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The changing face of community participation: the Liverpool black experience

by DAVID CLAY

Overview

The city of Liverpool has the longest established black community in Britain, concentrated in the Toxteth area. Here, 'community participation' has long been a reaction to racism or a fight for better services. My first experience of community mobilisation came in the early 1970s, when police failed to protect black residents on a new housing estate, and this led to campaigns for black studies and the formation of the Liverpool Black Organisation in 1976. However, after the Toxteth riots of 1981 – the culmination of all the frustrations experienced by the black community, particularly in regard to police and community relations – the face of community participation was set to change. As government agencies concentrated on regeneration and economic initiatives, community participation was now in the hands of civil servants and those employed to bring about 'consultation'. Grassroots action was slowly eroded as the community was broken up and dispersed, and government agencies now direct 'community participation' in the city.

Who am I?

My name is Dave Clay. The son of an African father and an English mother, I was born in the Toxteth area of Liverpool during the 1950s. We lived in the slums of Liverpool, within



walking distance of the docks. The city of Liverpool has the longest established black community in Britain, epitomised by its role in slavery. There is an abundance of historical information pertaining to the development of Liverpool's black community, most notably *Liverpool Black Pioneers* and *Black Liverpool* by Dr Ray Costello, *A History of Race and Racism* by Law-Henfrey, and *Loosen the Shackles* by Lord Gifford (see above).

The Liverpool black population

The city of Liverpool has a population of 403,625 (population census 2001) with the black population estimated at 35,848 (8.5%). These figures are without doubt underestimated, and the real size of the ethnic population is open to question. Suffice it to say that the majority of black families reside in the Toxteth area. It is within such a multi-racial environment that my views and opinions are formed.

During my childhood, racism was endemic. It was not until government legislation was introduced (Race Relations

Act, 1965) that direct discrimination was made illegal. In reality, the only difference, for example, was that you could not state in a job advertisement that 'no blacks need apply'. You simply did not employ black people. Inadequate housing, low employment, overt racism, police brutality, institutionalised racism, gang warfare and educational underachievement have been the reality for black people in Liverpool. It is then of no surprise that community participation was usually a reaction to racism or a fight for better services. The city of Liverpool is renowned for its working-class resistance and militancy, epitomised by a militant local council during the 1980s. But the history of black resistance has been hidden for many years.

A community fights back

The Liverpool black community has never been far from the headlines. In 1919, Liverpool experienced race riots. Returning soldiers from the First World War could not come to terms with the reality that black people had jobs in munitions factories, and the number of mixed marriages and relations had visibly increased. Mobs of white people descended on the black area of Toxteth, resulting in the murder of Charles Wootton, a former black sailor, who was drowned in the River Mersey.

The Charles Wootton Centre for Further Education was established during the 1970s in the Toxteth area. During the early 1970s, a new housing estate had been built in the area, known as the Falkner Housing Estate. Bigots took exception to the fact that the first families to move in were black. The estate was attacked on two consecutive evenings. I was part of a group that protested and accused the police of failing to protect the residents. They told us that it was their duty to protect the estate. After a third night of attacks we took the situation into our hands and erected barricades to protect the residents. The community mobilised. Despite the incident escalating into a confrontation with the Liverpool police, the attacks stopped. This was my first experience of the community standing up against both the racism of the perpetrators of the attacks and the racism of the police.

I was part of a generation of black kids who were born in Liverpool, only spoke Liverpudlian and in affect were black 'scousers' – a colloquialism for people born in Liverpool.¹ I remember reading about a six-year-old black girl, born in Liverpool, who tried to bleach her skin white, believing that if her skin was white she would be accepted in the playground, since she had no language differences. The psycho-

logical implication of this was frightening. 'Why should our kids feel inferior?' we all asked. The answer was easy. This was a period when Agatha Christie's novel, *Ten Little Niggers*, was available in most primary schools.² It was period when 'little black sambo' and 'golliwogs' were the order of the day.³ There were a million ways to make black people feel inferior. Black studies: we demanded black studies within the school curriculum. No, they said, but we will fund black studies outside of the school curriculum. Consequently night classes were set up. This coincided with the culture revolution in the USA – 'black is beautiful' and 'black and proud' were better alternatives to bleach. Collective community participation was proving to be positive for black development.

Liverpool Black Organisation (LBO)

There was little or no history of black involvement in trade union activism since very few black people were employed in the city. There was no single body that had the interests of the Liverpool black community on the top of their agenda. It was vital that we organised ourselves. This resulted in the formation of the Liverpool Black Organisation in 1976.

There is no space here to highlight how the organisation created a participative structure that became a thorn in the side of racism. Nevertheless, I would like to recollect a successful protest that was inspired by the work of the late community activist Saul Alinsky. His tactics were based on addressing apathy and showing the community that you could 'legally' challenge authority and **win**.

The Half Penny protest

When a 15-year-old black youth told the organisation that he had been accused of stealing a coat while in a top store in Liverpool city centre, it was a perfect opportunity to deploy the Alinsky tactics. Security staff had demanded to see the inside of his coat, claiming that it had been taken from the store. The youth was adamant that it was his own coat. He was wrestled to the ground and his coat ripped off. It transpired that he was telling the truth. He complained to the store via a solicitor. He was informed that, 'Following a full investigation into your complaints we fully support the actions of our security staff.'

² Agatha Christie was one of the most prolific writers in history, whose books have outsold any others apart from the Bible and Shakespeare. The title of this book, one of 80 novels she wrote, was given a different name for the US market.

³ 'Golliwog' is a rag doll-like children's literary character created by Florence Kate Upton in the late 19th century based on a black minstrel. Between 1910 and 2001 one of the world's leading jam manufacturers used the character as a marketing tool, giving away golliwog badges. This was despite protests from black people, against whom the term 'wog', derived from golliwog, had long been used.

¹ The local accent and dialect of Liverpool, also known to outsiders as 'scouse'.

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At this particular time half pennies were legal tender in Britain. In fact, you could legally spend up to 60 pence. So you can imagine the difficulties that would arise if, for example, you paid your bus fare with 120 half pennies. One of the fundamental principles of Alinsky tactics was that every action brings about a reaction. It was how you plan for the reaction that is crucial. It was decided to visit the store at the peak shopping time, Saturday morning. The planning had been meticulous as well as fun. There would be a half penny group who would purchase goods across the eight tills we had identified. Basically, just causing inconvenience to shoppers and staff alike. A solicitor and a vicar were at the door to deal with any reaction. This was a legal protest that would happen every Saturday. Within two hours the management asked us what we wanted. We presented the store with a list of demands, including reimbursement for the youth and a pledge to become equal opportunity employers. All demands were met. Community action had achieved a victory.

1981 Toxteth riots

The Toxteth riots were the culmination of all the frustrations experienced by the black community in Liverpool, particularly with regard to police and community relations.

The events of 1981 are well documented.⁴ What is important here is how the riots were to change the face of community participation in regard to Liverpool and the black community.

The arrival in office of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, was to see the development of

numerous governmental agencies such as the Toxteth Task Force. Government neighbourhood policy revolved around the principle of 'consultation'.

The next 20 years concentrated on regeneration and economic initiatives. Community participation was now in the hands of civil servants and those employed to bring about consultation. Grassroots action was slowly eroded as the community was broken up and dispersed. Social outlets were destroyed under the banner of regeneration.

The growth of housing associations in Toxteth also played a role in stifling local protest. Neighbourhood schemes were now run by this growing housing sector. The Race Relations Act further put an obligatory duty on authorities to produce diversity and inclusion statements. Liverpool's early wealth was built on the slave trade, and the city invested in slavery again, building a number of slave galleries in museums telling us 'not to forget our history'. In reality it is now convenient to exploit our history to coincide with the 2008 European Capital of Culture label. Yesterday we could not have black studies, but today we can view a Ku Klux Klan outfit down in the gallery.

Community participation is now led by any agency that has a stake in Toxteth and you had better believe me when I tell you that there are countless agencies with such a stake. Today, real community participation would no doubt contravene Section 5 of the Public Order Act, or come under the scope of the Terrorism Act, epitomising the changing face of community participation.

Despite these developments, the fruits of grassroots struggle have achieved some rewards. In 1999 Liverpool Council apologised for their role in the slave trade and the month of October was officially recognised as Black History Month. A yearly Libation ceremony (a ceremony involving the sacred act of pouring – see picture inset) takes place at the city docks as the black community continues to impact on the future of the city.⁵



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⁴ They were one of the most serious series of riots ever in the UK, lasting nine days, during which one person died after being struck by a police vehicle attempting to clear crowds, and (according to the police) there were 468 police officers injured, 500 people arrested, and at least 70 buildings demolished.

⁵ 'Libation' comes from an ancient Greek word referring to the ritual pouring of a drink as an offering to a god. Its modern use often relates to the remembrance of past historical events