

## ETHNIC QUESTION IN THE CENSUS AND THE EVIDENCE OF THE ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

The Royal Statistical Society has submitted evidence to you with the title "Questions on Racial/Ethnic Origin in the Census". This evidence is purported to be the "Views of the Royal Statistical Society and the Institute of Statisticians". This forces me to inform you that it is not correct. The evidence has not been discussed by the members of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS). I, an active member of RSS, found by accident that this evidence was to be submitted. It does have the approval of the RSS Council, a more or less self-perpetuating body, none of whose members has any experience of race relations. This evidence should, therefore, be treated with caution.

It is a regrettable feature of Western civilisation that in the past, its learned societies have invariably taken an anti-black stance. It is my hope and conviction that in the foreseeable future we shall change our institutions to adopt a posture of neutrality on racial issues. The RSS Council has never thought it fit to pronounce on questions which affect the welfare of ethnic minorities e.g. IQ and race, black population projections in Britain, Sus, etc. It has chosen to speak on an issue where there exists an almost unanimous opposition among ethnic minorities. It puts me in the strange position of having to explain to ethnic minorities that the RSS Council is not racist, only ignorant.

### REASONS FOR OPPOSITION

The issue of an ethnic question in the census is not new. It was debated widely in 1979-81. Initially, I took the view that the issue was irrelevant to the problems faced by ethnic minorities and that its only purpose was to provide material for publication to academics. This will allow them to gain 'recognition' (I realize that the vast majority of research workers involved in research on race relations, both here and the U.S.A., are white and often wonder, why?). I have traded union loyalties and, therefore, took a neutral stance in favour of the inclusion of ethnic questions in the census. As the debate progressed, I recognised my error and now oppose the inclusion of ethnic questions in the census in Britain.

The usually preferred argument in favour of inclusion is that ethnic minorities in the U.S.A. have used it to reduce discrimination. It is presented by those who fail to recognise the difference between Britain and the U.S.A. The Indian Constitution has a positive discrimination clause in it and ethnic minorities fall over each other to register as "scheduled castes". I wonder, given the success of the Indian experiment, if the RSS Council will now support positive discrimination in favour of black youth as Lord Scarman suggested!

The American experience is not relevant here, at least, not at the present time. American blacks are accepted to be rightful citizens. They are not threatened with deportations. Few politicians demand their repatriation. On entry to hospitals and other institutions they are not required to prove that they are legally in the country. None of them is arrested on suspicion of being an illegal immigrant on a visit to a police station to report a robbery. No American born black youth has ever been recommended by a judge for deportation to Trinidad. American blacks are not harassed by the police. In short, British

minorities have suffered so much at the hands of the British government and our institutions, that they feel insecure. They are frightened. In these circumstances, it is insane for a learned society to seek to add to their insecurity.

When British ethnic minorities are accepted to be as much a part of the British landscape as American ethnic minorities are of the American landscape, I shall commend the introduction of questions on ethnic origins in the census.

RSS evidence is uncertain about these fears and says "If these fears are indeed as widespread as some have claimed ...". I am surprised that RSS Council tries to gloss over the fears which exist among ethnic minorities. I cannot explain how anyone living in Britain during the last few years could be unaware of these.

The evidence states that "Reassurances (to ethnic minorities) must be provided.....". Who will provide these reassurances? A British government cannot bind its successors. Moreover, anyone who knows anything about race relations knows that very few people from ethnic minorities will put their faith in the word of a British government. In their experience British governments do not keep their promises to ethnic minorities. They will cite as examples the history of immigration laws, the assurances given to Kenyan Asians and to the dependents of those already settled here, the nationality law, etc. They might also remind you of the sad spectacle of a British government reneging on the European Convention for Human Rights just to keep a few hundred non-white husbands out. The list of broken promises by the British government may be lengthier than the evidence of the RSS Council.

Do we really need information from census to fight discrimination? The answer surely is, no. The RSS Council's evidence says that "over the past fifteen years research ..... financed by the government has shown a consistent pattern of discrimination". What has been done to remove this discrimination? Precious little. Where are the benefits in collecting more data which show, yet again, that ethnic minorities suffer discrimination in every sphere? What is needed is action. Yet this is precisely the point on which the RSS Council is silent and is likely to remain silent.

It is important that we use the next few years to establish the confidence of ethnic minorities in our institutions and avoid marginal issues which are likely to raise passions among them. The issue of ethnic questions in the census should be quietly forgotten till the 1991 census. The RSS Council should be told firmly that "The fact that ethnic groups exist" is no reason to provide it with "a reliable data base from which to establish present conditions". The social cost of pleasing the RSS Council, as shown by the 1981 Test Census in Harringey, is simply too high. The dispirited, disillusioned and discriminated ethnic minorities cannot afford it.

Evidence presented to the

Commons Sub-Committee on Race Relations

Alan Vella  
Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford OX3 9BQ

2 November 19