

## Report of Church and Peace online discussion on

### **“The Politics of Division – is the UK government using an agenda of ‘white nationalism’ to divide our communities?”**

**on 19 April 2021**

The catalyst for this event was the accusation in December 2020 by the director of the UK’s Runnymede Trust that the government was pursuing a divisive “white nationalist” agenda.

We were fortunate in having two wise and illuminating guest speakers: Simon Barrow, director of the theological think-tank Ekklesia, and Bishop John Perumbalath, Chair of Churches Refugee Network and trustee of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI).

The discussion was introduced by **Evelyn Shire**, a Yorkshire Quaker (also part of the planning team for the event), who drew the distinction between traditional “ethnic” nationalism and the more cosmopolitan “civic” nationalism which invites people to join them to build a shared future. At the moment in the UK, inward-looking and angry nationalism seems to have the upper hand, seeing the glory days of an unreal past and encouraging rampant xenophobia and racism.

Successive governments in the UK have scrambled to placate voters with the deliberately divisive “culture wars” – most recently seen in the furore around the Sewell Report which claimed that there is no systemic racism in British society – United Nations experts have said that this report is being used to “normalise white supremacy”. And while many of us grew up believing that a secure and self-confident country had no need of flamboyant flag-waving, we are now seeing Union Jacks everywhere, from the offices of junior politicians to the packaging of supermarket potatoes. The young Londoners who have revived the slogan of the 80s “There ain’t no black in the Union Jack” are making it clear how that makes them feel.

Our first guest speaker, **Simon Barrow**, introduced his talk by remembering the late Rev Ken Leech, the Church of England’s first Race Relations Officer, and a doughty campaigner against racism who helped to set up the Runnymede Trust. Simon felt that while in Evelyn’s introduction we had heard about some dangerous and unpleasant aspects of nationalism, the Prime Minister and his colleagues would of course deny that these have anything to do with their agenda. However, we cannot let them brush it aside so easily. There is an emerging right-wing English and British nationalist agenda, predominantly supported by white people, using the excuse of “racial resentment” – the false belief that people of colour, immigrants, asylum seekers, are stealing our houses, jobs, benefits etc. This has a long history and was prominent in the EU referendum, with some blatantly anti-immigrant campaigning, some of which echoed Nazi propaganda. It would be wrong to say that everybody who voted for Brexit is racist but it is also clear that racist groups saw Brexit as a way of making Britain whiter.

The current Conservative government is pursuing an aggressive hostile environment policy towards asylum seekers and others, and has turned the clock back on the MacPherson Report and other reports on institutional racism. The Sewell Report, already mentioned, was commissioned effectively to deny that racism is a systemic issue despite huge evidence to the contrary – the team appointed had a history of denying structural racism. The Commission on Race & Ethnic Disparities (which produced the Sewell Report) was set up by the government in response to the Black Lives Matter process which erupted last year, and also to the emerging debate over the UK’s imperial and colonial history, including the issue of statues of historic figures associated with slavery and colonisation. There is an attempt to restore the feeling of cosiness and ease about UK imperial history, and to

claim that racism is largely in the past and is in any case a consequence of individual failings. The Sewell report suggested that Black Communities themselves are responsible for the problems they face and even claimed that there are benefits and opportunities arising from colonial history.

The government is trying literally to “whitewash” Black History and to de-link debates on contemporary migration with the history of racism and the ongoing discussion on our role in the global context. It is not only an effort to divide and rule but to create a majority consensus (in England) around a white nationalist agenda. It is a deliberate way of avoiding an important turning-point symbolised by the BLM campaigns and by a growing commitment amongst civil society and faith groups towards the importance of racial justice for the healing of our nations and for the healing of the nations generally. It is wider than the UK - there are documented links between far-right groups in the UK and in the US and worldwide, and we also see the growth of far-right and racist groups throughout Europe, and the rise in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

The seepage of far-right politics into the mainstream happened via Brexit. Current government policies are part of long and complex developments and we must take very seriously the insidious growth of an English and British nationalist agenda permeated by racial resentment and opposition to immigration, hostility to Europe, nostalgia for Empire, contempt for human rights and their legal enforcement, denial of systemic and historic racism. There is a parallel agenda based on deregulation and protection of corporate power and side-lining of parliamentary accountability. Most policies to do with migration are absolutely steeped in in this worldview.

Finally we need to think about how we can face the challenge. While building unity, we need to be careful. The attempt to be “colour-blind” is a mistake: we need to recognise and expose these issues, not pretend that we can look the other way and it will disappear. Also in churches and faith communities we need to be careful about the easy rush to reconciliation – the attempt immediately to seek to pacify conflict without addressing the root causes. Sustainable peace will only emerge when we address issues of injustice.

The current narratives are harmful and destructive to us all, and as churches and faith communities we need a different story about how we can be together and learn from one another. We need to challenge institutional racism and recognise and deal with our own complicity and our own sin. The personal, political and spiritual are all bound together; spirituality is not an escape but a reshaping. We can build a coalition of change and announce, not just in words but in deeds and actions, a sense of good news in the face of racism in its multiple and linked forms. We can reject the story which is being imposed on us.

Following some discussion with Simon and in breakout rooms, we came back to the plenary where **Bishop John Perumbalath** reminded us that Arundhati Roy, the Indian activist and writer, pointed out that nationalism of one kind or another was the cause of most of the genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – we are therefore talking about very dangerous ideologies. He wasn’t sure if the government is sure if intentionally following an agenda to split the communities but its policies and rhetoric ensure that this is what is happening. The migration narrative has helped to turn people’s anger on to others, victimising and creating a hostile society. The UK the only nation in the world where creating a hostile environment for immigrants is official policy. “The White Working Class” is another narrative – in order to win them over, the Conservatives say that these are the people “left behind” – this is a deliberately racist agenda such as that used by Trump in the USA. The government has left the Windrush generation and other communities behind.

With his background in India, Bishop John is very aware that such nationalist agendas exist not just in UK but also elsewhere – the Indian government is also following a religious nationalist agenda –

“India is a Hindu country”. What both countries have in common is the rulers’ belief in their own superiority and their lack of concern for others who are “not like us”. This doctrine of superiority has played a huge part of British history – we became a rich and prosperous nation by plundering the resources of our colonies, and fed our people by forcefully taking food from others and letting them die. He reminded us of the famine in Bengal in 1943, when 3 million died because British troops took control of food distribution, and took it away from people who were deemed to be not worthy of our care.

Groups espousing white nationalism, such as the British National Party and UKIP, regularly speak about “our Christian roots” and have come to believe that Christianity is the religion of the west. This is also the case within the church itself – Bishop John told us about an interview for a post in a cathedral, when he was asked when his family had become Christian – the assumption being that the family had recently been converted. In fact, however, his family has been Christian for nearly 20 centuries – the first church in his part of the world was established in 51 AD.

Bishop John insisted that using Christianity in a nationalist way is against the transformational nature of Christianity. Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD said “the glory of God is a human being fully alive” – he did not say “white men and women fully alive”. We are called to create a new community where racial, social and economic values are broken down; we are all sojourners, pilgrims and exiles - not settlers. If we don’t understand this we will remain in control and others will remain at our mercy.

British society is already pluralistic – “being British” now is different from being British 50 years ago. The white nationalistic agenda is disaster for our own community. Bishop John told us about former priest in his care who refused to use any other language than English in worship, in spite of the different languages spoken in his congregation. When challenged, the priest said, “in our church we want to be a bit like Heaven – everybody speaking the same language”, and the faulty nature of his assumption, that the language in Heaven would be English, had to be pointed out to him.

Bishop John often refers to three approaches – mono-cultural, multi-cultural and inter-cultural. In the mono-cultural approach, the people of the dominant culture expect others to assimilate; other people can be recognised and appreciated, but they are regarded as inferior. Be like us, or go home. The multi-cultural approach celebrates racial and cultural differences, where people are happy to stand alongside each other but not be influenced by one another or disturb one another. With the inter-cultural approach, we come together to learn from one another, giving equal value and power to each other. The early church was established as an inter-cultural body – something which even the early apostles struggled with. It is part of the church’s calling to challenge society and call for transformation. But we first must become what we are called to be - if there is racism within the church, how do we become an agent of transformation in the wider society? Recently the Trustees of CTBI commissioned a piece of research to look at church, nationhood and identity, in the hope that this will contribute to a wider debate. A narrow racist nationalist agenda is in stark opposition to the values of the Gospel – we need to be intercultural and welcoming as Christian communities and share this with wider society. We must reclaim the church’s radical vision.

There was much lively discussion in breakout groups and in the plenary session. Over the evening, our speakers and some of the participants felt the presence of the spirit of the prophetic Anglican priest Ken Leech who was an inspiration for many. Our speakers this evening were equally inspiring and encouraged us to go forward to re-shape our worshipping communities, and the wider society.

*By Barbara Forbes*