

• THE GAFF BLOWN

On 1 February 1979 the *Guardian* newspaper revealed that a woman at Heathrow Airport had been subjected to a so-called 'virginity test'. In the public outcry that followed it emerged that this was not an isolated incident. Yet the Labour government refused to hold a public enquiry. Their Tory successors, elected on an anti-immigrant platform, also refused. Then contrary to all expectations, that normally toothless race relations watchdog, the Commission for Racial Equality, agreed to mount a formal investigation into immigration procedures.

The Government attempted to halt this initiative through court action. They argued that racial discrimination was an inevitable function of immigration control and that to investigate was outside the Commission's statutory powers. The Commission however persuaded the court that the administration of control could damage race relations in Britain. They were given permission to proceed under their general duty to promote good race relations rather than to investigate discrimination. Thus the basis of the investigation was limited. Its eventual production was delayed, and rumours of extensive amendments from the Home Office reinforced fears that it would provide little that was new or useful to the growing band of people campaigning against the racism of British immigration laws.

And there is little new in the recommenda-

tions of the report, which rehearse familiar demands in the most temperate language. Its description of the way the system works produced no surprises; it is axiomatic that immigration officers treat passengers in a racially discriminatory way, that entry clearance officers in Bangladesh and Pakistan are rude and hostile to applicants and that they are eager to find excuses to refuse entry to the spouses and children of black settlers in Britain.

However the report is unique. Quoting internal Home Office memoranda, secret instructions and immigration officers' files, it documents precisely the racist culture in which the administration of immigration control operates. It reveals how the guidance circulated to immigration officers constructs grotesque racial stereotypes: people from Pakistan and Morocco are 'simple and cunning', Nigerians have plans 'out of all proportion to their capabilities and circumstances'. It quotes notes made by officers which consistently show disappointment when applicants are successful in obtaining permission to settle in Britain and frequently glee when a reason is found to refuse them. It reveals that sexual privacy is still invaded. An entry clearance officer is instructed: 'Ask the sponsor if he can explain the gap in his child fathering. . . he made a visit back to Bangladesh from 27 October 1966 to 22 July 1967 yet no children were born as a result of that visit.'

In the face of the detailed evidence in the report the response of the Government has been to attack it and to complain it is 'fundamentally flawed' and 'unrealistic'. The

Minister responsible, David Waddington, when asked to react to the racist comments written on files by officers said 'it is unprofessional but certainly does not warrant stringing up entry clearance officers by their thumbs and flogging them'. Of course the report makes no such recommendation.

It does request that the Race Relations Act be extended to cover the administration of immigration control. It is unacceptable that actions, which in a landlord, shopkeeper, or employer would be unlawful, are daily carried out by the immigration service at our ports and overseas posts.

David Waddington claims that 'common sense' tells him that there is more 'pressure to emigrate' to this country from some parts of the world than from others and that the report ignores this. Yet the report reveals that this common sense has never been justified by research or statistics and is used as camouflage for racial discrimination. The only real 'pressure to emigrate' is from the families who have been divided by Britain's racist laws and practice.

In Bangladesh more than half of the wives and children applying to join sponsors here are turned down. Only women who are British citizens are allowed to be joined here by a husband or fiancé from abroad, nevertheless 50% of the husbands and fiancés in the Indian sub-continent are turned down, usually because it is claimed that the 'primary purpose' of their marriage is immigration.

But in recent years there has also been more determination to fight back. Young black people, many of whom were born here, are organising against laws which discriminate against them. For many white people immigrants are no longer strangers but neighbours and they are joining together in defence of members of their community threatened with deportation.

The CRE report is a comprehensive condemnation of the administration of immigration control, yet on its own it has left ministers unmoved. It needs to be taken up by campaigners and used in local and national action. One of the most crucial opportunities to do this will be the Campaign Against Racist Laws national lobby of parliament on 21 May. This is designed to follow the European Court of Human Rights ruling on Britain's laws governing the entry of foreign husbands. The combination of condemnation by the international court, by our national statutory race relations body, by thousands of black and white electors and by MPs of all parties provides the only likely opportunity for change in the immigration rules in the lifetime of this parliament.

Fiona Mactaggart.

