

Three questions from *bis*, the journal of the Swedish organisation, Bibliotek i Samh.

Answers by Shiraz Durrani
8 April 2001

1. In information sent to Sweden, you describe the formation of the Diversity Council as a historical event. Why?

There are a number of levels at which the formation of the Diversity Council is an historical event. Black and Minority Ethnic workers have struggled for a long time to get their managers, the profession, employers, and local and central governments to take serious action and address discrimination within the information field. Part of the reason for lack of progress was the fact that a number of different groups were working on their own, or with minimal co-operation and so failed to make a national impact. With the coming together of the four main groups¹ as the Diversity Council, new possibilities have been opened up under a united strategy, action plan and aims.

At another level, the Diversity Council opens out the possibilities of other oppressed groups joining in, in an even larger movement. Such areas include oppression on ground of class, gender, sexuality, disability etc. Much work has been done recently in the field of "social exclusion" and the Diversity Council can help to focus action along all these fronts.

At the same time, for the first time, the Library Association has been very supportive of this initiative and it is hoped that the Diversity Council will be recognised as a Library Association Group, thus "mainstreaming" an area of exclusion which has previously struggled outside the professional organisation. Meaningful contacts have also been made with the Black Caucus of the American Library Association which is providing valuable experience in organising and solidarity work.

2. What is, briefly, the situation for librarians in UK with a third world background?

Their marginalisation, powerlessness and discrimination is reflected in the fact that out of 25,000 members of the (British) Library Association, only 286 are from African, Caribbean or Asian backgrounds and only 3 of them earn more than £27,000 p.m. At a recent meeting on Annual Library Plans, the lack of Black librarians was glaring; this is true also among senior LIS management generally, among ranks of the Library Association Councillors, at ALCL (Association of Chief London Librarians) and at the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL). All this indicates a lack of input from Black librarians in the planning process itself. They remain outside the power structures that decide on policies, resource allocation and service delivery.

¹ The organisations that form the Diversity Council are the African Caribbean Library Association (ACLA), the Asian Librarians and Advisers Group (ALAG), and Race and Class Group (RCG), SPICE (Specialist Provision in Community Languages and English). Also expected to join is the Chinese Library Support Group.

At the same time, workplace discrimination places additional pressures on majority world librarians who, in most cases, have to survive extremely oppressive work environment where they do not receive the same support, information, training or experience that non-majority world library workers receive. In many cases work places are run by dictatorial white managers whose main interest seems to be to maintain the power *status quo*.

Following the publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, it has now been recognised that institutional racism exists widely in Britain. Libraries are no exceptions. While new legislation makes it a requirement for all public authorities to address institutional racism, it remains to be seen how much meaningful change will be made in LIS.

3. Which is, in your opinion, the biggest challenge to LIS in UK?

A number of major social, economic, and technologic forces are changing the world of information in Britain today. The forces of corporate globalisation are breaking old relationships and creating new ground rules that favour corporate profit. New moves from the WTO to "corporatise" services, including information and education, create yet more challenges. The exploitative forces that have affected information in the majority world for decades are now doing similar damage in Britain and other industrialised countries. New technologies provide new possibilities to solve many social and economic problems, but, in the wrong hands, they also carry the danger of further marginalizing majority of working people who have traditionally remained outside the remit of "public" information services.

While people all around the world, and in Britain too, are organising to face these challenges with a powerful international movement of people's globalisation, it remains to be seen if the British LIS profession joins the progressive forces or not. Change is always brought about by a minority and signs of these in LIS are activities of organisations such as Information for Social Change, LINK, and the Democracy Council, among others. Many senior managers controlling the direction of British libraries as well as the Library Association have yet to indicate their stand in harnessing the positive aspects of the new technological and social forces in the interest of serving the needs of the excluded working people. Thus the biggest challenge to LIS is to make itself relevant to the majority of British people and move out of the 150-year old tradition of "the middle class running information services for the middle class". Success will be measured on the basis of a real shift of power from a minority white, usually male, middle class to a representative and diversified majority of working people.

"If you have Internet links to suggest, the readers can go beyond the answers and find out more about the issue."

Some electronic sources



10 Downing Street - Home.url

<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/>



BBC Online Homepage - Welcome.url

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>



Black Caucus of the American Library Association.url

<http://www.bcala.org/>



Black Information Link.url

<http://www.blink.org.uk/>



ALP.url

Annual Library Plan:

http://www.libecon2000.org/vti_bin/shtml.dll/country/uk.htm



Campaign Against Racism and Fascism.url

<http://www.carf.demon.co.uk/index.html>



Culture, Media & Sport Committee Home Page.url

http://www.culture.gov.uk/index_flash.html



Home Office Internet Service - home page.url

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>



House of Commons - Culture, Media and Sport - Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence.url

<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/selcom/cmssel.htm>



THE BLACK PRESENCE IN BRITAIN - Black British History.url

<http://www.blackpresence.co.uk/>



Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion.url

<http://www.lmu.ac.uk/ies/dmudd/dmudd1.htm>



UK Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.url

<http://www.detr.gov.uk/>



Library Association - Publications.url

<http://www.la-hq.org.uk/directory/publications.html>



Local Government Association - LGA - LGANet.url

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/>



THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT BOARD, UK

<http://www.global.org.uk/lgmb/local.htm>



The Library Association, UK

<http://www.la-hq.org.uk/>

Commission for Racial Equality

<http://www.cre.gov.uk/>

Department of Culture, Media and Sport

<http://www.culture.gov.uk>

Guardian Unlimited

<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/>

I CARE - Internet Centre Anti Racism Europe

<http://www.icare.to/>

Information for Social Change

<http://libr.org/ISC/TOC.html>

LARRIE (Local Authorities Race Relations Information Exchange)

www.lg-employers.gov.uk/equal-info.html

Progressive Librarian

<http://gort.ucsd.edu/newjour/p/msg02462.html>

Social Exclusion Unit : Cabinet Office

<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/index.htm>

Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority

<http://www.london.gov.uk/>

UNISON -- the public service union --

<http://www.unison.org.uk/home/index.htm>

United Kingdom Parliament home page

<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/>