

## ***PLAYING THE ETHNIC CARD – politics and segregation in London's East End***

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### ***Abstract***

*This article takes a critical look at the exploitation of difference, and at the impact of political forces of various kinds on ethnic segregation. It examines both external forces and forces from within 'communities' themselves through the case history of Bengali settlement in the East End of London. It assesses the different, though interacting, roles of immigration legislation and resource allocation, community and separatist politics, populism and multiculturalism, and brings the story up to date with an account of the incorporation of faith groups in local governance and of the wooing of the Muslim vote in the context of 'The War on Terror'. This understanding is presented as a necessary first step in combating ethnic division and focusing instead on social equality for all ethnicities.*

We are currently seeing a growing, often alarmist, recognition that segregation matters.<sup>1</sup> Where once people would talk about celebrating difference, the emphasis today is on 'cohesion'.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that the political forces that now express so much concern about segregation have often been responsible for its development and perpetuation. And it is not just political parties that may be found to be promoting ethnic separation. There are strong drives towards separate organisation within different ethnic 'communities', and organisational separation can easily manifest itself as physical separation; indeed sometimes that is an important aim. Media coverage of segregation is often driven by a populist, Right-wing xenophobia, and politicians are often criticised for riding the populist horse. Meanwhile, liberal commentators may prefer to concentrate on the resulting victimisation of minority ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> However, there has always been a reasoned Left critique of policies that promote segregation, though it has been little heard. This argument, which I have looked at more fully elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> criticises segregation for causing divisions between the poorer members of our society, encouraging inter-ethnic competition for limited resources and preventing people from coming together to fight for greater economic equality for all ethnicities.

The purpose of this paper, though, is not to look at why we might be concerned about segregation, nor to engage in the quantitative arguments about whether and where and how it is increasing or changing.<sup>5</sup> What I want to look at is why segregation of various kinds persists, and, specifically, the role played by politics. I am interested not just in measurable physical separation - as expressed in separate housing patterns and school rolls - or cultural segregation that can allow people to live parallel lives. I am also interested in the tendency for members of minority groups to engage with wider civil society – in which many are very active – specifically through their identity as members of their group. I will look at all this

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<sup>1</sup> See the speech by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality where he warned that 'we are sleepwalking our way to segregation', Manchester Town Hall 22 September 2005 (<http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/cre/Default.aspx.LocID-0hgnew07r.RefLocID-0hg00900c001001.Lang-EN.htm> [accessed 12 December 2008])

<sup>2</sup> For example in the establishment of the Community Cohesion Review Team following the riots in the North of England in 2001. See also Goodhart, (2004)

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Phillips (2006)

<sup>4</sup> Glynn, Sarah (submitted) *Marxism and Multiculturalism*

<sup>5</sup> For discussion that goes beyond the headline figures see Simpson (2004) and Poulsen and Johnston (2006)

through a historical case study that goes back over the last 50 years, exploring the role of political forces on the evolution and development of segregation in one of the most physically concentrated immigrant ‘communities’ in Britain, that of the Bengali Muslims in Tower Hamlets.<sup>6</sup> The ideas discussed here use a historical materialist analysis to build on PhD research looking at 120 years of immigrant political mobilisation in London’s East End. They are based on extensive mixed method investigations that included long recorded interviews with many of those who have worked politically in the area, ethnographic observation of numerous local meetings and other political activities and long sorties into the local archives.

### ***The Bengali East End***

The majority of the Bengali Muslim families who live in Tower Hamlets immigrated from Sylhet, in what is now Bangladesh, and the crucial first link in many of their immigration chains was formed by *lascars*,<sup>7</sup> oriental seamen in the British Empire’s merchant navy, who had jumped ship and put down roots near the docks. Larger-scale immigration can be dated from the 1950s. In London, most Bengalis worked in the garment trade, perhaps after initial unskilled jobs in hotels and catering, or on the railways, and others found work in factories in the north and the midlands. The seventies and eighties saw a rapid growth in the East End Bengali community as wives and children finally left their homes in Bangladesh to join the men, and others moved down from recession-hit towns in the north of England.

Like other immigrants, the Bengalis relied on their own community networks for the infrastructure of daily life and for physical protection. They lived close together near the mosque, the shops that sold Bengali foodstuffs, the garment workshops where other Bengalis could find them work, and, most importantly, near others who spoke their language and understood their needs, where they could find protection in numbers from the unfamiliar and hostile world of white Britain.

At the same time as the garment trade increasingly succumbed to foreign competition, the predominantly Sylheti-run ‘Indian’ restaurant sector was expanding and providing an important stepping-stone for many new and older immigrants; and although this has allowed some families to put down roots all over the country, Tower Hamlets has remained the Bengali capital.

Many of the first Bengali settlers established themselves in privately-rented flats in Spitalfields in the west end of the borough, where Dickensian living conditions meant they met with little competition for tenancies, and fewer signs specifying ‘no coloureds’.<sup>8</sup> However the East End of London was to build a very high proportion of council houses, and a high proportion of Bengalis eventually got places in council accommodation. As with the earlier Jewish immigration, the area of Bengali settlement has spread eastward from its original nucleus. Many longer-established white residents have moved out, and some Bengali families are also choosing a more suburban existence. Parts of the old centres of immigration

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<sup>6</sup> Most people are happy to be described as either Bengali or Bangladeshi, though Bengali is preferred by those who want to stress a secular cultural identity, and Bangladeshi by those who want to draw a distinction between Islamic Bangladesh and Hindu West Bengal. Although Bangladeshi is most commonly used by those outside the community, Bengali can also be used when referring to the time before the creation of Bangladesh, and for that reason I will tend to adopt it here.

<sup>7</sup> Lascars were employed under different conditions from British sailors.

<sup>8</sup> Forman (1989) p30, claims ‘In 1966 a third of all adverts in the local press for privately rented rooms actually specified “no coloureds”.’

are rapidly succumbing to the dual pressures of office expansion and gentrification; and there are similar developments in former white working-class areas.

Immigration is now limited, though strong Bengali identity and community ties (in part perpetuated through segregation) mean that marriage partners are still often sought in a family's area of origin back in Bangladesh. On top of this, natural increase is very significant, and the East End Bengali population is growing. Large families have produced a Bengali age profile that is heavily slanted towards the younger end, and the 2001 Census found that 40% were under 16 (compared to 12.5% of the borough's 'White British' population). The Census also found that 65,500 people - one third of the population of Tower Hamlets - described themselves as ethnically 'Bangladeshi', and that they were largely concentrated in certain areas of the borough. The age profile already has implications for schools, and also means that, despite incoming marriage partners, the community will become rapidly dominated by a generation born and educated in Britain.

### ***Organising as a community***

The first distinctly political forces that acted to bring the Bengali immigrants together were those focused on their Bengali homeland: first the campaign for independence from Britain, then mobilisation around the politics of what had become East Pakistan – and especially its troubled relationship with the West Pakistani dominated government in Islamabad. Initially, like other post-war immigrants, most Bengalis in Britain saw themselves as sojourners with futures and families in their country of origin. They also had specific concerns connected with the freedom to come to Britain. Initially these, too, related to the Pakistani government and the emigration restrictions it imposed on those from the East, but then, along with other immigrants, their focus turned to the British government and its increasingly restrictive immigration legislation, starting with the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962.<sup>9</sup>

Campaigns around all these issues not only encouraged Bengali solidarity, but also strengthened the community organisations with which they were associated, consolidating the community's emotional and physical heart in Tower Hamlets. So, for example, the campaign for the Pakistani passports needed for emigration, which was co-ordinated in London by the newly-formed Pakistan Welfare Association, gave the association an enormous boost in membership.<sup>10</sup> Political activists combined their more overt political activities with community work. For those on the Communist inspired left, such as Tasadduk Ahmed who played a major part in early community organisation, this was an important part of the practice of 'popular front' politics and was supposed to politicise people more generally.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of their homeland could not be fully shared with the Bengalis' white neighbours; and it also cut across other possible bases of organisation, such as class. It was central to Bengali life during the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971,<sup>12</sup> and Bangladeshi politics – both national and local - continues to play an important role in Tower Hamlets today, with modern communications making it ever easier for local community links to be intermeshed with transnational ones. The international link was officially consolidated with the twinning of Tower Hamlets and Sylhet in 1996.

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<sup>9</sup> Shukra (1998) p 10

<sup>10</sup> Adams (1994)

<sup>11</sup> Glynn (2006)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. This did not, of course, mean that the organisation of united Bengali action was easy or without, sometimes bitter, political conflict.

***Impacts of immigration legislation***

Immigration legislation can be seen both as a response to popular racism, and, despite its avowed opposite intent, as a spur to greater racism and 'racial' division. Since the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, immigration rules have been widely acknowledged to have been constructed so as to restrict non-white immigration,<sup>13</sup> and by the mid sixties both the main political parties were arguing that limiting immigration and legislating for improved 'race relations' were two sides of the same coin. This fuelled racism, legitimising the view that racist violence could be blamed on the growth of the black and Asian population. And racism encouraged segregation as self-defence, and the movement of white families out of immigrant neighbourhoods.

In addition, the way the legislation worked promoted chain immigration and ethnic clustering. In response to the introduction of immigrant work vouchers in the 1962 Act, Bengalis already in Britain organised themselves, for example through the Pakistan Catering Association, to procure vouchers for would-be immigrants.<sup>14</sup> After the 1971 Immigration Act effectively ended the possibilities for Bengali primary immigration, the vast majority of those who came were relations, by blood or marriage, to earlier immigrants, and came to join those already here.

These new rules applied to the majority of non-white immigrants,<sup>15</sup> but especially impacted on settlement patterns of ethnic groups such as the Bengalis that were only just getting established in Britain.

***The politics of housing***

Crucial to 'race relations' and to segregation, is the issue of housing, and nowhere more so than in Tower Hamlets, where the housing available has always fallen far short of what is required, and housing issues dominate councillors' surgeries. Limited options have tended to push immigrants disproportionately into the poorest housing, and for the existing population, too, this is an area where the effect of immigration may be quite literally brought home. Already in 1903, the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, which failed to find evidence for most of the social effects then largely blamed on Jewish immigrants in the same areas of East London, did accept that immigration was responsible for increasing overcrowding and for displacement of the previous population.<sup>16</sup> The famous map of 1899 that accompanied Russell and Lewis' volume on *The Jew in London* shows this in graphic terms, with large areas hatched deep blue to indicate streets with more than 75% of their residents Jewish, and many solid blue to indicate 95% Jewish residency.<sup>17</sup> Competition for housing has long been an important catalyst for racialised action,<sup>18</sup> and is far from being a new source of tension, as implied by Dench et al in their much-heralded examination of *The New East End*.<sup>19</sup> Their book records white working-class concern, not only about the huge demand for housing, but also about council-housing policies that, especially since the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, have increasingly prioritised those in greatest need rather than rewarding long-term residents. The general principle of housing meeting the needs of those in the worst

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<sup>13</sup> Solomos (1993) p 63

<sup>14</sup> Adams (1994) p 90

<sup>15</sup> See Solomos (1993) p 63 –70 for an explanation of how the laws discriminated against non-white immigration.

<sup>16</sup> Garrard (1971) p 40

<sup>17</sup> Russell Lewis (1900)

<sup>18</sup> Feldman (1994) p 183

<sup>19</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 4

housing conditions, has been recognised since the beginning of the slum clearances in the thirties, but in practice it was always subject to some qualification. In Tower Hamlets, those most in need have often been large, newly arrived, Bengali families.

Dench et al follow the lead of many of their interviewees in regretting the loss of older letting systems and of the strength they gave to established family networks. This is an important point, but housing for those in greatest need is important too – which is why new criteria were introduced after bitter struggle. The crucial issue, which the book does not discuss, is that the problem is not the prioritising of those in greatest need, but chronic under-investment in public housing, which has meant that those in greatest need can only be helped at the expense of those a little better off. *The New East End* develops old reactionary ideas in line with the currently fashionable sport of blaming the welfare state for community breakdown. It has proved a headline catching thesis, but it is an argument based on accepting narrow, politically imposed limits on investment in social housing, and on ignoring wider socio-economic issues (which have only increased with the pressures of gentrification). The book rightly points out that ‘from the beginning of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets there has... been a contest for housing in which both groups feel badly treated’,<sup>20</sup> but it cannot resolve that contest within its own limited terms.

In her 1989 study of segregation, Susan Smith showed that apparently aracial policies ‘have effectively (if apparently unintentionally) denied black people full access to the welfare and property rights associated with state-subsidized housing’.<sup>21</sup> The nature of council house allocation resulted in inbuilt discrimination against the Bengalis, and a climate of institutional racism meant that there was little incentive for housing departments to do anything about it. For a start, there were comparatively few houses for large families and a lack of interpreters. Existing rules made it impossible to apply for family housing until wives and children were in the UK, and applicants lost their place on the waiting list if they left the UK for more than 3 months – which frequently happened as they battled with the red tape controlling family immigration in the British High Commission in Dhaka. As a result, Bengalis frequently found themselves in temporary accommodation as homeless families, and although this made them a priority for re-housing, the homeless tended to be given the worst flats. On top of this, housing departments were riddled with conscious and unconscious prejudice and assumption.<sup>22</sup> As a local campaigning group pointed out, housing officers’ original biased allocations had a compounding effect on racism and segregation, as they gave certain white families ‘the feeling they had the “right” to keep their estates white’.<sup>23</sup>

The ethnic impacts of council housing legislation were coincidental to its underlying aims; however, the vital issue of housing as it affects different ethnic groups has been actively taken up by different political organisations, and this in turn has further impacted on housing patterns.

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<sup>20</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 164

<sup>21</sup> Smith (1989) p50

<sup>22</sup> As demonstrated in an independent report commissioned by the GLC in 1983-4 (Philips, 1986) and the 1988 CRE report on Tower Hamlets, as well as by anecdotes from those affected (Glynn, 2005 p536). The GLC were landlords of around 3/5 of the Borough’s public housing until their abolition, when GLC housing stock passed to the Borough Council.

<sup>23</sup> *Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) Annual Report* December 1983, p4

**Black radicalism**

In the 1970s, racism played a crucial role in Bengali housing decisions. Few families wanted to move out from the heartland of Bengali settlement in Spitalfields, even though this meant living in appalling conditions in run-down private-rented housing, or, increasingly, in squats. When they were allocated council housing, it was generally in predominantly white areas, where the racism forced many to return to the slums they had hoped to leave.<sup>24</sup>

Bengali squatters initially sought practical help and advice from Terry Fitzpatrick of the Squatters Union, who combined the skills of a trained builder with 'sort of anarchist' policies of 'self help';<sup>25</sup> but the squats acquired a more overt political dimension one evening in January 1975, when Mala and Farrukh Dhondy and another member of the Race Today Collective joined the squatters' weekly meeting. As part of the vanguard of Black Radicalism, Race Today attempted to turn the squatters into a movement for black self-organisation.<sup>26</sup> The following February they established the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) and it has been estimated that 'at its peak BHAG was several hundred families strong, with a core of 150 in the four main squats'.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Race Today was instrumental in organising an anti-racist group that rejected older conciliatory methods and set up its own vigilante patrols.

The role played by these organisations in mobilising a generation of young Bengalis has been well acknowledged,<sup>28</sup> and many of those who now form Tower Hamlets' political and civil establishment can trace their active roots to this time. The majority went on to pursue their political ambitions through the Labour Party because that was the party in power and, as Helal Abbas who later became council leader explained to me, 'you can only change so much from outside'.<sup>29</sup> In May 1986, Channel 4 showed Farrukh Dhondy's television drama, *King of the Ghetto*, which was set in the Bengali community with a main character based on Fitzpatrick. However, the story departed significantly from actual events, both in its detail and in its final message. The film ended by showing newly radicalised youth in opposition to a corrupt and cynical Labour Party; this was very far from the reality.

So what was the impact of the Black Radical ideology? For most of those involved, the turn towards separate organisation appears to have been pragmatic rather than ideological,<sup>30</sup> but that does not mean that separate organisation did not have powerful effects that are still being felt today. Looking back, Mala Sen (formerly Dhondy) is characteristically forthright:

We did change people's minds, we did make them feel... a more kind of... community sense rather than an individual sense... I think we achieved a lot, but I think we had a limited agenda. I mean you can't

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed examination of the developments described in this section see Glynn (2005)

<sup>25</sup> Fitzpatrick, interviewed 23 Aug and 20 Nov 2001

<sup>26</sup> Black radicalism was a formative strand of the New Left that developed from criticism of tendencies towards mechanicism and excessive structuralism *within* Marxism, to criticism of Marxism itself. It disputed Marx's argument that the primary division in society is class, based upon ownership of the means of production. Socialist revolution remained the ultimate aim, but the Black Radicals argued that autonomous black revolution had to come first, and would help to bring it about. Working-class unity was postponed, and the majority of the working class was temporarily excluded from the equation altogether.

<sup>27</sup> Forman (1989) p 82 Charlie Forman was himself involved as a housing campaigner from 1979

<sup>28</sup> Glynn (2005) pp 538-9

<sup>29</sup> Interviewed 10 October 2001. A similar point was made in other interviews. See Glynn (2008)

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, interview with Abbas Uddin 10 Oct 2001, quoted in Glynn (2005) p 538

create a world revolution with ghetto politics, and it was ghetto politics.<sup>31</sup>

BHAG's key demand was not only the permanent re-housing of all its members, but that they be given the option of housing in the safe area of E1. Following the Greater London Council's squatters' amnesty in 1977, the Bengali squatters were asked to agree a list of acceptable estates; and Bengali tenants campaigning for slum clearance and re-housing took up similar demands and agreed a similar list. A GLC housing document then proposed taking this a step further, suggesting,

...we might continue to meet the wishes of the Bengali community by earmarking blocks of flats or, indeed a whole estate if necessary, for their community, *provided* the existing tenants wish to move away and could be given the necessary transfers.<sup>32</sup>

When these plans leaked out to the *Observer*,<sup>33</sup> they caused a flurry of activity among journalists and worried community groups, and considerable confusion in the main political parties. Jean Tatham, GLC housing committee chair, initially clung firmly to the proposals, even telling the *East London Advertiser*, 'I will give priority to any of my white tenants who are overcrowded or who want transfers from blocks that are predominantly non-white' and 'I am prepared to consider applications from all-white or all-West Indian groups, for instance, who want to live separately on their own estate.'<sup>34</sup> Other Tories were more critical, and the Labour opposition, which had initially seemed ready to back the scheme, became increasingly persuaded of its potential for boosting racism and division. What had become dubbed 'The Ghetto Plan' was eventually rejected, but the GLC decided that when vacancies occurred on nine specified estates that already had a large number of Bengalis, they would be offered to the Bengali squatters; and a GLC spokesman told the *Daily Mail* that 'Existing tenants who wish to move from these blocks will be transferred'.<sup>35</sup> The political confusion had been encouraged, and the proposals to a considerable extent legitimated, by the Black Radicals' demands. Mala Dhondy, on behalf of BHAG, told the *Observer* that 'The GLC has gone beyond what we asked in a potentially dangerous way'<sup>36</sup>, and a 'packed and emotional', ethnically-mixed meeting organised by local community groups unanimously called for the withdrawal of the original GLC report<sup>37</sup>; however the principle that council policy should enable concentrated Bengali settlement in the E1 area was rarely challenged.

This debate was of immediate concern to around 300 families, consisting of about 2,000 people, but the pattern it set so publicly, and which had already been accepted by housing officials more privately, was to have much wider impact. BHAG's campaign played an important part in the segregation of the Bengalis. It also helped make possible the very high proportion of Bengalis – unique among ethnic minority groups – who were able to find accommodation in council housing. At the same time, because of their special requirements in terms of location and house size, it was easy for them to be allocated the worst quality housing.

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<sup>31</sup> Interviewed 5 Nov 2001

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Leech (1994) p 13

<sup>33</sup> *Observer* 4 June 1978

<sup>34</sup> *East London Advertiser* 9 June 1978

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Mail* 20 June 1978

<sup>36</sup> *Observer* 11 June 1978

<sup>37</sup> *East London Advertiser* 16 June 1978

Although she criticised the GLC report at the time, overall, Mala's view remained unequivocal:

Some people said, 'You are creating a ghetto'. We said, 'fine, we prefer the ghetto, at least you have each other to defend yourself'... So that's what it was and we achieved it, and today you walk round Brick Lane, it's totally Bengali.<sup>38</sup>

Separate black - and increasingly ethnicity-based - organisation was not confined to Tower Hamlets. Similar changes were taking place everywhere, however the role of Race Today allowed the Bengalis to achieve a high level of organisation, which may help to account for the exceptionally high degree of ethnic concentration still found in the Bengali community.

As Kalbir Shukra points out in her history of 'black politics', despite the revolutionary rhetoric, 'the search for group strength and power as black people[,] turned black liberation into a pursuit of a stronger bargaining position with the establishment'; and 'in the end they settled for a piece of the British pie'.<sup>39</sup> Black Radicalism could not answer the fundamental theoretical question of how, as it assumed, different oppressed groups would ultimately link forces. Instead made it less likely that they would do so. BHAG's demands contradicted all the old Left arguments about working-class unity, limiting the scope of the movement and militating against the coming together of different groups in a common cause that had been so successfully promoted by housing activists in the East End of the thirties.<sup>40</sup>

The radicalism failed to put down roots, and dreams of black separatism mutated into liberal multiculturalism, but community organisation was left flourishing; and Bengali political activists, whether in the Labour Party or elsewhere, still see themselves as working for and representing their community.<sup>41</sup> Pragmatic in their turn, the main-stream parties were ready, as in other immigrant areas, to make full use of traditional patriarchal and village-based community networks to bring out votes. This politics perpetuated social as well as physical segregation.

### ***White populism***

Perennial and severe competition for housing inevitably led to conflict; as it continues to do today. When attempts were made to address Bengali needs - by rehousing squatters, by giving priority to homeless families or those suffering severe overcrowding, or by building larger housing units - this was seen as queue jumping and discrimination against established residents.

There was plenty of scope for political groups to play the 'race card', and this became a particularly potent technique from the mid eighties. Conservative housing policies - especially the council tenants' 'Right to Buy' introduced in 1980, and the accompanying restrictions on investment in public housing - were putting pressure on council housing throughout the country. In the East End, this coincided with rising Bengali demand as family reunification brought more wives and children from Bangladesh. Other inner London Boroughs had larger numbers of homeless families, but in Tower Hamlets more and more of

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<sup>38</sup> Interviewed 5 November 2001

<sup>39</sup> Shukra (1998) pp 49 and 27

<sup>40</sup> Glynn (2005)

<sup>41</sup> Glynn (2008)

the homeless were Bengali – half of the total in 1981 and nearly 90% in 1987.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Labour splits allowed the Liberals to take power in Tower Hamlets, and to put into practice a community politics that excluded the Bengalis. Most Bengalis could be guaranteed to vote Labour, so, for the Liberals, appealing to the white working class made electoral sense;<sup>43</sup> and, when circumstance suited, the Labour party succumbed to similar tactics. The Conservatives had little support in Tower Hamlets – but of course it was their national housing policies that created the climate that made these politics possible.

The conduct of the local Liberals became so notorious that the national party was forced to hold an inquiry into their publication of ‘allegedly racist election literature between 1990 and 1993’,<sup>44</sup> and to suspend the three men most involved. Tower Hamlets Liberals had actually been practising their populist politics from the time of their election to office in 1986, when they caused widespread outrage (and publicity) with proposals to put hundreds of homeless families into a ship moored on the Thames.<sup>45</sup> Their strategy almost always centred on housing, and consciously encouraged the idea of different housing entitlements for different ethnic groups.

Charlie Foreman has shown how these policies allowed the Liberals to shift the blame for housing shortage onto the homeless (predominantly Bengalis), while continuing to sell off housing and building land.<sup>46</sup> To be fair, under the previous Labour administration housing policy had been both inefficient and discriminatory, however, the Liberals made discriminatory procedures the centre of their community politics, establishing the idea that the Bengali families were a threat to the existing community and did not belong here. One of their first acts was designed to garner popular support for this approach. They asked existing council tenants to vote for endorsing proposals that limited still further the options available to homeless families requiring more than two bedrooms, almost all of whom would be Bengali.<sup>47</sup>

In 1987, the council stopped paying for accommodation for dozens of homeless families where wives and children had recently arrived from Bangladesh, and succeeded, where the Labour council had failed, in getting the courts to support their argument that the families had made themselves intentionally homeless when they left Bangladesh and so were not entitled to housing.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the council reintroduced housing policies that favoured sons and daughters of long-established existing tenants – policies that had been scrapped in the early eighties as inherently racist. Although the number of allocations made under this scheme was relatively small, the ideas it embodied provided a rallying cry for a white community that saw itself as under siege. Between 1989 and 1992 sons and daughters legislation was used to place 170 tenants, of whom 73% were white, 11% black and 6%

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<sup>42</sup> Forman (1989) p 231

<sup>43</sup> Sabine Drewes (1994) has commented that although Tower Hamlets Liberals had a 70% Bengali membership on paper, this was based on traditional village patronage politics, and that it was ‘the interplay of white domination of central party committees and of the [Bengali] community leader’s personal career aspirations that prevented effective representation of ethnic interests’. (p30) The community leader in question was Syed Nurul Islam who stood for the Liberal Democrats in Bethnal Green and Bow in the 2005 general election, when he came in 4<sup>th</sup> on 11% of the vote.

<sup>44</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) The local party campaigned as the ‘Liberal Focus Team’.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, *East London Advertiser* 7 Nov 1986 and 31 Oct 1986

<sup>46</sup> Forman (1989) pp 249 - 251

<sup>47</sup> Forman (1989) p 250

<sup>48</sup> *ibid* p 244 and *New Statesman* 11 Dec 1987

Asian,<sup>49</sup> but the policy allowed the Liberals to present themselves as champions of the local (white) community, and to paint the Bangladeshis, and their Labour defenders, as usurpers of local homes.

For the 1990 local council elections, the Liberals made this point through a provocative fake leaflet that purported to be an edition of Labour News and announced 'HOMES FOR LOCALS – RACIST! SAYS LABOUR'. It continued,

In the last 4 years Bangladeshi people in Tower Hamlets have been discriminated against by Liberals' racist housing policies, like the Sons and Daughters scheme and their decision not to house homeless families because they had left homes abroad...

If Labour is elected the homeless will go to the top of the list, EVEN IF THIS MEANS ALL EMPTY FLATS BEING ALLOCATED TO THEM.<sup>50</sup>

The next year, newly elected councillor, Jeremy Shaw, who had written the leaflet, took advantage of his position on a post-cyclone charity mission to Bangladesh to take his message to the Bangladeshi Government and the British High Commission in Dhaka. Before leaving he informed the *East London Advertiser*,

I will tell them that Tower Hamlets is full to bursting, and that for anyone to leave Bangladesh and come to Tower Hamlets and expect the Council to house them is totally irresponsible – both to their own families and to the rest of the community... I will want to know what procedures are followed by the British High Commission before they give people permission to settle in the U.K.<sup>51</sup>

Populist abuse of housing politics reached an infamous peak in Millwall on the Isle of Dogs, where it enabled the brief reign of BNP Councillor Derek Beackon. It was no accident that this racist politics thrived next to the Thatcherite reincarnation of the London Docklands, which could be seen to be consuming money and land while providing no benefits to its poorer neighbours. Unemployment was high and housing scarce and neglected, and there were good socio-economic reasons for local residents to be angry. The Island's relatively small Bengali population provided an easy scapegoat. Janet Foster quotes the local vicar, who commented that the arrival of yet another set of newcomers was 'one more bit of change that people didn't like but which they felt they could kick against'.<sup>52</sup>

The Liberals had divided Tower Hamlets into neighbourhoods, and the Isle of Dogs was Labour-run and had not adopted the sons and daughters schemes that operated in Liberal-run areas. This became the main plank of the Liberals' 1992 Millwall by-election campaign, under the slogan of 'Island homes for Island people'.<sup>53</sup> Housing allocation in Masthouse Terrace, the first social housing to be built in the area for many years, provided a focus of debate and anger, especially as the scheme included some larger units that were commonly

<sup>49</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) p 26

<sup>50</sup> A copy of the leaflet is in Tower Hamlets' Local History Library

<sup>51</sup> *East London Advertiser* 15 Nov 1991. Similarly, just over 100 years earlier, the Jewish Board of Guardians had put notices in foreign papers warning of the depressed British labour market to try and stem the pressures of further Jewish immigration. (Lipman, 1959, p 93)

<sup>52</sup> Foster (1996) p 162

<sup>53</sup> Liberal Democrats (1993) pp 37- 40

perceived as purpose-made for large Bengali families. The xenophobic atmosphere allowed the BNP to pick up 20% of the vote, but rather than take this as a warning, both Liberals and Labour chose to pander to populist racism when Millwall held a second by-election the following year.<sup>54</sup> The left-wingers who dominated the ward Labour party in the eighties had been ousted, and the new ward leadership attempted to outflank the Liberals on their own ground, with a call to 'house the hidden homeless... your children who have to sleep on the couch, your brothers and sisters who want a place of their own, your grandchildren without space to grow up in...'.<sup>55</sup> The crucial boost to the BNP was, however, provided through a dishonest tactical blunder by the Labour Party, who leaked false canvas returns suggesting that it was the BNP that was the main threat to Labour. It seems they had intended to frighten people into voting Labour to keep out the BNP, but populist sentiments had been aroused, and the effect was to boost BNP credibility and make their imagined threat a reality.<sup>56</sup> Beackon got in with 1,480 votes to Labour's 1,473, and although he lost the election the following year, that was after a major effort to bring out the antiracist vote and trump a BNP vote that had actually risen by 561.

All these developments clearly encouraged racist attitudes and the popular linking of 'race' and territory. Self-serving political tactics built on and promoted separatist mentalities, but what impact did they actually have on housing distribution?

Most Bengalis still wanted homes near Spitalfields, but these were limited and many families found themselves in other parts of the borough. Families allocated accommodation under homeless persons' legislation were given very little option but to accept whatever they were offered, and this provided a vehicle for moving Bengalis into less attractive white estates. So, for example, of the eight Bengali families placed on the Teviot Street Estate in 1984 under the Labour-controlled Tower Hamlets Council, all but one had been living for months in the grim hotels used as temporary accommodation and would have been out on the streets if they had refused.<sup>57</sup> Before the 1977 Act made housing homeless families a legal obligation, they had been regarded as undeserving wasters. Attitudes did not change overnight, and all homeless families were generally allocated the least popular housing. As housing pressures increased due to central government policy, and as local politicians juxtaposed housing Bengali homeless against finding better homes for the established white working class, it is easy to see how Bengalis ended up concentrated in the very worst housing of all. This was not the official aim, but it had long been a common practice, and was encouraged by a politics all too ready to exploit the 'race card'. It is not surprising to discover that a 1988 CRE report found Tower Hamlets Liberal Council guilty of allocating ethnic minorities disproportionately to a poor quality estate.<sup>58</sup>

Under the Liberals, every neighbourhood had to take its share of homeless families, but biased letting practices reinforced by populist rhetoric, ensured that within the neighbourhoods Bengali families tended to be clustered within certain housing schemes. That same populism encouraged racism and defensive separatism, and promoted 'white flight'. Through no wish of their own, the Bengalis had become colonisers of new areas.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid* pp 40 - 42

<sup>55</sup> *New Statesman and Society* 18 Feb 1994 p 20

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* p 19 and Liberal Democrats (1993) pp 54 - 55

<sup>57</sup> Press release by the families and community groups announcing a picket of the Town Hall 19 June 1984

<sup>58</sup> CRE (1988) p 11

***A new multicultural orthodoxy***

An important consequence of all this was the strengthening of ‘community’ organisation among the Bengalis. Increasing numbers became involved in local politics and civil society more generally, but such involvement tended to be centred on promoting Bengali ‘community’ interests.<sup>59</sup> Even within the Labour Party, Bengalis often acted as a group and independently of more orthodox left, right divisions, which could lead to strange changing alliances<sup>60</sup>.

Through the eighties and nineties, different varieties of ethnic organisation became institutionalised into the new politics of multiculturalism. Although this was often presented as liberatory, it posed no real threat to the existing economic and social order. The GLC under Ken Livingston (from 1981 until its abolition in 1986) did, at least, succeed in combining support for local community-based organisations with some more widespread attempts at equitable politics. However, in New Labour, anti-racist credentials have increasingly become a radical cloak to hide a lack of socialist, class-based politics. It is now more acceptable - as well as much easier - to help Bengalis and other ethnic minority groups by subsidising an arts festival, say, than by addressing structural inequalities in society; even though any serious attack on racism would require a serious attack on the conditions of inequality on which racism thrives.

But multiculturalism is not just a distraction from more fundamental issues. It can act as a barrier to unified resistance to attacks on the working class as a whole. Instead, different groups are encouraged to compete against each other along ethnic lines. A common focus for such competition has been the allocation of regeneration funding, where millions of pounds have been committed to projects specifically supporting black and minority ethnic groups.<sup>61</sup> Such policies can contribute to resentments and perpetuate division.

It is easy to see how this can happen, and again the East End provides plenty of examples. In 2004, the letters page of the *East London Advertiser* was packed with complaints about the building of a sheltered housing block for ‘Asian Elders’, after the leading Liberal Democrat councillor had talked about calling in the Commission for Racial Equality, and David Davis, the Conservative shadow Home Secretary, had condemned it as ‘the sort of thoughtless policy that feeds extremism’<sup>62</sup> Although Davis had (fashionably) presented this as an issue of segregation, the real source of concern locally appears to have been – yet again – the competition for housing. The Sonali Gardens scheme helps meet the needs of the growing numbers of older Bengalis by serving halal food, providing space for Muslim prayer and employing staff who speak Sylheti as well as English. It should provide a home to people who are unlikely to integrate further into British society than they already have. However, the sight of a hoarding advertising council-sponsored homes for just one section of the community was bound to raise questions.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Glynn (2008)

<sup>60</sup> Compare, for example, *East London Advertiser* 27 April 1995 and 2 May 1996

<sup>61</sup> e.g. The November 2000 issue of *Banglatown News* announced the award of £5 million pounds regeneration money to a partnership of about 50 Black and Minority Ethnic led groups, as well as reporting on the Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project that had been newly set up to assist ethnic minority businesses in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>62</sup> *Evening Standard* 27 Apr 2004, *Daily Mail* 28 Apr 2004 and *East London Advertiser* 29 Apr, 6 May, 13 May and 10 June 2004

<sup>63</sup> This particular issue does not appear to have been raised in connection with the homes for ‘black and minority ethnic elders’ built as a joint partnership between the council, East London Mosque and two housing associations two years earlier. (Tower Hamlets Council press release 22 July 2002) Perhaps that was too much

Potentially of more concern to those worried about segregation, is the Government promotion of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic)-led housing associations, especially as housing associations are becoming increasingly significant providers of publicly subsidised social housing. BME housing associations are defined as those with 80% or more of their governing body drawn from BME communities, however they also tend to employ many more BME staff and house a much higher proportion of BME tenants.<sup>64</sup> All social housing in the borough (council and housing association) is centrally advertised. Potential tenants submit preferences, and homes are allocated by the council's letting department. Advertisements for general-needs housing cannot specify a particular ethnic group, and although associations have in the past told the council they are looking for particular groups of tenants – and one of the council officers remembers a couple of allocations being rejected on grounds of ethnicity<sup>65</sup> – they now have no ethnic restrictions on allocations. Legally, some housing associations that are charities are allowed to provide housing for a particular ethnic or national group if that is specified in their foundation deeds (so long as the group is not defined by colour). Other housing organisations can only do so to meet special needs, which was the argument used in the case of Sonali Gardens.<sup>66</sup> BME led associations may, though, (provided they avoid indirect discrimination) be more ready to address what is lacking in the general market from the point of view of Bengali tenants (such as larger houses), and Bengali tenants may be more attracted by their housing. However, as the council letting officer pointed out, at present the biggest group applying for social housing in Tower Hamlets is Bengali any way, with increasing numbers of white families moving out of the area.<sup>67</sup>

Bengali elders, such as the residents of Sonali Gardens, may still have language restrictions (as well as specific religious and cultural needs), and the generation that came of age in the seventies, eighties and early nineties felt the need to organise separately for defence, but the tradition of separate organisation continues through to today's youth. Although Dench et al are not quite accurate in claiming that in the 1990s there were no mixed youth clubs in the borough<sup>68</sup> (I helped at a girls group with one white member), there are still many specifically Bengali youth organisations, and even a Bengali football league. All of this can flourish under policies of multiculturalism, but tends to perpetuate separatism; and as the Bengali population has grown in size and dominance, such separatism can easily encourage the feeling among white working-class families that there is little left for them, and that they are better off moving out of the East End.

Multiculturalism took perhaps its most symbolic and immediately geographical form in 1997 with the official, and not uncontroversial, restyling of the former Spitalfields ward as Spitalfields-Banglatown. This branding of the core area of Bengali immigration demonstrates the strength of the Bengali presence on the borough council, and was aimed at boosting the many Bengali businesses, especially the restaurants, that crowd into the area now marked by specially designed Bengali lampposts. Brick Lane has found a firm position in London's tourist map, and, although Spitalfields is still a place where Bengalis go to shop, pray and bump into old friends, it has also attracted a young international crowd who enjoy the

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part of the mosque complex to be thought a candidate for more general housing – or perhaps politicians did not then find it useful to draw attention to it.

<sup>64</sup> Blackaby and Patel (2003) p 17

<sup>65</sup> Phone discussion 29 Jun 2006

<sup>66</sup> CRE (2006) pp 23 - 24

<sup>67</sup> Phone discussion 29 Jun 2006

<sup>68</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 145

cosmopolitan atmosphere. The trendy cafés and fashion showrooms in the old Truman's Brewery site beyond the railway bridge seem as disconnected to Bengali Spitalfields as do the city developments that increasingly loom over its western edge. Banglatown is more place-marketing than segregation, and at times Brick Lane resembles a theme park; but a real Bengali world is not far away.

### ***Faiths in the city***

Increasingly, that world has come to be associated with religion. Although Islam always affected the way Bengalis lived and their choice of location - through considerations such as proximity to the mosque and *halal* food shops, and the relative seclusion of women and girls - it is only very recently that the Bengalis have been perceived as a community separated by faith rather than by 'race' or ethnicity. The growing social dominance of the mosque is reflected in the built environment, where the new London Muslim Centre, next to the East London Mosque, now towers over Whitechapel. At the opening ceremony for the new centre in 2004 the crowd of 15,000 spilled across the road outside.<sup>69</sup>

The political drive towards this new Islamisation of Tower Hamlets predated 9/11 and originated both within the community, in the growth of Islamist organisations around the East London Mosque,<sup>70</sup> and outside, in New Labour's courting of faith groups to play a bigger part in civil society and local governance. This inclusion of faith groups can be seen as a more socially conservative development of the multicultural agenda.

In recent years the terms Islamist and Islamism have acquired dangerous associations in popular usage, but Islamism simply refers to those forms of Islam in which people believe that it is not possible to separate a private religion from public action, arguing that religion bears on every aspect of life. Islamist ideas have become increasingly influential, especially as Muslims have found themselves at the centre of government policies. However, by no means all Muslims who have become politically involved through faith-based groups would consider themselves Islamists, and their political interests may be relatively parochial.

The effective collapse of the British Left allowed Islamist groups such as the Young Muslim Organisation to present themselves as the only significant radical challenge to an establishment that has failed many of the people of Tower Hamlets. Islamic brotherhood is a potent antidote to alienation, offering guidance and meaning and a sense of belonging. And Muslims have rallied in defence of their faith or their brothers at key political junctures - to protest the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, or support Muslims under attack in Bosnia. However, as in so many parts of the world, the Islamists have largely built and consolidated their strength on the basis of grassroots work in the community, and not just in areas directly related to Islam. Islamism encourages Muslims to play an active and exemplary part in civil society and provide examples of Muslim leadership.

But, at the same time as outwardly criticising isolationism, Islamist groups such as those around the East London Mosque provide the means for Muslims to live in an increasingly separate social sphere, almost from the cradle to the grave. In Tower Hamlets there is an Islamic playgroup, and even for those who do not attend the (still all private) Muslim schools, there are evening classes, Saturday school and numerous Islamic summer schemes. Although there is a strong emphasis on Islamic knowledge, it is recognised that

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<sup>69</sup> *East London Advertiser* 17 Jun 2004

<sup>70</sup> Glynn (2002)

children need more than this, and organisations such as the Junior Muslim Circle ensure that football, camping, trips and other activities can all take place in ‘a sound moral atmosphere’.<sup>71</sup> It is even possible to get Muslim chocolate (with 10% of profits going to charity).<sup>72</sup> Youth groups – run separately for boys and girls - are extremely active, as are Islamic student societies. At Ramadan, Muslim Community Radio invites listeners to ‘tune in with the whole family’.<sup>73</sup> The Muslim Centre arranges regular sessions to help in finding and applying for jobs, as well as opportunities for serious Islamic study. Alongside advice services, Women’s Relief organises sport, art and social activities, and the new centre includes a gym and spa. For the old, there is a day centre and sheltered flats. The funeral service was, of necessity, one of the first institutions the Bengalis established, back in 1965.

Islamic community projects have received the active backing of Tower Hamlets Council, who have deliberately drawn the mosques into their new ‘partnerships’, and have been holding regular dialogues with the local Council of Mosques since helping establish it in 2001. The incorporation of interest groups from business and the voluntary sector is characteristic of today’s neo-liberal forms of governance, and New Labour has increasingly merged the boundaries between politics and civil society, bringing once distinct organisations into the New Labour project –including faith organisations. John Eade and David Garbin have pointed out that the successful and passionate two-year battle to secure the site of the Muslim Centre for Islamic use - against opposition from a private developer and more secular Muslim councillors - marked a major shift from the prioritisation of cultural to religious identity. And they note that for the Mosque activists this ‘demonstrated their strengthening position both within the community representation sphere and in the struggle for local resources.’<sup>74</sup>

By the time it came to the construction of the centre, the council were fully on board, and ready to advertise their involvement. Their website described the London Muslim Centre as ‘the result of innovative joint working between the Council and its partners in the Tower Hamlets Partnership, the East London Mosque, the Greater London Authority and the European Development Fund’, and portrayed it as ‘promoting racial equality and community cohesion’. The centre has an open door policy and is anxious to engage with non-Muslims – *dawah*, spreading the word of Islam, is a central Islamist tenet. However, it has to be asked if giving the mosque such a pivotal role in civil society is really contributing to community cohesion, and this question concerns not just non-Muslims but also Bengalis who do not share Islamist Muslim beliefs.

Besides its wide range of more general social functions, the Mosque has become an important channel for the provision of local services, working with the health authorities, the job centre and local schools. For the service providers, this gives them a route to a large section of the population. It also ties that population more closely to the Mosque. A visit from the imam as part of the Improving School Attendance Partnership may persuade families of the importance of getting their children to school,<sup>75</sup> but it also increases the authority of the

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk> and <http://www.islamicforumeurope.com> [accessed 30 June 2006]

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.ummahfoods.com> [accessed 13 Sept 2004]

<sup>73</sup> *ELM News* Oct 2005

<sup>74</sup> Eade and Garbin (2001), Garbin (1999). Decisions did not always go entirely the Islamists’ way. Despite filling the council building with 100 black-veiled girls carrying home made posters, Madani Girls’ School failed to persuade councillors to let them purchase a disused school building in September 2000, however, they were offered another building in Myrdle Street.

<sup>75</sup> *The Guardian* 6 Aug 2002 and [www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk)

Mosque as arbiter of all aspects of life. Similarly, drugs advice given by a fellow Muslim may hit home, but it can also present an Islamic lifestyle as the only valid alternative to drug dependency.<sup>76</sup> The most active youth groups and organisations are increasingly those run by Islamists and targeted at young Bengalis – organisations such as Brick Lane Youth Development Association, which receives money from the local council as well as other secular funding bodies.<sup>77</sup>

The Department for Communities and Local Government explained on its website that ‘the Home Office strives to ensure that [faith] communities are given the opportunity to participate fully in society through voluntary activity and other faith based projects’ and that ‘the Government is committed to working closely with them to build strong active communities and foster community development and civil renewal’.<sup>78</sup> Recent events have made the government only more anxious to strengthen what they regard as ‘moderate’ Islamic organisations,<sup>79</sup> as well as to demonstrate their Muslim-friendly credentials, although there is considerable confusion about how to do this and which groups to support.<sup>80</sup>

Islamist ideology and government policy can both be seen to be encouraging British Muslims to participate in British society as representatives of their faith group, and, as the next section demonstrates, separate Muslim political and civil identity has also been boosted by some of those opposed to government policies.

Before moving on to look at this it is important to note the role being played by other, more long-established, faith-based public institutions that pre-date large-scale immigration. Although there are as yet no state-funded Islamic schools in Tower Hamlets, there are church schools, both Church of England and Roman Catholic, and these allow even greater segregation among school children than among the general population. There is no significant Christian revival, but church schools can use religious affiliation as a basis for selection, and white parents who are concerned about bringing up their children in an increasingly Bengali dominated milieu may work hard to boost their church-going credentials.<sup>81</sup> This is an additional point that needs to be considered by anyone proposing to increase faith-based schools.

### ***Competing for respect***

Although the Islamisation of Tower Hamlets had begun long before 9/11, events in New York and subsequent developments have had a huge impact on the dynamic of life in the borough. Of course, the most significant political response to 9/11 was the government’s decision to go to war, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq; but political reactions have also come from the Borough’s Bengalis - and the consolidation of Islamic political identity among British Muslims, who have felt themselves increasingly embattled, has been widely recorded. From the government there have been further, confused reactions, as politicians struggle to show support for ‘moderate’ Muslims at the same time as demonising ‘Islamic terrorism’. The contradictory public statements and often-discriminatory policing have inadvertently

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk> [accessed 2006] and XXXX (2002)

<sup>77</sup> BLYDA Bi-Annual Report 2002/4, and interview with president of YMO Aug 2004

<sup>78</sup> <http://raceandfaith.communities.gov.uk> [accessed 2006]. See also Home Office (2004)

<sup>79</sup> Letters between Home Office and Cabinet Office on relations with the Muslim Community, April and May 2004 (leaked and published on the web)

<sup>80</sup> Glynn (2009)

<sup>81</sup> Dench et al (2006) pp 145-146

fueled Islamophobia,<sup>82</sup> and this situation is being exploited by the far Right and by conservative and xenophobic elements in the mainstream parties. All these developments are important, but of special significance to the East End, are the reactions of the anti-war movement and the Respect Coalition that grew out of it. To look at this in detail would require a paper in itself; here I will just look briefly at the high profile election battle that took place in 2005 when George Galloway for Respect ousted Oona King, sitting MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, and at how this helped consolidate a separate Muslim identity.<sup>83</sup>

The driving force behind Respect (which was a party in all but name) was the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP); and Galloway – expelled from the Labour Party for his comments on the war in Iraq – gave it electability. Although any sort of organised Muslim backing was only ever conditional, it was always recognised that Muslim anti-war feelings were key to its support and success. Tower Hamlets with its high proportion of Muslims and pro-war New Labour MP, was chosen by Respect as their main battleground.

In the course of a bitter electoral campaign, both parties accused the other, with some justification, of stirring racial tensions; and both attempted to appeal to Bengali voters through their Muslim identity.<sup>84</sup> There were plenty of reasons for non-Muslim East Enders, as well as Muslims, to want to vote against New Labour, and Galloway stressed these when campaigning outwith the Bengali areas, but there was no doubt that his main constituency was the Bengalis, and his most active local support was from young Bengali men. Labour canvassers tended to concentrate on whiter areas, but there was a core old Labour vote that was not going to come out for Oona King, and they also had to attract Bengali voters, who, according to a Respect estimate, made up about 55% of the electorate. In Tower Hamlets, populism now means appealing to Muslims.

In the European elections the summer before, Respect had put a Muslim in first or second place on every slate across England and Wales,<sup>85</sup> and leaflets from Galloway's own campaign to be MEP for London described Respect as 'the Party for Muslims'.<sup>86</sup> Now, by promising if chosen as MP to stand down at the next election and make room for a Bengali, Galloway specifically courted the ethnic vote, claiming (correctly) that support for him gave the best chance of a Bengali MP in the future. But the Iraq war was Respect's main campaigning issue, and it was portrayed as an anti-Islamic war. As Galloway told a packed public hustings, 'If you make war against Muslims abroad, you are going to end up making war against Muslims at home.'<sup>87</sup>

Respect did not have to prove their pro-Muslim credentials, but their presence in Tower Hamlets, on top of the war and the already growing strength of Islamist organisations, pushed the Labour Party to do more to demonstrate their own support for Muslim interests.

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<sup>82</sup> Glynn (2008 and 2009). A particularly significant moment in the 'War Against Terror' in the East End was the shooting of an innocent young Muslim in a bungled anti-terror raid in Forest Gate in June 2006, which gave added strength to the idea of a Muslim community under attack.

<sup>83</sup> For a fuller account see Glynn *Muslims and the Left*

<sup>84</sup> I went out with canvassers from both Labour and Respect

<sup>85</sup> Interview with George Galloway 19<sup>th</sup> January 2005. Respect did not operate in Scotland so as not to compete against the Scottish Socialist Party.

<sup>86</sup> The leaflet quoted was made to be distributed outside mosques, but one cannot imagine a broadly Left party making similar blanket claims to other religious groups.

<sup>87</sup> Speaking at TELCO (the East London Community Organisation) hustings 20 Apr 2005. By portraying the war as a crusade, Galloway ignored most serious left analysis, which saw it as part of wider economic and political strategies.

Although the Labour councillors had declared themselves officially anti-war, they did not take an active part in the anti-war movement. Helal Abbas, then council leader, explained this to me on the grounds that as a Muslim dominated group it would have left them open to negative media stereotyping, but he added that during the war they did a lot of work with the local mosques.<sup>88</sup> A defeated motion at the Respect national conference in the autumn of 2004, calling for an end to state subsidies for faith schools, prompted a press release from Tower Hamlets Labour Group in which Oona King not only boasted of the government's support for state-funded Islamic schools and other pro-Muslim legislation, but branded Respect 'an enemy of religion'<sup>89</sup>. And the next month she was publicly chastised in the local paper for sending out Eid cards to non-Muslims by mistake.<sup>90</sup> During the campaign, Labour election leaflets were worded differently for distribution in white and Muslim areas – allowing their opponents to draw attention to the inconsistencies. However, King insisted throughout that she was working 'for the whole community' in contrast to Galloway's 'single-issue campaigning'.<sup>91</sup>

Many among the white working class have felt increasingly excluded. During the election campaign, both Oona King and the Labour council became the target of angry letters to the local paper by white constituents drawing on a legacy of them and us politics. This one is from a Mrs King of Poplar (no relation):

I see more and more people writing in to say how badly the real East Enders are treated in Tower Hamlets... People born and bred in the East End who went through a war like me are forgotten. The real East Enders come out as second class. What do we expect when Tower Hamlets council offices are run for foreigners. Let's have fairness, treat all people the same – not foreigners first!<sup>92</sup>

And there were many letters after the election critical of Galloway, often along similar lines to this one from Janet Parker of Vallance Road:

...Perhaps if he spent less time travelling around the world talking about Iraq, and more time in his constituency – if he can remember where it is – he might realise there is more to the East End than Brick Lane.

The man's a 'one trick' pony and his party is only interested in votes from one community.

As for the rest of us, it seems we're on our own now.<sup>93</sup>

Although Respect have campaigned on key social issues – and especially against the transfer of council housing to housing associations - many white voters have not been persuaded that they are not an ethnically based party. It is no coincidence that, despite a hugely unpopular Labour council, and chaos among the local Liberal Democrats, the Respect councillors elected in May 2006 were all Bengalis, and there was a strong correlation

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<sup>88</sup> Interview 6 Aug 2005

<sup>89</sup> Press Release 7 Nov 2004. Respect's SWP Leadership ensured that any motions that might put off potential Muslim voters would not be passed.

<sup>90</sup> East London Advertiser 2 Dec 2004

<sup>91</sup> East London Advertiser 4 Mar 2005

<sup>92</sup> East London Advertiser 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005

<sup>93</sup> East London Advertiser 23 June 2005. Many of the letters to the paper are from party hacks or a few regular grumblers, but there are still significant numbers of genuine complaints.

between the percentage of votes cast for Respect and the percentage of Bengalis in the ward.<sup>94</sup>

Repeated attempts to portray Respect as part of the great East End socialist tradition of Kier Hardy, the Bryant and May matchgirls and Communist MP Phil Piratin ring hollow. The strength of the Communist movement in the East End of the thirties, and its ability to stem the growth of Fascism, was due to a strict emphasis on class politics that cut across ethnic and religious difference.<sup>95</sup> Respect, in contrast, consciously appealed to a specific faith and ethnic community, and jettisoned so much socialist ideology in order to do so that it lost members from its founding organisations. In its opportunistic focus on election gains, it proved as ready as the mainstream parties to make use of patriarchal Bengali village networks to bring in the votes, and its eventual decline and split had long been predicted.<sup>96</sup> Rather than promote working-class solidarity, it has further encouraged a politics that builds on and reinforces ethnic division. This obsession was highlighted by the political reporter of the *East London Advertiser*, who observed after a council by-election in October 2008,

As soon as the by-election was called..., activists from all parties called me seeking an inside line on whether their opponents were going to select a Bengali or someone white.<sup>97</sup>

All this political attention may indeed have helped to give Tower Hamlets Muslims greater public confidence and, to use a favourite New Labour term, ‘community cohesion’, but, as Dench et al observe with respect to strong white community groups, such cohesion can be at the expense of relations with those outside.<sup>98</sup> A sense of group strength can sometimes be expressed in violence against outsiders. The election campaign exposed elements of anti-Semitism among Bengali youth<sup>99</sup> (Oona King is proud to be half Jewish), and there have been reports of ‘Asian’ anti-white racism, ranging from racist taunts to extreme violence and even murder.<sup>100</sup> At one particularly troubled estate in Bethnal Green the local paper reported ‘gangs hurling racist insults like “white trash”’.<sup>101</sup>

There has been no significant attempt at a right wing backlash in Tower Hamlets itself, but the 2006 council elections saw the British National Party become the second biggest party in Barking and Dagenham council, and it is places such as Barking that many white East Enders have moved to. In the absence of an effective Left movement, far- Right politics have been able to appeal to the neglected interests of local white communities, at the same time as Islamists have appealed to Muslims.

### ***Segregation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

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<sup>94</sup> R squared = 63% and P<0.001 – ie 63% of the variation is explained by the percentage of Bengalis. The dominance of the SWP (as well as Galloway’s excruciatingly embarrassing performance in the reality TV show, *Big Brother*) also deterred potential voters.

<sup>95</sup> Glynn (2005)

<sup>96</sup> The unravelling of Respect has been closely dissected in the *Weekly Worker*

<sup>97</sup> Ted Jeory, *East London Advertiser* 23 October 2008

<sup>98</sup> Dench et al (2006) p 187. This community cohesion can exclude secular Bengalis as well as non-Muslims.

<sup>99</sup> Besides the more well published accusations (Guardian 12 Apr 2005, East London Advertiser 15 Apr 2005, BBC Today Programme 5 Nov 2005) I found Oona King’s Bengali assistant clearly shocked at the hostility he had found campaigning outside a mosque, where several people had called her a ‘Jewish whore’.

<sup>100</sup> *East London Advertiser* 10 Mar, 7 Apr, 19 May, 6 July, 4 Aug, 11 Aug, 15 Sept, 6 Oct, 27 Oct, 24 Nov 2005

<sup>101</sup> *East London Advertiser* 10 Mar 2005. The problems occurred in the Jesus Hospital Estate off Columbia Road.

It is not easy to analyse the effects of politics as these never act in isolation, but, as the experience of the Bengalis has shown, political actions can be found behind very many of the different stages and forms of segregation. Sometimes these are actions that seem not especially connected to ethnic minorities, such as housing legislation, or even going to war. Sometimes they are expressed as plans to reduce racism or division, but end up increasing them. Immigration legislation can be included under that category. It has been presented as the other side of integration, but discriminatory legislation has increased racism and hence segregation; and those immigrants who are allowed in are generally connected to people already here and come to live close to them. And, as is being increasingly recognised, the institutional promotion of multiculturalism or faith groups, though often presented as benefiting ethnic minorities, can again be seen to be perpetuating division.<sup>102</sup> Clustering and segregation can also be a product of the political actions of minority communities themselves: sometimes through the common links provided by the politics of their homeland; and often through organisation for self defence in fighting immigration legislation and racism. Separatism may even be presented as a positive and progressive form of radical political action. And then there are the politics of populism. Immigration legislation can be included again here, along side the populist exploitation of resource division in pursuit of the white working class vote, and the new populism, in places such as Tower Hamlets, that chases the vote of a new Muslim majority.

So far, the Bengali presence in the East End has seemed only to increase, but will the Bengalis eventually disperse, as most of the East End Jews did before them? Certainly, some who have been able to afford it have already moved away from what is still an area that scores high on indexes of deprivation, settling further out where they can buy a small house with a garden and worry less about their children getting involved with drugs and gang violence. Many move to areas that do have relatively high numbers of other Bengalis, but, away from the pressures of poverty and insufficient resources, clustering becomes less important. Countering such forces of dispersion, religion provides a strong cohesive pull, and the Jewish example shows that those communities that have remained inward looking and separate are those for whom religious belief has remained central.<sup>103</sup> And of course many Bengalis do not have the resources, financial or cultural, to move away. For a small minority of their children, the frustration of limited prospects can be expressed as racism against others over whom they see themselves as superior, such as 'white trash', or Somalis.

Segregation in the East End is not just about the clustering together of the Bengalis, but also about the 'flight' of white families; and they are leaving the area not just because of competition for resources from the Bengalis, or fears of being made culturally marginal, but also through the intense pressures of gentrification. Political forces pushing home ownership and commercial development at the expense of public housing, together with the phenomenal rise in house prices, have driven many away from an area that has increasingly become an adjunct to the city and to the new financial centre in the Docklands. Among the new executive flats there are a few developments that complied with the London Mayor's requirements for 'affordable housing', but these are hardly within the financial limits of most

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<sup>102</sup> It is important here to distinguish between celebrating cultural diversity and prioritising cultural identity in the organisation of civil society.

<sup>103</sup> Affluent areas such as Golders Green may not have the deprivation associated with the Jewish East End, but lives here can be just as segregated.

of the East End's residents.<sup>104</sup> External pressures were already strong in the west of the borough when Forman wrote *Spitalfields: A battle for land* in 1989, and the 'regeneration' of the Docklands through the eighties and nineties sent shockwaves up from the south. As in other cities across the world, the pace of gentrification and redevelopment has rocketed through the first years of this century. Recently, Tower Hamlets has also become home to migrant workers from Eastern Europe, but most are young and single and do not think of themselves as permanent residents, so are ready to make do with the more basic housing. The impacts of all this need an article of their own, however it is clear that the biggest divisions in the East End today are often not those of ethnicity, but of class.

Politicians are concerned about segregation because it can breed division and unrest in the competition for limited resources, and no one wants the destructive violence of 'race riots'. But, many politicians also want to avoid more wholesale and deep-rooted socio-economic change, and they may welcome a bit of competition between ethnic groups as a useful counter to much more challenging class-based unrest. Better, they might argue, that different groups should compete for a small share of the cake, than that they should combine and demand a larger share. New Labour, after abandoning more class-based politics, has embraced multicultural alliances that encourage such competition, while presiding over a widening wealth gap on which racism can thrive. And many activists from all communities have fallen into the separatist trap; both through the best of motives, and through outright opportunism. As this history exemplifies, divisions and differences will always be exploited for political gain, but if we can understand the processes involved we can begin to cut across these differences and work for greater equality for all.

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<sup>104</sup> A high profile scheme for subsidised 'low-cost' rent-and-buy housing in the East End, put up by the Peabody Trust, required applicants to have an annual income of at least £28,758 (£32,644 for couples) (*Detail*, 2006 p 302)

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