

The 'Ethnic Question'

A Critique of the Home Affairs Committee Report

Earlier this year, the Home Affairs Committee reported on 'ethnic and racial questions in the census'. The report concentrates on the effect of the 'absence of definitive census-based data on ethnic or racial origin on racial disadvantage programmes', and draws on evidence from almost a hundred organisations and individuals, including some from the USA and Canada. The main recommendation of the report is that a question on racial or ethnic origin should be included in the next census. Since the proposed 1986 census was rejected following Lord Rayner's review finding that a quinquennial census would be too costly, the recommendation will not now be implemented until 1991 at the earliest.

The Committee's strong support for an 'ethnic question' came as no surprise. They were already in favour of one before they looked into the matter, and had expressed regret over its omission from the 1981 census in an earlier report (1981, Racial Disadvantage, HMSO). Nor did they make any secret of their views whilst obtaining evidence; on the contrary, their support for the question was quite blatant during their examination of witnesses. Those who gave evidence opposing the question often found themselves in direct conflict with the Committee: Councillor Grant, Deputy Leader of Haringey Council, was told that it was a myth that a group of Tory MPs supported repatriation (Vol II, qu. 843); and statistician Atam Vetta was told that 'it (was) ridiculous of (him) to come before this Select Committee and talk such utter gibberish and suggest it is a matter of a few hundred thousand pounds...' and then denied the right of reply (Vol II, qu. 425), to give but two examples.

In fact, much of the evidence, both written and oral, was less than enthusiastic about the question, causing the Committee to be selective in their choice of evidence in support of their recommendations. Indeed, the Committee might be accused of overstating the support they received in evidence. For example, local authorities were described as supporting a question 'almost without exception' (Vol I, para 47), when four were very dubious and others expressed reservations. Many other organisations and individuals pointed to the problems involved, and some argued against the question.

Notwithstanding much of the evidence, the report argues strongly for the collection of definitive data by means of the census. Such accurate, detailed and complete data are contrasted with currently available, 'inaccurate, even impressionistic' (Vol I, para 12) data such as that obtained from surveys and census surrogates for ethnic origin. Definitive data, the argument goes, are needed by programmes designed to combat racial disadvantage and discrimination: since funding, which is usually at a local level, is based on data including ethnic origin, definitive local data are necessary. What is more, with definitive, and therefore credible, data further programmes could be pressed for by members of ethnic minorities.

There are several problems with this argument. First, the programmes to which the Committee refers are in fact those designed to deal with disadvantage generally (such as the Urban Programme), since explicitly racial disadvantage programmes do not exist in Britain. In these, ethnic

origin is one of several variables used to allocate funds.

Secondly, it is by no means clear that 'definitive' data would lead to a more advantageous distribution of funds for ethnic minority groups, as the Committee suggest. It has been shown both here and in the USA, despite their equal opportunity programmes, that census under-reporting of ethnic minorities is an appreciable problem. Such under-reporting may negate any increases in accuracy gained by avoiding sampling errors, for example. Efforts to secure respondent cooperation by assurances of confidentiality and the careful choice of question may reduce this problem to a lower level than experienced in the 1979 Haringey test census, but it is well-known that certain sections of the population, that is youth in particular, are least likely to be convinced. Census data on ethnic origin is thus open to the possibility of being selectively biased towards undercounts. In addition, though the Committee are keen to point to the estimated ten per cent undercount of the black population in the 1981 census, they appear to be oblivious of the fact that these data include an estimated 15 per cent white people living in households with a black head. It is not entirely certain, therefore, that 'definitive' data would lead to a more advantageous distribution of funds.

Thirdly, even if definitive data were available, their effect on present funding allocations would be no more than a tinkering at the margins. The Rate Support Grant, for example, uses ethnic origin data with a weight of two-sevenths in the calculation of the education block grant. A ten per cent underestimate in this variable would be equivalent to a weight of 26.5 per cent (rather than 28.6 per cent), and a 50 per cent underestimate would be the equivalent of a weight of only 16.7 per cent. But this allocation of funds accounts for only two to three per cent of the total grant-related expenditure assessments of local authorities with large ethnic minority populations: an adjustment of two per cent or even 12 per cent of this two to three per cent would be insignificant compared to the total. Similarly, in the Urban Programme, where ethnic origin is one of eight variables used to determine special status, errors of underestimation will not have a tremendous effect. Even if an area is granted special status, improvements for ethnic minority groups per se are not guaranteed.

Finally, the idea that ethnic minority groups should use definitive data to press for further programmes to eradicate disadvantage and discrimination is heavily based on experience in the USA. In this, the Committee reject the argument that the US situation is entirely different to that in Britain. In the USA, there is recognised political will at a government level to improve the lot of minority people through equal opportunity and affirmative action programmes. No such commitment is to be found in Britain. In addition, black Americans have much greater confidence than their counterparts in Britain to press for social and economic equality, because no-one is challenging their right to reside in the USA. In fact, greater parallels can be drawn between the positions of Hispanics in the USA and the black population in Britain in this respect, and it is therefore significant that some Hispanic leaders have urged their people not to cooperate with the census.

Misfounded though the Committee's enthusiasm for the American model of (ethnic) data collection may be, the model does at least work tolerably well on home ground. Had the Committee considered other West European countries, they would have been less impressed, but probably the wiser. Greater parallels might have been found in Holland and France where ethnic minority populations also originate from ex-colonies and cannot be identified by nationality. Their censuses would not have provided examples of how data on ethnic origin were obtained, but examination of these countries would have shown how countries with similar situations to our own operate in the absence of definitive data. Indeed, Holland is worse off than Britain in this respect, since her 1981 census was postponed 'indefinitely' because of issues of confidentiality and financial constraint, and yet a coordinated minorities policy has been developed. West Germany, too, had to postpone the 1983 census at the last minute because of opposition concerning confidentiality (see RS27), and though these cases may not directly concern ethnic minorities, they do illustrate recent developments regarding census-taking which are all the more relevant for sensitive questions such as ethnic origin. It is not impossible that here in Britain the next census will meet with similar opposition following concerns about the Data Protection Bill and the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill.

In fact, this kind of general opposition to the census on grounds of confidentiality also occurred in Canada, though the Committee do not appear to consider it relevant. In the 1981 Canadian census, the problem was successfully pre-empted by the skillful use of the media and good public relations. Indeed, such practices are now a routine and important element of census operations in the USA, especially with regard to ethnic origin. The Committee commends them for use in Britain along with other US imports such as programmes to 'develop community level support among ethnic minority groups' (Vol I, para 96). In the USA, it should be noted, the Bureau of the Census 'hired minority people to live and work in given areas' (Vol I, para 100) in order to elicit support for the census, and prominent black and Hispanic sports figures (are there no minority members of other professions?) were used in public appearances. That such methods are necessary, even within the more favourable US context and 'despite a long, relatively successful history of asking questions on ethnic or racial origin in the Census' (Vol I, para 103), does not bode well for Britain.

Behind this call for more publicity and better promotion is the belief that if only black people understood the 'need' for data and if they could be convinced that the data would not be misused or find their way into other government departments, then they would have no reason to object. One of the reasons for the failure of the Haringey Test was that the question had not been well promoted, largely because OPCS 'did not have a positive case to put' (Vol II, qu 306) because 'nobody at the time was prepared to say how it would be used' (Vol I, para 34). But while this argument attempts to allay fears of misuse, it ignores the call for concrete evidence on the part of government of a commitment to equal rights and the elimination of disadvantage. In short, minority groups question the existence of political will: without this there is no need for

data. For the Committee, however, 'no new expression of will is needed' (Vol I, para 106) to improve upon allocations under existing policies, and whilst a declaration of will is highly desirable, it 'is not essential' (Vol I, para 106). The Committee recommend that data be collected; they do not recommend that the Government make a declaration of intent to act upon existing or future data.

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Reference:

Home Affairs Committee, Ethnic and Racial Questions in the Census. Session 1982-1983. Vols. I, II & III. HMSO, 1983.

Some quotes from the report (Vol I):

We entirely accept that black people are not in themselves a problem: the major problems are that they have some needs that might be neither perceived nor catered for by Government, that policies do not reach them and that they suffer from racial discrimination. (para 11)

Undoubtedly any Government could legislate to repeal the confidentiality provisions of the Census Act, however improbable this might appear at present. (para 71)

In sum, MSC's sample is useless as an indicator of whether their programmes are meeting at a local level the needs of ethnic minority groups. (para 27)

We suspect that the working group set up by DES to examine possible questions is little more than a time-wasting exercise to postpone positive decision-making within DES. (para 31)

Blacks are, on the whole, prepared to identify their colour if they perceive the object is to assist work against disadvantage: this explains the good response rate to the NDHS and LFS. (para 95)

...such a Government would not rely on Census data. Records of immigration exist, and most ethnic minority people in this country are readily identifiable by skin colour, unlike many German Jews in the 1930's. (para 71)

The fears put to us centred around immigration and nationality, which are manifestly not the object of asking questions on ethnic origins. (para 76)