

## **TAKING A STAND**

- **Gus John Speaks on education, race, social action & civil unrest  
1980-2005**

### **BOOK LAUNCH**

- **National Union of Teachers HQ, Mabledon Place, London WC1  
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### **Why 'Taking A Stand' and why now?**

I have lived and worked in Britain since 1964 and have always been involved in radical politics. 'Radical' as in getting to the root of things, understanding the connection between things and not settling for easy or consensual explanations for why things are as they are.

'Taking A Stand' because I do not believe in political neutrality. We are active agents even when we are politically inactive or indifferent. Our indifference gives licence to others to act in accordance with their ideology and then claim to be acting in our name. That is why I am always wary of people who invoke 'the silent majority'. If you don't stand for something, you fall for any damned thing. So, it is important to know where you stand, what you stand for and why. I stand for racial and social justice and for the right of every individual to have their human rights respected and safeguarded.

This book is testimony to my action, my practice and reflection on matters to do with the state and civil society in Britain in the last 25 years, especially in relation to Britain's efforts to come to terms with its post-war black presence and therefore with its own legacy of Empire.

Those 25 years, as indeed any period before them, have been characterised by political advances and defeats in the struggle against oppression and for social liberation; in the struggle against racism and fascism and for social justice; in the struggle against poverty, illiteracy and ignorance and to make the society more humane.

## **Why Now?**

I believe the society is in danger of becoming too complacent about the gains we have made in the last 25 years. I believe that we as black people have become too comfortable and have joined the 'cult of individualism' that was so rampant during the Thatcher years and that has expanded into all areas of civil society under Tony Blair's leadership. We seem to have lost the capacity to work collectively, to cultivate a sense of group identity and act together, forming alliances with others, in order to confront the oppression we face AS A GROUP.

Ironically, the more we advance, the more signs there are of us 'breaking through' and being included at all levels of the society, the weaker we seem to become as a community. We have become too integrated; so integrated in fact that we forget that for every 10 of us who are inside the gates, there are thousands more who are being refused entry and are having endless hurdles put in their path. What is more, young people are the most excluded and have the least understanding of the struggles we waged over the last 40 years so that some of us could get inside the gates. In fact, the schooling system and the gatekeepers would have them believe that the society has always been 'open' and the opportunities have always been there. The Government's 'community cohesion' agenda and its 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven' tomfoolery would have us all believe that the experience of Stephen Lawrence, Christopher Alder, Anthony Walker and Roger Sylvester, to name but a few, simply represents the ugly side of the society and of its police service. As far as they are concerned, those deaths should not be taken to be symptomatic of the racism at the heart of the body politic itself.

## **Time for Collective Action**

I say it is now time for collective action because we hardly need more evidence of the bankruptcy of electoral politics when it comes to eradicating racism and guaranteeing human rights and racial equality to black people. **This is not a plea for us all to stay at home and boycott the local government elections on May 4<sup>th</sup>. Too many people in earlier generations sacrificed their all to win the right to exercise the franchise**

**for us to nonchalantly pass up that right. My argument is that electoral politics has never been enough to confront racism, deliver equal opportunity and safeguard the life chances of black people in this society, and we delude ourselves if we believe that it could or will.**

We need collective action to hold those whom we elect to account, be they white or black. Sentimental and sycophantic celebration of the fact that we now have black barons and baronesses of the realm gets us absolutely nowhere. When their presence begins to make a difference to the education of our children, to the race equality content of Government 'white papers' and bills, to the mental health of our youth and of our communities, to the extent to which our communities are imploding upon themselves, then I would happily concede that their being black in those circles actually makes a difference.

History tells me that we must be our own liberators. The struggle for education rights, for quality educational outcomes for our children, for access to higher education and to high level courses within higher education, for equitable treatment within the criminal justice system, for respect and dignity in the workplace; the battle against gun crime, against gang culture, against domestic violence and against the self destructive activities of young people in our communities is a struggle **we must own** and organise ourselves to lead.

It is not just a matter for Operation Trident, or for the local Crime & Reduction Partnership, or for the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service, or the Aiming High team.

Some people believe that now that there is a black staff network in just about every area of public service, from police to pensions, black communities could feel secure in the belief that the black professionals are taking care of business. Would that were so.

The presence of those networks or staff associations, however generously they are funded and however grand their annual jamborees, are not even a guarantee of just and equitable treatment for their own members, let alone a guarantee of appropriate and equitable services to communities.

One of the chapters in this book is the keynote address I delivered to The Network in the Home Office in January 2004. I argued then, that in the context of the Race Relations Amendment Act, both The (black staff) Network and the Home Office as employer had certain responsibilities. One responsibility the Home Office has is:

“ [to create] a climate in which whistle blowing is encouraged and bigotry and racism do not go unchallenged because of the protection the system affords to those who use power and authority to discriminate, harass and bully.

Where such conduct provides justifiable reasons for bringing race complaints, it is usually the black staff member who is seen as the problem and is invariably victimised as a consequence. The organisation then goes to all lengths to avoid being judged to be racist, including paying out undisclosed sums in pre-trial settlement of the matter whilst leaving the offenders in place, or worse still, rewarding them with promotion. Meanwhile, as in one unresolved case that has its origins in events dating back to 1987, the aggrieved individual is sent home on ‘gardening leave’ for a period long enough to enable them to supply the entire Sainsbury’s chain with organic vegetables. That black staff member has been on gardening leave for 2&1/2 years. No one in the Home Office appears to be overly concerned about the effect this bizarre state of affairs is having on her career and her capacity to continue to believe in her skills”.

That was 2004. It is now April 2006, and that black woman member of the Home Office staff is still home on ‘gardening leave’, five years after the report of the inquiry into her complaint. There are no disciplinary proceedings involved, she has not been suspended and no complaint has been lodged against her. She is simply waiting for the Home Office to implement the recommendations of the report of the investigation of her case, recommendations which both she and they agreed, in writing, to be bound by even before the inquiry commenced.

Here, then, is a black member of staff whose career has been put on hold, who has simply been left to vegetate (never mind ‘garden’) at home for 5 years while those criticised in the investigation report have all been promoted. In terms of her experience of the Home Office in the last 5 years, The Network of black employees in the Home Office has been a complete irrelevance.

The question this interesting case raises is: what precisely is the role of such black staff networks or associations and whose interests, ultimately, do they serve?

Are they simply a forum for white managers, once a year, to come and tell black staff and whoever else would listen what great things they are doing to promote diversity in the workforce? Or should they provide for those same managers and for one another ongoing evidence of how black staff and service users experience the organisation and its culture and a forum for determining how, jointly, they would act on that evidence?

I maintain that until such time that racism is finally eradicated from this society, the civil service and all other such institutions, including schools, remain a legitimate site of struggle for black people and for all other oppressed minorities. The issue, then, for members of such networks is the political meaning they attach to their existence and the independence with which they could organise themselves, having regard to the difference between their formation and the trade union to which their members might belong.

The Government must be seen to put its action where its mouth is as far as promoting race equality and complying with race relations legislation is concerned. The Home Office presides over this blatant denial of fundamental rights to a black member of staff. The Department for Education and Skills drafts a ‘White Paper’, in name and content, that proposes the most shameless reversal of the principles governing the right of access to comprehensive schooling for all children, irrespective of background, and fails to subject those proposals to race equality impact assessment before putting the paper out to public consultation.

Meanwhile, the school students and the parents (especially in inner city areas) who would be most affected by these proposals are systematically excluded from the debate. Black school students and parents cannot look to any one national organisation to canvass

opinion amongst them and work with them to ensure that Tony Blair and Ruth Kelly jettison their hair brained schemes. We have been talking about what the schooling system does to our children since before Bernard Coard published his seminal study in 1971 of *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British Schooling System*; ever since we formed the Caribbean Education Association, followed by the Caribbean Education and Community Workers Association in the late 1960s. Surely, it is about time that we, collectively and from all around the country, did something about it, and empowered our children to do something about it..., for their own sake and for the sake of their children.

So, let us build an **independent** mass organisation of black parents and of black school students. Let us nurture our children to understand the meaning and purpose of struggle. Let us provide them with the historical evidence of the power of struggle and the role it has played in our very survival as a people. Above all, let us, by our own example, give them permission to be bold and fearless about fighting for change rather than for 'bling'.

We need not doubt our capacity to do that. There are already models operating successfully round about us, national models. Take the black led churches, for example. Ordinary working people of a previous generation on typically low income, predominantly at the lower end of the job market, had the determination, the will and the faith to rescue Christianity from decline and to buy up any number of buckshee churches, thus saving church commissioners a massive headache and enlarging their coffers. Some black pastors and church members mortgaged their homes to raise money to buy the church and get out of worshipping in the basement and in the living room. Their members give their tithes dutifully every week and every month. While they invest in the afterlife, however, more and more of them are finding that life on this side of the curtain is not so rosy for them and their children.

They still face school exclusion, racial harassment at work and in the community, murderous racist attacks as they wait at bus stops. They struggle against the society's stereotypically low expectations of us, just like the rest of us do. Investment in the afterlife does not displace oppression **now**, or the need to struggle for social liberation and more dignified living, **now**.

I noticed that recently a group of black church dignitaries met with leaders of state to demonstrate that the black church has something to say about the matters of the day. That is surely a good thing. Let us adopt their model and ensure that we build national organisations, democratically organised and democratically run, independent of government and of government influence, with local branches capable of acting locally on regional, national and global issues.

This book provides a framework for us to do just that, both in respect of an independent movement of black students and youth and an independent movement of black parents. It engages with the issue of men's participation in their children's schooling. It calls for a People's Inquiry into the inter-ethnic conflicts in Lozells, Birmingham, in October 2005. In it you will find 'tools for understanding' and 'tools for action'. Make it your own personal DIY 'manual' for working with others to effect change.

I can summarise what I have said to you in six words: OWN THE BOOK! READ THE BOOK!

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