

Opening the Doors: Racial Discrimination in Cyprus

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The eventuality of Cyprus joining Europe appears and evaporates in one relentless breath. Leaving aside the usual cacophony over the 'Cyprus problem' (whose Cyprus and whose problem?) It seems something is not going fundamentally right. In all fairness, to date politicians, diplomats and entrepreneurs have focused on the economic and political gains of Cyprus joining the European fold. And I can recall presenting a couple of concerts some five years ago at Famagusta Gate under the slogan 'All Different -All Equal'. Again in all fairness, the politicians from the whole political spectrum seem to be sharing the statement.

"Racism does not exist" (here) a government minister recently stated in a TV reportage that showed dozens of Sri Lankans 'looking happy' on a Sunday lunch time in the Nicosia Municipal Gardens. The impact of sound, image and discourse washes everything aside with one mighty liberal swoop. It is pointless when public figureheads make such wishy-washy claims when reality presents an unwanted genealogy of the obvious. No underpaid overworked servants here. No people have been waiting for over 10 years in order to attain some kind of legal status. During this time of course, the said people are not allowed to work legally. Even into the last decade Cypriots who had resided abroad and returned to Cyprus were not given a standard ID card. The scenario is reminiscent of the diplomatic triple talk that existed in Britain after 1974. Back then a refugee was not a refugee but a displaced person and hence had no claim to legal status in Britain. Simultaneously 'we' marched, as part of a collective ritual behaviour, in defiance of the Turkish invasion and occupation of Cyprus and one of the demands was that all refugees should be returned to their homes. But if successive British (and many other European) governments did not even recognise refugee status then what could 'we' expect for the refugees themselves. The symmetry between Cyprus and Britain is surprising and predictable.

A few weeks later a different reportage on the same news broadcast had similar images coupled with a rather disturbing script. The newsreader's voice had all the tones of an impending crisis. 'The Sri Lankan' this time we were told had syphilis and on his recent return to Cyprus had been diagnosed with AIDS. Meantime the

images reeled out in front of 'our' collective eyes and were absorbed by 'our' collective ears. The same innocent faces, relaxing in the Municipal Gardens were shown again and by implication every Sri Lankan was being slandered. I wonder if the government minister saw that one? Flashing back to London in the 1930's, when the first Cypriot emigrants left their rural villages for the sprawling colonial metropolis in search of work and a few pennies more the stereotypes are uncannily similar. TV was not around; radio was in the process of becoming a new 'mass communications medium'. The main source of information came from newspapers, colonial and police reports, in both London and Cyprus. Having researched this period for my thesis I came across several useful files at the Public Records Office in London. C. E. Campion was a London Divisional Detective Inspector who wrote in a confidential letter:

"Most of their spare time is spent in cafes run by their compatriots of which there are six in Soho and four in Tottenham Court Road district. These cafes are open all day and night, and Cypriots can be seen in them at all hours.

*There is no doubt Mr. Mead is right in his allegation that venereal disease is rife amongst these Cypriots, and strange to say they seem to have found fascination for white women, and they can be seen in these cafes in the company of white women, mostly of the prostitute type."*¹

In both examples the specific becomes a generalisation and in the process whole communities of people are stigmatised as problematic and anomalous. By implication the solution, both then and now, in Britain and Cyprus is a crude form of unwanted repatriation. This is also manifest today in common sense forms of racism. We are surrounded by these in our every day exchanges. Some of 'us' engage in these hysterical collective rituals with statements like 'they are all to blame' 'send the foreigners back home' and 'it was different here before they moved in'. The crux however relates to Europe in the popular sense of the word and to Cyprus in specific as a potential odd ball in this equation.

In the first popular instance European means many different things to as many different people. Europe means 'no borders'. No discrimination and racism. Far from being an idealist utopia where all are treated equally, most of Europe is still riddled with differential treatment of its own citizens. Many of these people campaign, organise, oppose and challenge practices and ideas that deny equality. Cyprus, however, is somewhat behind on matters of equal opportunity, equal rights and anti-racism. There are several organisations that campaign, most of them operate 'on behalf' of various communities, with very little direct representation. Drawing a parallel with the Cypriot community in England, it did not seem at all strange for people to put forward basic demands for community and advice centres. In fact whole cam-

OPENING THE DOORS

paigns were waged for these kinds of facilities between 1960-1980 in London boroughs such as Camden, Hackney, Islington and Haringey. In Cyprus, however, in the year 2000 people have the Municipal Gardens in Nicosia on a Sunday. Have you ever wondered why the venue and the day? Sunday is perhaps the only day these workers have off. And the Municipal Gardens do not operate a discriminating door policy. The Gardens are open for all. Unlike numerous clubs, restaurants and bars that do apply discriminating entrance exams. It is perhaps reminiscent of a form of apartheid. I wonder if the news broadcast that was mentioned before would ever dream of covering such issues. And what would happen if a Sri Lankan European citizen decides to go to such a venue in the near future?

Note

*1. 'Immigration of Aliens to UK....' (CO 67/260/7) letter by C.E. Campion dated 27/11/1935)