

The west persists in using race to decide who can cross its borders

What may look like a gatekeeper's hunch is the accumulated weight of prejudice, entrenched by global economics

Gary Younge
Monday January 22, 2007
The Guardian

One morning several years ago, an MP's secretary agreed to meet me off a train in rural Wales and take me to her boss for an interview. The train arrived on time and about 15 people got off, leaving just me standing there. A middle-aged woman remained looking straight through me for what seemed like an age before it occurred to her that the black man with whom she was sharing the platform might just be the Guardian journalist she was supposed to be meeting. She said she was expecting someone taller.

I was reminded of that incident last August as I crossed into the US from the Mexican border town of Palomas. I was travelling with a photographer - a white Mexican with dual Spanish citizenship who, unlike me, did not have a visa to work as a journalist in the US. I thought there would be a problem. I didn't realise the problem would be me.

The border guard arranged for dogs to sniff my belongings and other guards to search my hire car, while she checked out my visa, asked me where I was born so many times I could barely remember, and made me explain every stamp in my passport. Meanwhile the visaless photographer had been waved through. Finally, when she had run out of fingers to fingerprint, she had to concede the possibility that I might actually be the foreign correspondent I claimed to be. Maybe she thought I should be taller.

The Home Office report, *Exploring the Decision-Making of Immigration Officers*, published last week, provides further evidence of what most non-white travellers have long known to be true. That the practice of profiling on the basis of race, ethnicity and religion persists at borders around the world. Compared to all the strip-searching, deportations and interrogations that go on, I have got off lightly. My granny was once questioned for more than three hours after arriving from Barbados. They wanted to know, among other things, whether she was coming to work. "Do you cut cane here too?" she asked.

These abuses are not systematic. According to the report, British immigration officers say they base their decisions on "instinct" or "intuition" about people who "look the part". On further inspection, these sixth senses turn out to be total nonsense - a grab-bag of "received wisdom" constructed from stereotypes that are anything but wise. "American ladies who've got loads of jewellery on ... their hair is perfect ... their makeup is perfect and their clothes are really nice," apparently get their approval. Young women in "white stilletoes and short skirts", however, could be prostitutes.

But the abuses are systemic. For what looks like an individual's hunch is little more than the accumulated weight of assumption, presumption and prejudice, entrenched by global economics and sustained by local politics. Capital, we are told, must flow freely around the world to ensure international prosperity. The trouble is, this prosperity remains elusive to many in a world where about half the people live on less than \$2 a day and the rules of international trade are weighted against the poor. Facing hunger and destitution, the poor move in search of work. But when they seek to gain access to the wealthiest countries - the very ones which created the rules that keep them poor - the doors are closed. Politicians desperate to galvanise popular support at home argue not for correcting the global inequalities in wealth but instead for stiffer immigration laws to keep the poor out. Since most, but by no means all, of these impoverished people are not white, racism almost inevitably informs and infects these immigration laws and the debate that surrounds them.

By the time it gets to the gatekeepers, the damage has largely been done. What immigration officers describe as instinct is, in truth, little more than playing the odds. "We're making decisions based on ... a balance of probability," said one immigration officer. In other words, they correctly intuit that there is a greater likelihood that non-white travellers will be poorer than white travellers and so stop them more often.

So non-white travellers fall foul not of the law of the land but the law of probabilities. The result is a vastly disproportionate number of black and Asian travellers who are stopped for questioning because on some level they "do not look the part". Non-white South Africans are 10 times more likely to be subjected to further questioning and non-white Canadians nine times more likely than their white countrymen.

The authors of the report insist that this has nothing to do with racism, insisting instead that socioeconomic factors play a key role. In other words, these people weren't more likely to be stopped because they were black but because they were poor and therefore more likely to be seeking work or drawing on public funds.

There are two main problems with this conclusion. First, it isn't true. Not only do the researchers provide no evidence for their conclusion. But the evidence they do provide suggests the contrary. When the figures were adjusted to take occupation into account, the discrepancy widened dramatically for all but the Americans. Non-white South Africans became 18 times more likely to be stopped and non-white Canadians 13.5 times. Moreover, when translated into sterling, the mean income of a black Canadian is almost double that of a white South African. Yet a black Canadian is four times more likely to be stopped than a white South African. Their efforts to understand race and class separately in this manner effectively lead to a complete misunderstanding of both.

Second, even if it were true, it is still wrong. For if the barriers to entry into the west are racist in practice, they are avowedly and unashamedly classist in intent. "For some immigration officers, credibility is essentially a matter of economics," states the report. In this particular respect, the officers are really just doing their job: actively excluding poor

people who it seems no longer have the right to travel around the west with dignity and without suspicion.

The basic right to the freedom of movement was championed as one of the central criticisms of the eastern bloc. But as soon as the wall came down we built another huge one to replace it. True, in Europe we are gradually and grudgingly expanding its perimeters; but most of the world remains on the other side of it - and the wall is getting higher. Politics once kept people in; now economics keeps them out.

For the wealthy, however, it is a different matter. The report claimed that immigration officers have learned to "no longer ... ask a well-travelled American businessman how much money he has brought with him or for details of his bank balance". So the man most likely to steal your pension walks through without a word, while the one most likely to flip your burger or clean your house hugs the bottom of trains because legitimate means of entry are barred to them. So much for global citizenship.

So long as there are nation states there will be borders and immigration laws to regulate them. The least we can do is drop the pretence that these laws are fair. They are not designed to discriminate between people, but against them.

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Let's have an open and honest discussion about white people

The tolerant, secular, liberal society into which British Muslims are being asked to integrate is still a work in progress

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Monday October 2, 2006
The Guardian

On Wednesday September 20 Corporal Donald Payne became the first Briton to admit to a war crime. Payne, 35, is accused of repeatedly banging the head of Baha Mousa, a 26-year-old Iraqi hotel worker, against a wall and floor until Mousa died - an accusation he denies. Payne called his Iraqi prisoners in the jail in Basra "the choir", because he liked to invite friends to hear them shriek with the pain he inflicted. "Corporal Payne enjoyed conducting what he called the choir," Julian Bevan QC told the court martial, which is taking place at Bulford Camp, in Wiltshire, and is expected to last for 16 weeks. "It was all done very openly."

The next day the home secretary, John Reid, went to Leyton, in east London, and told a room full of Muslims how to raise their kids so they won't grow up hateful. "Look for the telltale signs now and talk to them before their hatred grows and you risk losing them for ever," he told them.

The heckler in his midst simply provided Reid with proof of his moral righteousness. "This is Britain," Reid told the Labour party conference last week. "We will go where we please, we will discuss what we like, and we will never be browbeaten by bullies. That's what it means to be British."

Reid and Payne are two sides of the same coin. The bully of Basra exercises his right to demean and degrade wherever he pleases - the longstanding hallmarks of British colonialism. The hooligan from the Home Office vaunts the fair play, decency and social liberalism that ostensibly underpin core British values - a longstanding feature of Britain's self-delusion. Payne could have done with some parenting lessons of his own. Instead he was given a uniform and a gun. The arrogance we imbibe and the atrocities we export do not just coexist - they are codependent. That's also what it means to be British.

In Reid we find these qualities embodied in one man. Before he was the home secretary he was the defence secretary. He is set to have an impact on Britain's racial terrain analogous to the one he has had on the killing fields of Iraq: making a fragile situation worse.

Reid is not alone in this. Last month Ruth Kelly, the communities secretary, called for a "new and honest debate" about race in this country. This should not be mistaken for the

"honest dialogue" Peter Hain wanted to launch in 2002 or the "rigorously honest" discussion David Blunkett sought to initiate in 2004. Quite what kind of deceitful debate they were engaged in back then and, given their huge parliamentary majority, what prevented their candour is not obvious. However, each followed a familiar pattern; promising blunt truths, but pandering to soft bigotry.

Kelly was no different. She insisted that it is "not racist" to voice concerns about immigration and asylum - a statement as true as it is fatuous since it depends on what those concerns are and what argument you're making. "We must not be censored by political correctness," she continued. "And we can't tiptoe around the issues." Are you thinking what I'm thinking? This was precisely the line taken by Michael Howard, the then Tory leader, before the last election. Far from being censored, the tabloids have been serving this tripe up as a staple for the past decade and New Labour has been swallowing it whole and then throwing it up whenever it gets nervous.

Any candid discussion of race, immigration and asylum that was not racist would not just acknowledge fear and prejudice but challenge them both. Since ministers are not able to do that about ethnic minorities, maybe they should start off with a subject with which they are more familiar. Let's have an open and honest discussion about white people.

Let's start by talking about how they don't want to integrate. The stubborn rump of around 10% of whites who, according to a 2002 Mori poll, are hostile to racial equality and antagonistic to the very existence of non-white people in this country. Given a percentage point either way, that is the consistent figure who believe that to be truly British you must be white and who do not believe it is important to respect the rights of minority groups.

Let's discuss their inability to choose moderate leaders and the propensity of the leaders they do choose to murder innocent civilians abroad by their thousands. Let's analyse their vulnerability to extremists such as the British National party, not to mention elsewhere in Europe, where fascism is once again a mainstream ideology.

Let's talk about the religious intolerance that rages in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and can be found in the highest levels of the state, where only Protestants can marry into royalty. And let's not forget the terrorists white people have been rearing at home for years, whether they are bombing Brick Lane, parliament or shopping centres in Manchester, and the no-go areas in housing estates, football terraces and boardrooms.

Only then perhaps will it become sufficiently apparent for those with insufficient imagination just how crude and crass the framing of the debate about Muslims has been. Any group of people will rightly bristle at the demand to answer collectively for the acts of individuals with whom they share an identity but over whom they have no control.

The tolerant, secular, liberal society into which Muslims are being asked to integrate lies somewhere between mythology and a work in progress and, the responsibility for

transforming it into a lived reality lies with all of us. When it comes to poor whites lured by organised racism, Labour makes allowances.

'It is the poorest whites who feel the greatest anger because there is no way out for them,' said Margaret Hodge about some of her constituents in Barking earlier this year. "The Labour party hasn't talked to these people. Part of the reason they switch to the BNP is they feel no one else is listening to them." When it comes to Muslims lured by fundamentalism, they make threats: but no one is listening to them either.

We should not be in denial that some young Muslims have become attracted to extremism and fundamentalism in recent years, but nor should we be in denial about why that should be. Muslims did not invent terrorism, nor did they introduce it to this country. Indeed, so long as Britain has occupied foreign lands, it has been vulnerable to sporadic acts of violence on its own soil.

Which brings us back to Payne, Reid and Kelly. For there is no honest conversation you can have about the strained racial fabric of this country at present without talking about the war. Once branded leftwing heresy, this truism is now intelligence-service orthodoxy on both sides of the Atlantic. It has been "a recruiting sergeant for extremists across the Muslim world", according to a leaked document allegedly written by a British MI6 officer attached to the Ministry of Defence; and a "cause celebre for jihadists", in the words of the US National Intelligence Estimate.

The war didn't invent fundamentalism; nor did it introduce it into Britain. But it has clearly exacerbated it. So long as the likes of Corporal Payne can conduct their torture choirs abroad, our racial landscape will be scarred; so long as the likes of Reid are preaching to the racist choir at home, it will never heal.

• Gary Younge will deliver the Claudia Jones memorial lecture - What's So Great about Integration? - on Tuesday October 12 at 7pm in the Guardian Newsroom, London. Tickets are limited; please email BMC@nuj.org.uk

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