

A large, stylized green shamrock graphic that occupies the left and center portions of the page. It has three rounded leaves and a long stem.

# **THE IRISH IN BRITAIN**



**T**he Irish are Britain's largest ethnic minority group. Irish people have been coming to work and live in Britain for centuries. Today, Irish people are to be found in all walks of life and in every part of Britain. Their contribution to the economy, to culture, to political life and to society at large is a vital and powerful one. For many of them this has been a place of welcome and opportunity. Yet, at the same time, there is evidence of inequality, discrimination and prejudice.

Since the Commission for Racial Equality was established in 1977, Irish people have been coming to it with complaints of unlawful racial discrimination. Academic research and official statistics have revealed inequalities in Irish people's experience of the labour and housing markets, the health service and the benefits system. Many Irish people in Britain have also objected to being made the butt of humour and remarks which they find offensive.

In 1994, the CRE commissioned a national research project to examine the extent of the discrimination that Irish people face in Britain. The researchers were asked to draw conclusions and to recommend appropriate action.

The research report was published in June 1997. Its recommendations have been supported by the CRE and are relevant to the work of a wide range of agencies and sectors.

There has been a failure, both at an official level and in general discussion of race relations, to recognise the difficulties that many Irish people experience in Britain. Institutions need to examine their practices to ensure that they are offering equality of opportunity to all. The researchers argue in their report that:

Irish people are constantly reminded that they are not entitled to an equal place in British society. On the other hand, they are not seen as sufficiently different for this racism to be acknowledged and to be afforded some measure of protection.

## **WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND**

Using data from the 1991 and earlier censuses, consulting the numerous agencies now at work assisting Irish people and, finally, conducting a pilot survey, the authors highlight evidence of inequality and of a 'powerful sense of hurt and unjustified exclusion from an equal place in British society' among many people of Irish origin. They argue that:

... deep-seated anti-Irish stereotypes affected

many areas of interviewees' lives, including workplaces, access to housing, treatment at benefits offices and interactions with neighbours and the police.

The researchers emphasise the following points:

- The Irish are by far the largest ethnic minority by immigration in Britain. According to the 1991 census, 1.5% of the population in Great Britain were born in Ireland, north or south. Taking people born in Ireland and their children together, the researchers estimate that they form 4.6% of the total population in Great Britain, and as much as 11.5% of the population in Greater London.
- Britain's Irish-born population consists of two groups: those who came to Britain in the 1950s and are now retiring from the workforce where they have clustered in manual occupations; and younger immigrants, many of whom are highly qualified, who arrived in the 1980s. There are also differences between migrants from the Irish Republic and those from Northern Ireland, who are closer on average to the overall British population on indicators such as unemployment rates and qualification levels.
- Most of the Irish-born population are concentrated among the most deprived social classes and have lower than average rates of upward social mobility. On car ownership, an overall measure of standard of living, Irish-headed households were well below the average level in the 1991 census, close to that of the Black Caribbean population. Irish men experience above average unemployment rates, and their health in middle age is consistently poorer.
- Such disadvantages go unrecorded, and no targets for improvement are set, as there is little or no monitoring, and where there is, use of the results is almost negligible. The needs of Irish people play no part in the service plans and consultation processes of statutory bodies, voluntary organisations and local authorities, and consequently go unrecognised and unmet.
- Stereotyped responses to Irish clients by service providers occurred frequently, the most common being assumptions that the Irish are feckless, drunks or fraudsters. Such

views could lead to exclusion from benefits or other services to which clients were entitled.

- A survey of Irish members of the public showed that, although only 20% specifically reported a 'bad atmosphere' at work, 79% had been subjected to anti-Irish 'jokes' and remarks. Seventy per cent of those surveyed said they found anti-Irish jokes offensive, but only 30% felt able to reject them outright. None of the sample had considered taking legal action over any abuse they had been subjected to. Anti-Irish attitudes were seen to be widespread, and the majority of those surveyed could immediately identify instances of behaviour which they had found insulting, hurtful or intimidating.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The experience of Irish people in Britain, positive and negative, can only be made visible through the collection of accurate information. Without it, the nature and scale of the problems many Irish people face cannot be measured, let alone tackled. Proper monitoring of the experiences of Irish people in Britain will guide action for change - and allow the effectiveness of such action to be assessed.

**Monitoring.** All ethnic monitoring systems should include an Irish category. This should cover employment and the provision of services in the public, private and voluntary sectors and include areas such as health, housing, education, social services and commercial and financial services.

**Census 2001.** An Irish category should be included in the ethnic origin question in the 2001 census for Scotland, England and Wales. The 1991 census did not include a specific Irish category, and statistics on the Irish community in Britain had to be derived from the answers given on place of birth.

**Employment.** All employers should review their equal opportunity practices and make such changes as may be required to prevent discrimination against Irish employees, trainees or applicants.

**Services provided by government, public, statutory and voluntary sector bodies and**

### MONITORING CATEGORIES

In 1994 the CRE recommended that all ethnic monitoring systems should include an Irish category. Several local authorities and private employers have introduced an Irish category in their employment monitoring procedures. NHS trusts have used one in monitoring hospital in-patients, and housing associations and local authorities have done so in monitoring housing allocations.

The CRE currently recommends the following ethnic monitoring categories:

White	Indian
Irish	Pakistani
Black - African	Bangladeshi
Black - Caribbean	Chinese
Black - Other (please specify)	Other (please specify)

**agencies.** Equal opportunity policies and practices in service delivery should:

- recognise the needs of Irish people in housing allocations, provision of benefits, care for the elderly, health services, and the welfare of children;
- include the Irish when allocating resources to meet ethnic minority needs;
- train staff to be aware of Irish issues and needs;
- ensure that contracted service providers take account of all these points.

**Criminal justice.** Practice should be reviewed across the criminal justice system to ensure that discriminatory attitudes and procedures are tackled. Training programmes designed to improve racial and cultural awareness should include an Irish dimension, as should ethnic monitoring systems.

**Racial harassment.** Policies to tackle racial harassment should recognise that anti-Irish attitudes are a persistent element in incidents of harassment.

**Media.** Those working to raise standards in the media, whether in regulatory bodies hearing complaints from the public or within media institutions, should take account of an Irish dimension in issues of portrayal and taste, decency and racial offence.

**Travellers.** Local authorities and other statutory bodies involved should review their procedures to ensure that Irish travellers are not subjected to discriminatory practices.

**Equal opportunity consultants.** The advice and assistance given to clients should include reference to the Irish dimension of equal opportunity work.

**Research.** Further research is required to gain a fuller picture of the Irish in Britain and to guide policy and practice. Research funding bodies and social research establishments should commit resources to such projects in a planned and comprehensive way.

## THE IRISH AND THE RACE RELATIONS ACT

The Race Relations Act 1976 makes it unlawful to discriminate on racial grounds in employment and the provision of goods, facilities and services. Racial grounds include 'colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins'. In 1971, the House of Lords confirmed that the words 'national origin' covered the differences between English, Irish, Scots and Welsh.

Industrial tribunals have heard a number of complaints of discrimination in employment brought by Irish people and there have been several court cases arising in areas outside employment. Some of the complaints brought to the CRE have resulted in settlements including compensation and agreement by the companies or organisations involved to change their practices. In several cases the details of the settlements are confidential.

## TRIBUNAL DECISIONS

- A job applicant was refused an interview because she was Irish and likely to get homesick and run off. (*Killian v Boots*, 1989)

### NEW LAW FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The Race Relations Act 1976 covers Great Britain, but not Northern Ireland. In March 1997, Parliament passed a separate Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order, largely similar to the 1976 Act. The 1997 Order established a separate Commission for Racial Equality in Northern Ireland

### CRE CODES AND STANDARDS.

The CRE has issued three racial equality standards (covering employment, local government and services for young people) and six codes of practice (covering employment, education, housing and some areas of health service provision). These standards and codes do not make specific references to particular ethnic groups. Introducing an understanding that the specific needs of Irish people, along with those of other ethnic groups, should be taken into account in the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality of opportunity will not alter the way in which these standards or codes apply.

- An Irish job applicant, after answering a question about his nationality, was asked: 'Do you have a problem with drink?' (*O'Driscoll v Post Office*, 1990)
- A job applicant was told by an employment agency that she would not be interviewed for a particular job as she was Irish and therefore unreliable. (*Nicholl v London Staff Bureau*, 1991)
- Faced with derogatory comments about his Irish origin nearly every day, a factory worker was dismissed when he continued to complain. (*McAuley v Auto Alloys Foundry*, 1994)
- Abused in front of other members of staff and visiting professionals, a college lecturer was victimised by his employer when he continued to seek an apology. (*Bryans v Northumberland College*, 1995)

## SETTLEMENTS

- Three Irish customers who tried to get service in a public house were abused because of their Irish origins. They brought court proceedings against the brewery which owned the pub. The case was settled and the complainants received compensation.
- When a student of Irish origin was refused a place on a postgraduate course, the university agreed to amend its admission procedures for the course.
- A woman of mixed Irish/black origin was

turned away from an interview for a job with a voluntary agency because the post was covered by a section of the Race Relations Act allowing the appointment of staff from a particular ethnic group. The agency said it wanted someone of Black Caribbean origin, although this was not mentioned in the job advertisement. The settlement included compensation and agreement to consult the CRE about changes in practice.

- An Irish sous chef was so distressed by racial abuse at work that he resigned from the post and took legal proceedings. The settlement included compensation and agreement to deal with any future racial harassment.
- A man who was born in the Irish Republic was refused a car insurance policy on the grounds that he was born outside the UK and had not held a UK driving licence for three years. He took the case to court.

The settlement provided compensation of £7,500.

- When an Irish woman who worked in a bakery telephoned the CRE to say that her manager was abusing her because of her Irish origin, she was advised to make a formal complaint. Ten days later, she called to say that she had received a proper apology and that her manager had been disciplined.
- When a building society refused to allow an Irish woman to open a savings account because she was unable to produce a UK passport, she started court proceedings. The society agreed to apologise and paid compensation.
- A care agency did not renew the short-term contract of an Irish nurse who complained of racial abuse. With the help of a local racial equality council, she started proceedings and secured compensation.

## USEFUL AGENCIES

There are Irish community organisations or centres in many parts of Great Britain. Details are available from various national bodies with links around the country. These include:

**Action Group for Irish Youth**  
LVSRC  
356 Holloway Road  
London N7 6PA  
☎ 0171-700 8137

**Federation of Irish Societies**  
50/52 Camden Square  
London NW1 9XB  
☎ 0171-916 2733

**Irish in Britain Representation Group**  
C/o The Irish Bookshop  
8 Archway Mall  
☎ London N19 5RG

**Irish Housing Forum**  
C/o Innisfree Housing Association, 190 Iverson Road,  
London NW6 2HL  
☎ 0171-625 1818

**London Irish Women's Centre**  
59 Stoke Newington Church Street  
London N16 0AR  
☎ 0171-249 7318

The following centres may also be able to help:

**Birmingham Irish Welfare and Information Centre**  
Plunkett House  
72 Digbeth Road, Birmingham B5  
☎ 0121-604 6111

**Liverpool Irish Centre**  
127 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5TG  
☎ 0151-709 4120

**London Irish Centre**  
52 Camden Square  
London NW1 9XB  
☎ 0171-916 2222

**Manchester Irish Community Care**  
289 Cheetham Hill Road  
Manchester M8 0SN  
☎ 0161-205 9105

Advice on equal opportunity issues is available from any CRE office or from the local racial equality council. A list of RECs' addresses and telephone numbers is available from CRE Distribution, Elliot House, 10 Allington Street, London SW1E 5EH. Please enclose a stamped and addressed A4 envelope.

The full research report, *Discrimination and the Irish community in Britain*: (ISBN 1 85442 200 6), priced £10.00 plus £1.00 to cover postage and packing is available from .  
Central Books  
99 Wallis Road  
London E9 5LN  
☎ 0181-986 5488  
Fax:0181-533 5821

Please make cheques payable to **Central Books**.

# COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY

The Commission for Racial Equality was set up by the Race Relations Act 1976 with the duties of:

- Working towards the elimination of discrimination.
- Promoting equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups.
- Keeping under review the working of the Act, and, when required by the Secretary of State or when it otherwise thinks it is necessary, drawing up and submitting to the Secretary of State proposals for amending it.

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## Wales

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*The CRE is  
working for a  
just society  
which gives  
everyone an  
equal chance to  
learn, work and  
live free from  
discrimination  
and prejudice  
and from the  
fear of racial  
harassment and  
violence*



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