 2012
- John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain*, 2003

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Race Relations, '[The Race Relations Act 1965—Blessing or Curse?](#)', 13 November 2015

<sup>2</sup> BBC News, '[What Was Behind the Bristol Bus Boycott?](#)', 27 August 2013

<sup>3</sup> HL Hansard, '[Second Reading of the Race Relations Bill](#)', 26 July 1965, col 1006

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, col 1014

<sup>5</sup> BBC, '[On This Day: 8 December 1965—New UK Race Law “Not Tough Enough”](#)', accessed 14 January 2016

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Race Relations, '[The Race Relations Act 1965—Blessing or Curse?](#)', 13 November 2015

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> See: National Archives, '[Discrimination and Race Relations Policy](#)', accessed 14 January 2015; and Institute of Race Relations, '[The Race Relations Act 1965—Blessing or Curse?](#)', 13 November 2015

<sup>9</sup> *Guardian*, '[Racism is Still Alive and Well, 50 Years After the UK's Race Relations Act](#)', 8 December 2015

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Race Relations, '[The Race Relations Act 1965—Blessing or Curse?](#)', 13 November 2015

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