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## PLAYING THE ETHNIC CARD – politics and ghettoisation in London’s East End

Ghettoisation is a politically charged subject, and politicians are often accused of encouraging racism and ghettoisation by ‘playing the race card’. But it is not just political parties that may be found to be promoting ethnic separation. There are strong drives towards separate organisation within different ethnic communities, and organisational separation can easily manifest itself as physical separation; indeed sometimes that is an important aim. This paper explores the role of political forces on the evolution and development of ghettoisation through the example of one of the most ghettoised immigrant communities in Britain, the Bengali Muslims in Tower Hamlets, whose families largely immigrated from Sylhet in what is now Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup>

The crucial first link in many Bengali immigration chains was formed by *lascars* in the British Empire’s merchant navy, who had jumped ship and established themselves near the docks. Larger-scale immigration can be dated from the 1950s. In London, most Bengalis worked in the garment trade, perhaps after initial unskilled jobs in the hotel and catering trade, or on the railways, and many more found work in factories in the north and the midlands. The seventies and eighties saw a rapid growth in the East End Bengali community as wives and children finally left their homes in Bangladesh to join the men, and others moved down from the recession-hit towns of the north.

Like other immigrants, the Bengalis relied on their own community networks for the infrastructure of daily life and for physical protection. They lived close together near the mosque, the shops that sold Bengali foodstuffs, the garment workshops where other Bengalis could find them work, and, most importantly, near others who spoke their language and understood their needs, where they could find protection in numbers from the unfamiliar and hostile world of white Britain.

As the garment trade increasingly succumbed to foreign competition, the predominantly Sylheti-run ‘Indian’ restaurant business was expanding and providing an important stepping-stone for many new and older immigrants; and although this has allowed some families to put down roots all over the country, Tower Hamlets has remained the Bengali capital.

Many of the first Bengali settlers established themselves in privately-rented flats in Spitalfields in the west end of the borough, where Dickensian living conditions meant they met with little competition for tenancies, and fewer signs specifying ‘no coloureds’<sup>2</sup>. However Tower Hamlets has a very high proportion of council houses, and a high proportion of Bengalis eventually got places in council accommodation. As with the earlier Jewish immigration, the area of Bengali settlement has spread eastward from its original nucleus, many longer-established white residents have moved out, and some Bengali families are also choosing a more suburban existence. Parts of the old centres of immigration are succumbing to the dual pressures of office

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<sup>1</sup> Most people are happy to be described as either Bengali or Bangladeshi, though Bengali is preferred by those who want to stress a secular cultural identity, and Bangladeshi by those who want to draw a distinction between Islamic Bangladesh and Hindu West Bengal. Although Bangladeshi is most commonly used by those outside the community, Bengali can also be used when referring to the time before the creation of Bangladesh, and for that reason I will tend to adopt it here.

<sup>2</sup> Forman (1989 p30) claims ‘In 1966 a third of all adverts in the local press for privately rented rooms actually specified “no coloureds”.’

expansion and gentrification; and there are similar developments in former white working-class areas.

Although immigration is now very limited, natural increase is still having a major effect and ghettoisation is still increasing. Large families have produced a Bengali age profile that is heavily slanted towards the younger end, with 40% under 16 (compared to 12.5% of the borough's 'White British' population).<sup>3</sup> The 2001 Census found that 65,500 people - one third of the population of Tower Hamlets - described themselves as ethnically 'Bangladeshi', and that they were largely concentrated in certain areas of the borough. The age profile already has implications for schools, and also means that the community will become rapidly dominated by a generation born and educated in Britain.

### ORGANISING AS A COMMUNITY

The first distinctly political forces that served to bring the Bengali immigrants together were focused on their Bengali homeland: first the campaign for independence from Britain, then the politics of what had become East Pakistan – and especially its troubled relationship with the West Pakistani dominated government in Islamabad. Initially, most Bengalis in Britain still saw themselves as sojourners with futures and families in East Bengal. There were also concerns connected with the freedom to come to Britain. Initially these also related to the Pakistani government and its emigration restrictions, but then the focus turned to the British government and its increasingly restrictive legislation, starting with the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962.

Campaigns not only encouraged Bengali solidarity, but also strengthened the community organisations with which they were associated, consolidating the community's emotional and physical heart in Tower Hamlets. So, for example, the campaign for Pakistani passports, which was co-ordinated in London by the newly-formed Pakistan Welfare Association, gave the association an enormous boost in membership.<sup>4</sup> Political activists combined their more overt political activities with community work. For those on the left, such as Tasadduk Ahmed who played a major part in early community organisation, this was an important part of the practice of 'popular front' politics and was supposed to politicise people more generally<sup>5</sup>.

The politics of their homeland could not be fully shared with the Bengalis' white neighbours; and it also cut across other possible bases of organisation, such as class. It was central to Bengali life during the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971<sup>6</sup>, and Bangladeshi politics – both national and local - continues to play an important role in Tower Hamlets today, with modern communications making it ever easier for community links to be intermeshed with transnational ones. The international link was officially reinforced with the twinning (in 1996) of Tower Hamlets and Sylhet, so consolidating the Sylheti imprint on Tower Hamlets.

### IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

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<sup>3</sup> Borough statistics from [www.towerhamlets.gov.uk](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Adams (1994)

<sup>5</sup> Glynn (2006)

<sup>6</sup> Glynn (2006). This did not, of course, mean that the organisation of united Bengali action was easy or without, sometimes bitter, political conflict.

Immigration legislation can be seen both as a response to popular racism, and, despite its avowed opposite intent, as a spur to greater racism and racial division. Since the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, immigration rules have been widely acknowledged to be constructed so as to restrict non-white immigration<sup>7</sup>, and by the mid sixties both the main political parties were arguing that limiting immigration and legislating for improved race relations were two sides of the same coin. This fuelled racism, legitimising the view that racist violence could be blamed on the growth of the black and Asian population. And racism encouraged ghettoisation as self-defence, and the movement of white families out of immigrant neighbourhoods.

The way the legislation worked actually encouraged chain immigration and ethnic clustering. In response to the introduction of immigrant work vouchers in the 1962 Act, Bengalis already in Britain organised themselves, for example through the Pakistan Catering Association, to procure vouchers for would-be immigrants. After 1971, and the effective end of the possibilities for Bengali primary immigration, the vast majority of those who came were relations, by blood or marriage, to people already in the country. These new immigrants came to join those already here.

#### THE POLITICS OF HOUSING

Crucial to race relations and to ghettoisation, is the issue of housing, and nowhere more so than in Tower Hamlets, where the housing available has always fallen far short of what is required, and housing issues dominate councillors' surgeries. Limited options have tended to push immigrants disproportionately into the poorest housing, and for the existing population, too, this is an area where the effect of immigration may be quite literally brought home. Already in 1903, the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, which failed to find evidence for most of the social effects then largely blamed on Jewish immigrants in the same areas of East London, did accept that immigration was responsible for increasing overcrowding and for displacement of the previous population.<sup>8</sup> The famous map of 1899 that accompanied Russell and Lewis' volume on *The Jew in London* shows this in graphic terms, with large areas hatched deep blue to indicate streets with more than 75% of their residents Jewish, and many solid blue to indicate 95% Jewish residency.<sup>9</sup> Competition for housing has long been an important catalyst for racialised action<sup>10</sup>, and is far from being a new source of tension, as implied by Dench et al in their recent, and much heralded, examination of *The New East End*<sup>11</sup>. Their book records white working-class concern, not only about the huge demand for housing, but also about housing policies that, especially since the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, have increasingly prioritised those in greatest need, rather than rewarding long-term residents. The general principle of housing meeting the needs of those in the worst housing conditions, has been recognised since the beginning of slum clearance in the thirties, but in practice it was always subject to some qualification. In Tower Hamlets, those most in need have often been large, newly arrived, Bengali families.

Dench et al follow the lead of many of their interviewees in regretting the loss of older letting systems and of the strength they gave to established family networks.

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<sup>7</sup> Solomos (1989) p 52

<sup>8</sup> Garrard (1971) p 40

<sup>9</sup> Russell and Lewis (1900)

<sup>10</sup> Feldman p 183

<sup>11</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 4

This is an important point, but housing for those in greatest need is important too – which is why new criteria were introduced after bitter struggle. The crucial issue, which the book does not discuss, is that the problem is not the prioritising of those in greatest need, but chronic under-investment in public housing, which has meant that those in greatest need can only be helped at the expense of those a little better off. *The New East End* develops old reactionary ideas in line with the currently fashionable sport of blaming the welfare state for community breakdown. It has proved a headline catching thesis, but it is an argument based on accepting narrow, politically imposed limits and ignoring wider socio-economic issues. The book rightly points out that ‘from the beginning of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets there has... been a contest for housing in which both groups feel badly treated’,<sup>12</sup> but it cannot resolve that contest within its own limited terms.

In her classic study of segregation, Susan Smith has shown that apparently aracial policies ‘have effectively (if apparently unintentionally) denied black people full access to the welfare and property rights associated with state-subsidized housing’<sup>13</sup>. The nature of council house allocation resulted in inbuilt discrimination against the Bengalis, and a climate of institutional racism meant that there was little incentive to do anything about it. For a start, there were comparatively few houses for large families and a lack of interpreters. Rules made it impossible to apply for family housing until wives and children were in the country, and applicants lost their place on the waiting list if they left the country for more than 3 months – which frequently happened as they battled with red tape in the immigration section of the British High Commission in Dhaka. As a result, Bengalis frequently found themselves in temporary accommodation as homeless families, and although this made them a priority for re-housing, the homeless tended to be given the worst flats. On top of this, housing departments were riddled with conscious and unconscious prejudice and assumption<sup>14</sup>. As a local campaigning group pointed out, housing officers’ original biased allocations had a compounded effect on racism and ghettoisation, as they gave certain white families ‘the feeling they had the “right” to keep their estates white’<sup>15</sup>

The racial impacts of council housing legislation were coincidental to its underlying aims; however, the vital issue of housing as it affects different ethnic groups has been taken up by different political organisations, and this in turn has impacted on housing patterns.

## BLACK RADICALISM

Racism was a crucial factor in Bengali housing decisions, with few families wanting to move out from the heartland of the Bengali settlement in Spitalfields, even though this meant living in appalling conditions in run down private rented housing, or, increasingly, in squats. When they were allocated council housing, it was generally in

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<sup>12</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 164

<sup>13</sup> Smith (1989) p50

<sup>14</sup> As demonstrated in an independent report commissioned by the GLC in 1983-4 (Philips, 1986) and the 1988 CRE report on Tower Hamlets, as well as by anecdotes from those affected (Glynn, 2005 p536). The GLC were landlords of around 3/5 of the Borough’s public housing until their abolition, when GLC housing stock passed to the Borough Council.

<sup>15</sup> *Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) Annual Report* December 1983, p4

predominantly white areas, where the racism forced many to return to the slums they had hoped to leave.

Bengali squatters initially sought practical help and advice from Terry Fitzpatrick of the Squatters Union, who combined the skills of a trained builder with ‘sort of anarchist’ policies of ‘self help’<sup>16</sup>; but the squats acquired a more overt political dimension one evening in January 1975, when Mala and Farrukh Dhondy and another member of the Race Today Collective joined the squatters’ weekly meeting. As part of the vanguard of Black Radicalism, Race Today attempted to turn the squatters into a movement for black self-organisation<sup>17</sup>. The following February they established the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) and it has been estimated that ‘at its peak BHAG was several hundred families strong, with a core of 150 in the four main squats’<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, Race Today was instrumental in organising an anti-racist group that rejected older conciliatory methods and set up its own vigilante patrols.

The role played by these organisations in mobilising a generation of young Bengalis has been well acknowledged<sup>19</sup>, and many of those who now form Tower Hamlets’ political and civil establishment can trace their active roots to this time, but what was the impact of the Black Radical ideology? For most of those involved, the turn towards separate organisation appears to have been pragmatic rather than ideological<sup>20</sup>, but that does not mean that separate organisation did not have powerful effects that are still being felt today. Looking back, Mala Sen (formerly Dhondy) is characteristically forthright:

We did change people’s minds, we did make them feel... a more kind of... community sense rather than an individual sense... I think we achieved a lot, but I think we had a limited agenda. I mean you can’t create a world revolution with ghetto politics, and it was ghetto politics.<sup>21</sup>

BHAG’s key demand was not only the permanent re-housing of all its members, but that they be given the option of housing in the safe area of E1. Following the GLC squatters’ amnesty in 1977, the Bengali squatters were able to agree a list of acceptable estates, and Bengali tenants campaigning for slum clearance and re-housing then took up the demands and agreed a similar list. A GLC housing document proposed taking this a step further, suggesting,

...we might continue to meet the wishes of the Bengali community by earmarking blocks of flats or, indeed a whole estate if necessary, for their community, *provided* the existing

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzpatrick, interviewed 23 Aug and 20 Nov 2001

<sup>17</sup> Black radicalism was a formative strand of the New Left that developed from criticism of tendencies towards mechanicism and excessive structuralism *within* Marxism, to criticism of Marxism itself. It disputed Marx’s argument that the primary division in society is class, based upon ownership of the means of production. Socialist revolution remained the ultimate aim, but the Black Radicals argued that autonomous black revolution had to come first, and would help to bring it about. Working-class unity was postponed, and the majority of the working class was temporarily excluded from the equation altogether.

<sup>18</sup> Forman (1989) p 82 Charlie Forman was himself involved as a housing campaigner from 1979

<sup>19</sup> Glynn (2005) pp 538-9

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, interview with Abbas Uddin 10 Oct 2001, quoted in Glynn (2005) p 538

<sup>21</sup> Interviewed 5 Nov 2001

tenants wish to move away and could be given the necessary transfers.<sup>22</sup>

When these plans leaked out to the *Observer*<sup>23</sup>, they caused a flurry of activity among journalists and worried community groups, and considerable confusion in the main political parties. Jean Tatham, GLC housing committee chair, initially clung firmly to the proposals, even telling the *East London Advertiser*, ‘I will give priority to any of my white tenants who are overcrowded or who want transfers from blocks that are predominantly non-white’ and ‘I am prepared to consider applications from all-white or all-West Indian groups, for instance, who want to live separately on their own estate.’<sup>24</sup> Other Tories were more critical, and the Labour opposition, which had initially seemed ready to back the scheme, became increasingly persuaded of its potential for boosting racism and division. What had become dubbed ‘The Ghetto Plan’ was eventually rejected, but the GLC decided that when vacancies occurred on nine specified estates that already had a large number of Bengalis, they would be offered to the Bengali squatters; and a GLC spokesman told the *Daily Mail* that ‘Existing tenants who wish to move from these blocks will be transferred’<sup>25</sup>. The political confusion had been encouraged, and the proposals to a considerable extent legitimated, by the Black Radicals’ demands. Mala Dhondy, on behalf of BHAG, told the *Observer* that ‘The GLC has gone beyond what we asked in a potentially dangerous way’<sup>26</sup>, and a ‘packed and emotional’, racially-mixed meeting organised by local community groups unanimously called for the withdrawal of the original GLC report<sup>27</sup>; however the principle that council policy should enable concentrated Bengali settlement in the E1 area was rarely challenged.

This debate was of immediate concern to around 300 families consisting of about 2,000 people, but the pattern it set so publicly, and which had already been accepted by housing officials more privately, was to have much wider impact. BHAG’s campaign played an important part in the ghettoisation of the Bengalis. It also helped make possible the very high proportion of Bengalis – unique among ethnic minority groups – who were able to find accommodation in council housing; and at the same time, because of their special requirements, made it easier for them to be discriminated against in terms of housing quality.

Although she criticised the GLC report at the time, overall, Mala’s view remains unequivocal:

Some people said, “You are creating a ghetto”. We said, “fine, we prefer the ghetto, at least you have each other to defend yourself”... So that’s what it was and we achieved it, and today you walk round Brick Lane, it’s totally Bengali.

Separate black - and later ethnic - organisation was not confined to Tower Hamlets. Similar changes were taking place everywhere, however the role of Race Today

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Leech (1994) p 13

<sup>23</sup> *Observer* 4 June 1978

<sup>24</sup> *East London Advertiser* 9 June 1978

<sup>25</sup> *Daily Mail* 20 June 1978

<sup>26</sup> *Observer* 11 June 1978

<sup>27</sup> *East London Advertiser* 16 June 1978

allowed the Bengalis to achieve a high level of organisation, which may help to account for the exceptionally high degree of ethnic concentration still found in the Bengali community.

As Kalbir Shukra points out in her history of 'black politics', despite the revolutionary rhetoric, 'the search for group strength and power as black people[,] turned black liberation into a pursuit of a stronger bargaining position with the establishment'; and 'in the end they settled for a piece of the British pie'.<sup>28</sup> Black Radicalism could not answer the fundamental theoretical question of how different oppressed groups would ultimately link forces, and instead made it less likely that they would do so. BHAG's demands contradicted all the old Left arguments about working-class unity, limiting the scope of the movement and militating against the coming together of different groups in a common cause, as had been so successfully promoted by the housing activists in the East End of the thirties<sup>29</sup>.

The radicalism failed to put down roots, and dreams of black separatism have mutated into today's liberal multiculturalism, but community organisation was left flourishing, and Bengali political activists still see themselves as working for and representing their community. This was a politics that encouraged social as well as physical ghettoisation.

#### WHITE POPULISM

Perennial and severe competition for housing inevitably led to conflict. When attempts were made to address Bengali needs - by rehousing squatters or by giving priority to homeless families or those suffering severe overcrowding, or by building larger housing units - this was seen as queue jumping and discrimination against established residents. There was plenty of scope for political groups to 'play the race card'.

This became a particularly potent tool from the mid eighties. Conservative housing policies – especially the Right to Buy introduced in 1980 and the accompanying restrictions on investment in housing - were putting pressure on council housing throughout the country. In the East End, this coincided with rising Bengali demand as family reunification brought more wives and children from Bangladesh. Other inner London Boroughs had larger numbers of homeless families, but in Tower Hamlets more and more of the homeless were Bengali – half of the total in 1981 and nearly 90% in 1987.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Labour splits had allowed the Liberals to take power in Tower Hamlets, and to put into practice a community politics that excluded the Bengalis. Most Bengalis could be guaranteed to vote Labour, so, for the Liberals, appealing to the white working class made electoral sense<sup>31</sup>; and, when circumstance suited, the Labour party succumbed to similar tactics. The Conservatives were never a

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<sup>28</sup> Shukra (1998) pp 49 and 27

<sup>29</sup> Glynn (2005)

<sup>30</sup> Forman (1989) p 231

<sup>31</sup> Sabine Drewes (1994) has noted that although Tower Hamlets Liberals had a 70% Bengali membership on paper, this was based on traditional village patronage politics, and that it was 'the interplay of white domination of central party committees and of the [Bengali] community leader's personal career aspirations that prevented effective representation of ethnic interests' (p30). The community leader in question was Syed Nurul Islam who stood for the Liberal Democrats in Bethnal Green and Bow in the 2005 general election, when he came in 4<sup>th</sup> on 11% of the vote.

potential force in Tower Hamlets – but of course it was their national housing policies that created the climate that made these politics possible.

The conduct of the local Liberals became so notorious that the national party was forced to hold an inquiry into their publication of ‘allegedly racist election literature between 1990 and 1993’<sup>32</sup> and to suspend the three men most involved. Tower Hamlets Liberals had actually been practising their populist politics from the time of their election to office in 1986, when they caused widespread outrage (and publicity) with proposals to put hundreds of homeless families into a ship moored on the Thames.<sup>33</sup> Their strategy almost always centred on housing, and consciously encouraged the idea of different housing entitlements for different ethnic groups.

Charlie Foreman has shown how these policies allowed the Liberals to shift the blame for housing shortage onto the homeless (predominantly Bengalis), while continuing to sell off housing and building land.<sup>34</sup> To be fair, under the previous Labour administration, housing had been both inefficient and discriminatory, however, the Liberals made discriminatory procedures the centre of their community politics, establishing the idea that the Bengali families were a threat to the existing community and did not belong here. One of their first acts was to garner popular support for their policies (and encourage polarisation) by getting existing council tenants to vote for endorsing proposals limiting still further the options available to homeless families requiring more than two bedrooms, almost all of whom would be Bengali.<sup>35</sup>

In 1987, the council stopped paying for accommodation for dozens of homeless families whose wives and children had recently arrived from Bangladesh, and succeeded where the Labour council had failed in getting the courts to support their argument that the families had made themselves intentionally homeless when they left Bangladesh, and so were not entitled to housing.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, they reintroduced housing policies that favoured sons and daughters of long-established existing tenants – policies that had been scrapped in the early eighties as inherently racist. Although the number of allocations made under this scheme was relatively small, the ideas it embodied provided a rallying cry for a white community that saw itself as under siege. Between 1989 and 1992 sons and daughters legislation was used to place 170 tenants, of whom 73% were white, 11% black and 6% Asian,<sup>37</sup> but the policy allowed the Liberals to present themselves as champions of the local (white) community, and to paint the Bangladeshis, and their Labour defenders, as usurpers of local homes.

For the 1990 local council elections, the Liberals made this point through a provocative fake leaflet that purported to be an edition of Labour News and announced ‘HOMES FOR LOCALS – RACIST! SAYS LABOUR’. It then proceeded to explain;

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<sup>32</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) The local party campaigned as the ‘Liberal Focus Team’.

<sup>33</sup> see eg East London Advertiser 7 Nov 1986 and 31 Oct 1986

<sup>34</sup> Forman (1989) pp 249 - 251

<sup>35</sup> Forman (1989) p 250

<sup>36</sup> *ibid* p 244 and *New Statesman* 11 Dec 1987

<sup>37</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) p 26

In the last 4 years Bangladeshi people in Tower Hamlets have been discriminated against by Liberals' racist housing policies, like the Sons and Daughters scheme and their decision not to house homeless families because they had left homes abroad...

If Labour is elected the homeless will go to the top of the list, EVEN IF THIS MEANS ALL EMPTY FLATS BEING ALLOCATED TO THEM.<sup>38</sup>

The next year, newly elected councillor, Jeremy Shaw, who had written the leaflet, took advantage of his position on a post-cyclone charity mission to Bangladesh to take his message to the Bangladeshi Government and the British High Commission. Before leaving he informed the East London Advertiser,

I will tell them that Tower Hamlets is full to bursting, and that for anyone to leave Bangladesh and come to Tower Hamlets and expect the Council to house them is totally irresponsible – both to their own families and to the rest of the community... I will want to know what procedures are followed by the British High Commission before they give people permission to settle in the U.K.<sup>39</sup>

Populist abuse of housing politics reached an infamous peak in Millwall on the Isle of Dogs, where it enabled the brief reign of BNP Councillor Derek Beackon. It was no accident that this racist politics thrived next to the Thatcherite reincarnation of the London Docklands, which could be seen to be consuming money and land while providing no benefits to its poorer neighbours. Unemployment was high and housing scarce and neglected, and there were good socio-economic reasons for local residents to be angry. The Island's relatively small Bengali population provided an easy scapegoat. Janet Foster quotes the local vicar, who commented that the arrival of yet another set of newcomers was 'one more bit of change that people didn't like but which they felt they could kick against'<sup>40</sup>.

The Liberals had divided Tower Hamlets into neighbourhoods, and the Isle of Dogs was Labour-run and had not adopted the sons and daughters schemes that operated in Liberal-run areas. This became the main plank of the Liberal 1992 Millwall by-election campaign, under the slogan of 'Island homes for Island people'.<sup>41</sup> Housing allocation in Masthouse Terrace, the first social housing to be built in the area for many years, provided a focus of debate and anger, especially as the scheme included some larger units that were commonly perceived as purpose-made for large Bengali families. The xenophobic atmosphere allowed the BNP to pick up 20% of the vote, but rather than take this as a warning, both Liberals and Labour chose to pander to populist racism when Millwall held a second by-election the following year.<sup>42</sup> The left-wingers who dominated the ward Labour party in the eighties had been ousted, and the new ward leadership attempted to outflank the Liberals on their own ground,

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<sup>38</sup> A copy of the leaflet is in Tower Hamlets' Local History Library

<sup>39</sup> *East London Advertiser* 15 Nov 1991

<sup>40</sup> Foster (1996) p 162

<sup>41</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) pp 37- 40

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* pp 40 - 42

with a call to 'house the hidden homeless... your children who have to sleep on the couch, your brothers and sisters who want a place of their own, your grandchildren without space to grow up in...' <sup>43</sup>. The crucial boost to the BNP was, however, provided by a self-serving and dishonest tactical blunder by the Labour Party, who leaked false canvas returns suggesting that it was the BNP that was the main threat to Labour. It seems they had intended to frighten people into voting Labour to keep out the BNP, but populist sentiments had been aroused, and the effect was to boost BNP credibility and make their imagined threat a reality. <sup>44</sup> Beackon got in with 1,480 votes to Labour's 1,473, and although he lost the election the following year, that was after a major effort to bring out the antiracist vote and trump a BNP vote that had actually risen by 561.

All this clearly encouraged racist attitudes and the popular linking of race and territory. These politics built on and promoted a ghetto mentality, but what impact did they actually have on housing distribution?

Most Bengalis still wanted homes near Spitalfields, but these were limited and many families found themselves in other parts of the borough. Families allocated accommodation under homeless persons' legislation were given very little option but to accept whatever they were offered, and this provided a vehicle for moving Bengalis into less attractive white estates. So, for example, of the eight Bengali families placed on the Teviot Street Estate in 1984 under the Labour-controlled Tower Hamlets Council, all but one had been living for months in the grim hotels used as temporary accommodation and would have been out on the streets if they had refused. <sup>45</sup> Before the 1977 Act made housing homeless families a legal obligation, they had been regarded as undeserving wasters; and attitudes did not change overnight. All homeless families were generally allocated the least popular housing, and in a racist political climate that juxtaposed housing Bengali homeless against finding better homes for the established white working class, it is easy to see how the Bengalis could end up concentrated in the very worst housing of all. This was not official policy, but it had long been a common practice, and was encouraged by a politics all too ready to exploit the ethnic card. It is not surprising to discover that a 1988 CRE report found Tower Hamlets Liberal Council guilty of allocating ethnic minorities disproportionately to a poor quality estate <sup>46</sup>.

Under the Liberals, every neighbourhood had to take its share of homeless families, but biased letting practices encouraged by populist rhetoric, ensured that within the neighbourhoods Bengali families tended to be clustered within certain housing schemes. That same populism encouraged racism and defensive separatism, and promoted 'white flight'. Through no wish of their own, the Bengalis had become colonisers of new areas.

#### THE NEW MULTICULTURAL ORTHODOXY

Community organisation among the Bengalis was strengthened by all these battles. Increasing numbers became involved in local politics and civil society more

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<sup>43</sup> *New Statesman and Society* 18 Feb 1994 p 20

<sup>44</sup> *ibid* p 19 and *Liberal Democrats* (1993) pp 54 - 55

<sup>45</sup> press release by the families and community groups announcing a picket of the Town Hall 19 June 1984

<sup>46</sup> CRE (1988) p 11

generally, but such involvement was generally centred on promoting community interests. Even within the Labour Party, Bengalis often acted as a group and independently of more orthodox left, right divisions, which could lead to strange changing alliances<sup>47</sup>.

Through the nineties, ethnic organisation became institutionalised into the new politics of multiculturalism. Although this was often presented as liberatory, it posed no threat to the existing economic and social order. In the new Labour Party, good anti-racist credentials could be used as a radical cloak to hide a lack of socialist, class-based politics. It became more acceptable - as well as much easier - to help Bengalis and other ethnic minority groups by subsidising an arts festival, say, than by addressing the structures that were reproducing fundamental inequalities in society; even though any serious attack on racism would require a serious attack on the conditions of inequality on which racism thrives.

But multiculturalism is not just a distraction from more fundamental issues. It can act as a barrier to working class unity, encouraging different groups to compete against each other along ethnic lines. A common focus for such competition has been the allocation of regeneration funding, where millions of pounds have been committed to projects specifically supporting black and minority ethnic groups. This can contribute to resentments and perpetuate division.

In 2004, the letters page of the *East London Advertiser* was packed with complaints about the building of a sheltered housing block for 'Asian Elders', after the leading Liberal Democrat councillor had talked about calling in the Commission for Racial Equality, and David Davis, the Conservative shadow Home Secretary, had condemned it as 'the sort of thoughtless policy that feeds extremism'<sup>48</sup>. Although Davis had (fashionably) presented this as an issue of segregation, the real source of concern locally appears to have been – yet again – the competition for housing. The Sonali Gardens scheme helps meet the needs of the growing numbers of older Bengalis by serving halal food, providing space for Muslim prayer and employing staff who speak Sylheti as well as English. It should provide a home to people who are unlikely to integrate further into British society than they already have. However, the sight of a hoarding advertising council-sponsored homes for just one section of the community was bound to raise questions. This particular issue does not appear to have been raised in connection with the homes for 'black and minority ethnic elders' built as a joint partnership between the council, East London Mosque and two housing associations two years earlier<sup>49</sup>. Perhaps it was too much part of the mosque complex to be thought a candidate for more general housing – or perhaps politicians did not then find it useful to draw attention to it.

Potentially of more concern to those worried about segregation, is the Government promotion of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic)-led housing associations, especially as housing associations are increasingly becoming the main providers of publicly subsidised social housing. BME housing associations are defined as those with 80% or more of their governing body drawn from BME communities, however they also

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<sup>47</sup> Compare, for example, *East London Advertiser* 27 April 1995 and 2 May 1996

<sup>48</sup> *Evening Standard* 27 Apr 2004, *Daily Mail* 28 Apr 2004 and *East London Advertiser* 29 Apr, 6 May, 13 May and 10 June 2004

<sup>49</sup> Tower Hamlets Council press release 22 July 2002

tend to employ many more BME staff and house a much higher proportion of BME tenants<sup>50</sup>. All housing in the borough (council and housing association) is centrally advertised. Potential tenants submit preferences, and homes are allocated by the council's letting department. Advertisements for general needs housing cannot specify a particular ethnic group, and although associations have in the past told the council they are looking for particular groups of tenants – and one of the council officers remembers a couple of allocations being rejected on grounds of ethnicity – they now have no ethnic restrictions on allocations. Legally, some housing associations that are charities are allowed to provide housing for a particular ethnic or national group if that is specified in their foundation deeds (so long as the group is not defined by colour). Other housing organisations can only do so to meet special needs, which was the argument used in the case of Sonali Gardens<sup>51</sup>. BME led associations may, though, (provided they avoid indirect discrimination) be more ready to address what is lacking in the general market from the point of view of Bengali tenants (such as larger houses), and Bengali tenants may be more attracted by their housing. However, as the council letting officer pointed out, the biggest group applying for housing in Tower Hamlets is Bengali any way, with increasing numbers of white families moving out of the area.<sup>52</sup>

Bengali elders may still have language restrictions (as well as specific religious and cultural needs), and the generation that came of age in the seventies and eighties originally organised separately for defence, but the tradition of separate organisation continues through to today's youth. Although Dench et al are not quite accurate in claiming that in the 1990s there were no mixed youth clubs in the borough<sup>53</sup> (I helped at a girls group with one white member), there are still many specifically Bengali youth organisations, and even a Bengali football league. All of this can flourish under policies of multiculturalism, but tends to perpetuate separatism; and as the Bengali population has grown in size and dominance, such separatism can easily encourage the feeling among white working-class families that there is little left for them, and that they are better off moving out of the East End.

Multiculturalism took perhaps its most symbolic and immediately geographical form in 1997 with the official, and not uncontroversial, restyling of the former Spitalfields ward as Spitalfields-Banglatown. This branding of the core area of Bengali immigration demonstrates the strength of the Bengali presence on the borough council, and was aimed at boosting the many Bengali businesses, especially the restaurants, that crowd into the area now marked by specially designed Bengali lampposts. Brick Lane has found a firm position in London's tourist map, and, although Spitalfields is still a place where Bengalis go to shop, pray and bump into old friends, it has also attracted a young international crowd who enjoy the cosmopolitan atmosphere. The trendy cafés and fashion showrooms in the old Truman's Brewery site beyond the railway bridge seem as disconnected to Bengali Spitalfields as do the city developments that increasingly loom over its western edge. Banglatown is more place-marketing than ghettoisation, and at times Brick Lane becomes as much theme park as ghetto; but the real ghetto is not far away.

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<sup>50</sup> Blackaby and Patel (2003) p 17

<sup>51</sup> CRE (2006) pp 23 - 24

<sup>52</sup> Phone discussion 29 Jun 2006

<sup>53</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 145

## FAITHS IN THE CITY

Increasingly, that real ghetto has come to be associated with religion. Although Islam always affected the way the Bengalis lived and their choice of location - through considerations such as proximity to the mosque and halal food shops, and the relative seclusion of women and girls - it has only been very recently that the Bengalis have been perceived as a community separated by faith rather than by 'race' or ethnicity. The growing social dominance of the mosque is reflected in the built environment, where the new London Muslim Centre, next to the East London Mosque, now towers over Whitechapel. At the opening ceremony for the new centre in 2004 the crowd of 15,000 spilled across the road outside<sup>54</sup>.

The political drive towards this new Islamisation of Tower Hamlets predated 9/11 and originated both within the community, in the growth of Islamist organisations around the East London Mosque<sup>55</sup>, and outside in New Labour's courting of faith groups to play a bigger part in civil society. This inclusion of faith groups can be seen as a more socially conservative development of the multicultural agenda.

The effective collapse of the British Left allowed groups such as the Young Muslim Organisation to present themselves as the only significant radical challenge to an establishment that has failed many of the people of Tower Hamlets. Islamic brotherhood is a potent antidote to alienation, offering guidance and meaning and a sense of belonging. As in so many parts of the world, the Islamists have built their strength on the basis of grass roots work in the community – not just in areas directly related to Islam. Their fundamental belief is that Islam encompasses every aspect of life. At the same time as outwardly criticising isolationism, and positively encouraging Muslims to play an active and exemplary part in civil society, Islamism provides the means for them to live in an increasingly separate social sphere, almost from the cradle to the grave<sup>56</sup>.

In Tower Hamlets there is an Islamic playgroup, and even for those who do not attend the (still all private) Muslim schools, there are evening classes, Saturday school and numerous Islamic summer schemes. Although there is a strong emphasis on Islamic knowledge, it is recognised that children need more than this, and organisations such as the Junior Muslim Circle ensure that football, camping, trips and other activities can all take place in 'a sound moral atmosphere'. It is even possible to get Muslim chocolate (with 10% of profits going to charity)<sup>57</sup>. Youth groups – run separately for boys and girls - are extremely active, as are Islamic student societies. At Ramadan, Muslim Community Radio invites listeners to 'tune in with the whole family'<sup>58</sup>, and the station would like to go full time. The Muslim Centre arranges regular sessions to help in finding and applying for jobs, and there are opportunities for serious Islamic study. As well as advice services, Women's Relief organises sport, art and social activities, and the new centre includes a gym and spa. For the old, there is the day centre and sheltered flats. The funeral service was, of necessity, one of the first institutions the Bengalis established, back in 1965.

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<sup>54</sup> *East London Advertiser* 17 Jun 2004. There are also plans to add a minaret to the mosque on Brick Lane.

<sup>55</sup> Glynn (2002)

<sup>56</sup> See [www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk) and [www.islamicforumurope.com](http://www.islamicforumurope.com) (downloaded 30 June 2006)

<sup>57</sup> [www.ummahfoods.com](http://www.ummahfoods.com) downloaded 13 Sept 2004

<sup>58</sup> ELM News Oct 2005

Islamic community projects have received the active backing of Tower Hamlets Council, who have deliberately drawn the mosques into their new 'partnership' style of leadership, and have been holding regular dialogues with the local Council of Mosques since helping establish it in 2001. The incorporation of interest groups from business and the voluntary sector is characteristic of today's neo-liberal forms of governance<sup>59</sup>, and New Labour has increasingly merged the boundaries between politics and civil society, bringing once distinct organisations into the New Labour project –including faith organisations. John Eade and David Garbin have pointed out, that the successful and passionate two-year battle to secure the ground where the Muslim Centre now stands for Islamic use - against opposition from a private developer and more secular Muslim councillors - marked a major shift from the prioritisation of cultural to religious identity. And they note that for the Mosque activists this 'demonstrated their strengthening position both within the community representation sphere and in the struggle for local resources.'<sup>60</sup>

By the time it came to the construction of the centre, the council were fully on board, and ready to advertise their involvement. Their website, which had also proudly announced the opening of the attached sheltered housing, describes the London Muslim Centre as 'the result of innovative joint working between the Council and its partners in the Tower Hamlets Partnership, the East London Mosque, the Greater London Authority and the European Development Fund', and portrays it as 'promoting racial equality and community cohesion'. The centre has an open door policy and is anxious to engage with non-Muslims – *dawah*, spreading the word of Islam, is a central tenet of the Islamists. However, it has to be asked if giving the mosque such a pivotal role in civil society is really contributing to community cohesion, and this question concerns not just non-Muslims but also Bengalis who do not share Islamist Muslim beliefs.

Besides its wide range of more general social functions, the mosque has become an important channel for the provision of local services, working with the health authorities, the job centre and local schools. For the service providers, this gives them a route to a large section of the population. It also ties that population more closely to the mosque. A visit from the imam as part of the Improving School Attendance Partnership may persuade families of the importance of getting their children to school<sup>61</sup>, but it also increases the authority of the mosque as arbiter of all aspects of life. Drugs advice given by a fellow Muslim may hit home, but it can also present an Islamic lifestyle as the only valid alternative to drug dependency.<sup>62</sup> The most active youth groups and organisations are increasingly those run by Islamists and targeted at young Bengalis – organisations such as Brick Lane Youth Development Association, which receives money from the local council as well as other secular funding bodies<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Leach and Percy-Smith (2001)

<sup>60</sup> Eade and Garbin (2001), Garbin (1999). Decisions did not always go this way. Despite filling the council building with 100 black-veiled girls carrying home made posters, Madani Girls' School failed to persuade councillors to let them purchase a disused school building in September 2000, but they were offered another building in Myrdle Street.

<sup>61</sup> *The Guardian* 6 Aug 2002 and [www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk)

<sup>62</sup> [www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk) and Glynn (2002)

<sup>63</sup> BLYDA Bi-Annual Report 2002/4, and interview with president of YMO Aug 2004

The Department for Communities and Local Government explains on its website that ‘the Home Office strives to ensure that [faith] communities are given the opportunity to participate fully in society through voluntary activity and other faith based projects’ and that ‘the Government is committed to working closely with them to build strong active communities and foster community development and civil renewal’<sup>64</sup>. And recent events have made the government only more anxious to strengthen what they regard as ‘moderate’ Islamic organisations<sup>65</sup>, as well as to demonstrate their Muslim-friendly credentials.

Of course there are also much older faith based public institutions that pre-date large-scale immigration. Although there are as yet no state-funded Islamic schools in Tower Hamlets, there are church schools, both Church of England and Roman Catholic, and these allow even greater segregation among school children than among the general population. Church schools can use religious affiliation as a basis for selection, and white parents who are concerned about bringing up their children in an increasingly Bengali dominated milieu may work hard to boost their church-going credentials<sup>66</sup>. This is an additional point that needs to be considered by anyone proposing to increase faith-based schools.

#### COMPETING FOR RESPECT

Although the Islamisation of Tower Hamlets had begun long before 9/11, there is no doubt that this and subsequent events have had a huge impact on the dynamic of life in the borough. Of course, the most significant political response to 9/11 was the government’s decision to go to war, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq; but political reactions contributing to recent changes have also come from the Bengalis themselves - and the rejuvenation of an Islamic political identity among British Muslims, who have felt themselves increasingly embattled, has been well recorded. And then there are the further confused reactions of the Labour Party, struggling to show its support for ‘moderate’ Muslims at the same time as demonising ‘Islamic terrorism’; and the reactions of the anti-war movement and the Respect Party that grew out of it. To look at this in detail would require a paper in itself, but I will look briefly at the high profile election battle between George Galloway for Respect, and Oona King, sitting MP and representative of pro-war New Labour, and at how this helped consolidate Tower Hamlets’ Muslim identity.

In the course of a bitter campaign, both parties accused the other, with some justification, of stirring racial tensions; and both attempted to appeal to Bengali voters through their Muslim identity<sup>67</sup>. There were plenty of reasons for non-Muslim East Enders, as well as Muslims, to want to vote against New Labour, and Galloway stressed these when campaigning in the Bow end of the borough, but there was no doubt that his main constituency was the Bengalis, and his most active local support was from young Bengali men. Labour canvassers tended to concentrate on whiter areas, but there was a core old Labour vote that was not going to come out, and they also had to attract Bengali voters, who, according to a Respect estimate, made up

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<sup>64</sup> <http://raceandfaith.communities.gov.uk>, see also Home Office (2004)

<sup>65</sup> Letters between Home Office and Cabinet Office on relations with the Muslim Community, April and May 2004 (leaked and published on the web)

<sup>66</sup> Dench et al (2006) pp 146-147

<sup>67</sup> I went out with canvassers from both parties

about 55% of the electorate. In Tower Hamlets, populism now means appealing to Muslims.

In the preceding European elections, Respect had put a Muslim in first or second place on every slate across the country, and leaflets from Galloway's European election campaign described Respect as 'the Party for Muslims'<sup>68</sup>. By promising to stand down at the next election to make room for a Bengali, Galloway specifically courted the ethnic vote, claiming support for him gave the best chance of a Bengali MP in the future. But the Iraq war was Respect's main campaigning issue, and it was portrayed as an anti-Islamic war. As Galloway told a packed public hustings, 'If you make war against Muslims abroad, you are going to end up making war against Muslims at home.'<sup>69</sup>

Respect did not have to prove their pro-Muslim credentials, but their presence in Tower Hamlets, on top of the war and the already growing strength of Islamist organisations, has pushed the Labour Party to demonstrate their own support for Muslim interests. Although the Labour councillors declared themselves officially anti-war, they did not take an active part in the anti-war movement. Helal Abbas, then council leader, explained this to me on the grounds that as a Muslim dominated group it would have left them open to negative media stereotyping, but he added that during the war they did a lot of work with the local mosques.<sup>70</sup> A defeated motion at the Respect national conference, calling for an end to state subsidies for faith schools, prompted a press release from Tower Hamlets Labour Group in which Oona King not only boasted of the government's support for state-funded Islamic schools and other pro-Muslim legislation, but branded Respect 'an enemy of religion'<sup>71</sup>. And the next month she was publicly chastised in the local paper for sending out Eid cards to non-Muslims by mistake.<sup>72</sup> During the campaign, Labour election leaflets were worded differently for distribution in white and Muslim areas – allowing their opponents to draw attention to the inconsistencies. However, King insisted throughout that she was working 'for the whole community' in contrast to Galloway's 'single-issue campaigning'.<sup>73</sup>

The white working class has felt increasingly excluded. During the election campaign, both Oona King and the Labour council became the target of angry letters to the local paper by white constituents who could draw on a legacy of them and us politics. This one is from a Mrs King of Poplar (no relation):

I see more and more people writing in to say how badly the real East Enders are treated in Tower Hamlets... People born and bred in the East End who went through a war like me are forgotten. The real East Enders come out as second class. What do we expect when Tower Hamlets council offices are

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<sup>68</sup> The leaflet quoted was made to be distributed outside mosques, but one cannot imagine a broadly Left party making similar blanket claims to other religious groups.

<sup>69</sup> Speaking at TELCO (the East London Community Organisation) hustings 20 Apr 2005. By portraying the war as a crusade, Galloway ignored most serious left analysis, which saw it as part of wider economic and political strategies.

<sup>70</sup> Interview 6 Aug 2005

<sup>71</sup> Press Release 7 Nov 2004

<sup>72</sup> East London Advertiser 2 Dec 2004

<sup>73</sup> East London Advertiser 4 Mar 2005

run for foreigners. Let's have fairness, treat all people the same – not foreigners first!<sup>74</sup>

And there have been many letters since the election that have been critical of Galloway, often along similar lines to this one from Janet Parker of Vallance Road:

...Perhaps if he spent less time travelling around the world talking about Iraq, and more time in his constituency – if he can remember where it is – he might realise there is more to the East End than Brick Lane.

The man's a 'one trick' pony and his party is only interested in votes from one community.

As for the rest of us, it seems we're on our own now.<sup>75</sup>

Although Respect have campaigned on key social issues such as housing stock transfer, many white voters have not been persuaded that they are not an ethnically based party. It is no coincidence that, despite a hugely unpopular Labour council, and chaos among the local Liberal Democrats, the Respect councillors elected in May 2006 were all Bengalis, and there was a strong correlation between the percentage of votes cast for Respect in each ward, and the percentage of Bengalis<sup>76</sup>. Repeated attempts to portray Respect as part of the great East End socialist tradition of Kier Hardy, the Bryant and May matchgirls and Communist MP Phil Piratin still ring hollow. The strength of the Communist movement in the East End of the thirties, and its ability to stem the growth of Fascism, was due to a strict emphasis on class politics that cut across ethnic and religious difference<sup>77</sup>.

All of this attention may indeed have helped to give Tower Hamlets Muslims a greater confidence and, to use a favourite New Labour term, 'community cohesion', but, as Dench et al observe with respect to strong white community groups, such cohesion can be at the expense of relations with those outside<sup>78</sup>. For some, a sense of group strength can even be expressed in violence against outsiders. The election campaign exposed elements of anti-Semitism among Bengali youth<sup>79</sup> (Oona King is proud to be half Jewish), and there have been numerous reports of 'Asian' anti-white racism, ranging from racist taunts to extreme violence and even murder<sup>80</sup>. At one particularly troubled estate in Bethnal Green the local paper reported 'gangs hurling racist insults like "white trash"'<sup>81</sup>.

There has been no significant attempt at a right wing backlash in Tower Hamlets itself, but the 2006 council elections saw the BNP become the second biggest party in

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<sup>74</sup> East London Advertiser 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005

<sup>75</sup> East London Advertiser 23 June 2005. Many of the letters to the paper are from party hacks or a few regular grumblers, but there are still significant numbers of genuine complaints.

<sup>76</sup> R squared = 63% and P<0.001 – ie 63% of the variation is explained by the percentage of Bengalis. The dominance of the SWP (as well as Galloway's performance in Big Brother) also deters potential voters.

<sup>77</sup> Glynn (2005)

<sup>78</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 187

<sup>79</sup> Besides the more well published accusations (Guardian 12 Apr 2005, East London Advertiser 15 Apr 2005, BBC Today Programme 5 Nov 2005) I found Oona King's Bengali assistant clearly shocked at the hostility he had found campaigning outside a mosque, where several people had called her a 'Jewish whore'.

<sup>80</sup> East London Advertiser 10 Mar, 7 Apr, 19 May, 6 July, 4 Aug, 11 Aug, 15 Sept, 6 Oct, 27 Oct, 24 Nov 2005

<sup>81</sup> East London Advertiser 10 Mar 2005

Barking and Dagenham council, and it is places such as Barking that many white East Enders have moved to.

### THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY GHETTO

It is not always easy to analyse the effects of politics as these never act in isolation, but, as the experience of the Bengalis has shown, political actions can be found behind very many of the different stages of ghetto development. Sometimes these are in areas that seem not especially connected to ethnic minorities, such as housing legislation, or even going to war. Sometimes they are expressed as plans to reduce racism or division, but end up increasing them. Immigration legislation can be included under that category. It has been presented as the other side of integration, but discriminatory legislation has increased racism and hence ghettoisation; and those immigrants who are allowed in are generally connected to people already here and live close to them. Perhaps less obviously, the institutional promotion of multiculturalism or faith groups, though often presented as benefiting ethnic minorities, can again be seen to be perpetuating division. Clustering and ghettoisation can also be a product of the political actions of minority communities themselves: sometimes through the common links provided by the politics of their homeland; and often through organisation for self defence in fighting immigration legislation and racism. Separatism may even be presented as a positive and progressive form of radical political action. And then there are the politics of populism. Immigration legislation can be included again here, along side the populist exploitation of resource division in pursuit of the white working class vote, and the new populism, in places such as Tower Hamlets, that chases the vote of a new Muslim majority.

So far, Bengali ghettoisation has seemed only to increase, but will the Bengalis eventually disperse, as so many of the East End Jews did before them? Certainly, some who have been able to afford it have already moved away from what is still an area that scores high on indexes of deprivation, settling further out where they can buy a small house with a garden and worry less about their children getting involved with drugs and gang violence. Many move to areas that have relatively high numbers of other Bengalis, but without the pressures of poverty and insufficient resources, clustering becomes less important. Countering this dispersion, religion provides a strong cohesive force, and the Jewish example shows that those communities that have remained inward looking and separate are those for whom religious belief has remained central<sup>82</sup>. And of course many Bengalis do not have the resources, financial or cultural, to move away. For a small minority of their children, the frustration of limited prospects can be expressed as racism against others over whom they see themselves as superior, such as 'white trash', or Somalis.

Ghettoisation of the East End is not just about the clustering together of the Bengalis, but also about the 'flight' of white families, and they are leaving the area not just because of competition for resources from the Bengalis, or fears of being made culturally marginal, but also through the intense pressures of gentrification. Political forces pushing home ownership and commercial development at the expense of public housing, and the phenomenal rise in house prices, has driven many away from an area that has increasingly become an adjunct to the city and to the new financial centres in

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<sup>82</sup> Affluent areas such as Golders Green may not have the deprivation associated with the ghetto, but lives here can be just as segregated.

the docklands. Among the new executive flats there are a few developments that comply with the Mayor's requirements for 'affordable housing', but these are hardly within the financial limits of most of the East End's residents<sup>83</sup>. Recently, Tower Hamlets has also become home to migrant workers from Eastern Europe, but most are young and single and do not think of themselves as permanent residents, so are ready to make do with the more basic housing. The biggest divisions in the East End today are often not those of ethnicity, but of class.

Politicians are concerned about ghettoisation because it can breed division and unrest in the competition for limited resources, and no one wants the destructive violence of race riots. But, for those who also want to avoid more wholesale and deep-rooted socio-economic change, a bit of competition between ethnic groups can act as a useful counter to much more challenging class-based unrest: better that different groups should compete for a small share of the cake, than that they should combine and demand a larger share. The Labour Party, after abandoning more class-based politics, has embraced new multicultural alliances, while presiding over a widening wealth gap on which racism can thrive. And many activists from all communities have fallen into the separatist trap; both through the best of motives, and through outright opportunism. Divisions and differences will always be exploited for political gain.

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<sup>83</sup> A recent, high profile scheme for subsidised 'low-cost' rent-and-buy housing in the East End, put up by the Peabody Trust, requires applicants to have an annual income of at least £28,758 (£32,644 for couples) (Detail, 2006 p 302)

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