

Only in South Africa, you say?

Black rights in the 1980's: the Canadian back yard

By Alan Christensen

Canadians have been shocked in recent years by the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in this country. They are shocked because they have always considered racism and racial discrimination to be an "American problem". However, says Rocky Burnley Jones, who was involved in the Afro-Canadian Liberation Movement in the 1960's and more recently ran as a provincial NDP candidate in a Halifax riding, black people have always been oppressed in Nova Scotia.

In fact, says Jones, the situation Nova Scotian blacks are in is not very different from that of blacks in the southern United States. Up until 15 years ago there were still discriminatory laws which were not unlike the notorious apartheid laws of South Africa. Until the 1950's blacks were still kept separate from whites in a New Glasgow theatre. In 1965 a black girl was not permitted to be buried in a Halifax graveyard, because it was reserved by law for whites only.

Furthermore, says Jones, "I don't believe that the relative position of blacks (in Nova Scotia) has changed one iota in the last ten years." In saying this, he blames many groups—including himself, for not being more vocal in the face of inaction. However, he maintains that most of the blame for the lack of change in the black plight can be placed firmly on the shoulders of the provincial and federal governments.

While he admits that Nova Scotia's Human Rights law has been quite effective in eliminating job discrimination, he also maintains that the problem for blacks and other minorities goes much deeper than discrimination. In the past, blacks were generally excluded from the mainstream of society and were usually forced to live on the outskirts of white communities, performing the most low paying, menial jobs in the towns. Only in Cape Breton were blacks in any degree allowed to work in the more high-paying factory and mine jobs, alongside white workers. As well, Cape Breton was the only place where the unions included black workers in their membership.

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This to Jones speaks of a need for more effective affirmative action programs, to get blacks and other minorities into the workforce "so that they can develop their own potential". Jones says that without effective affirmative action programs, it's not necessary to discriminate against blacks in order to keep them out of the more skilled and high-paying jobs.

Today's ghettos simply look nicer

Ghetto living is another part of life which has not disappeared for many of the provinces' blacks. In fact, says Jones, the ghetto of today is more likely to be a

huge government-owned housing project—such as Uniacke Square—which he says tends to isolate blacks. When people are identified at a low-income status, according to Jones, and are isolated from the rest of the community, they are jailed at the low-income levels.

Black groups lullaby-ed with government funds

The groups available to voice these concerns are almost non-existent, adds Jones, who says that in the sixties there was a large civil rights movement in the black community which paralleled the black civil rights movement in the United States. These groups, including the Afro-Canadian Liberation Movement of which Jones himself was a part, were co-opted by the government of the day, according to Jones. When these groups were organized, he says, "the government came along and said 'Hey, you're rocking the boat, but we'll help you rock the boat. We'll give you money and we'll set up one organization to speak for all of you.' So they created the BUF (Black United Front)."

"Whether it be boom times or bad times, blacks are the last hired, the first fired."

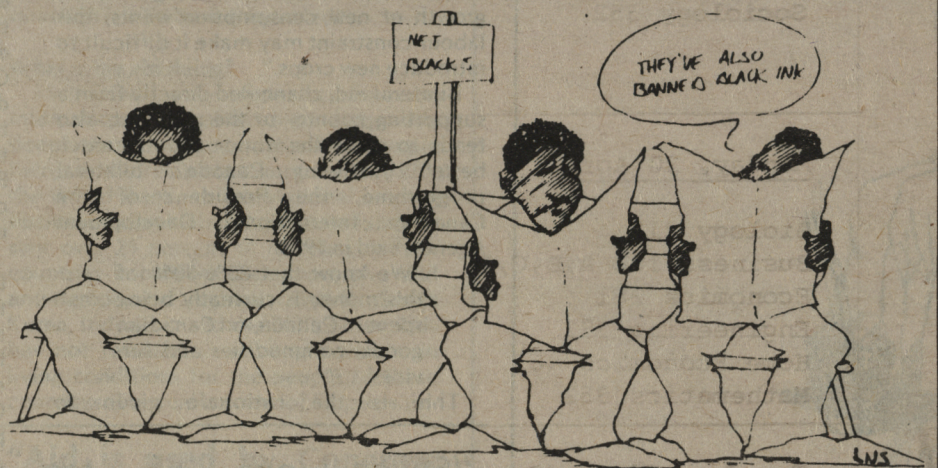
The BUF, he says, has isolated itself from the black community. It "speaks for all of us (the black community) directly to government and never to the community." The BUF does nothing to affect the lives of blacks in Nova Scotia by Jones' account.

Blacks, he says, are also becoming more interested in the political process—but it's still difficult for them to rise to any position of power in the political system. He points to the voting results when he ran in the Halifax-Needham riding for the NDP in a 1978 provincial election. While he picked up support in the black areas which had not previously voted heavily for the NDP, he lost ground in some of the traditionally NDP white working class neighborhoods. "The working class white in this area," according to Jones, "has yet to develop enough politically to separate race from politics."

An uneasy picture: one can see that Canadians, who always have looked smugly at racial problems in the U.S., Great Britain and South Africa, should take another look at their own backyards. The findings are surprising.

Provincial government tokenism?

Jones points an accusing finger at the Nova Scotia government for maintaining only "token affirmative action programs". He notes there is only one person to co-ordinate the needs of the designated minorities in Nova Scotia. He also accuses the provincial government of not allocating money to affirmative action, and of not elevating blacks in the civil ser-



vice. "In fact," he says, "it may be that the percentage of blacks in the civil service would be less than what it was ten years ago, or the relative position of blacks within the civil service may be less."

Duncan McNab of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission said he'd "not wish to agree or disagree" with Jones' allegations. The HRC is charged with enforcing the provisions of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act, and spearheads affirmative action programs in hiring, among other measures. He said the Commission has done "a great deal of work enforcing the Human Rights Act, particularly over the past ten years." McNab insists that there has been progress in human rights—in general—in that time.

Specific Human Rights Commission activities included school conference programs and affirmative action drives in education and employment fronts, "designed", says Duncan McNab, "to improve the status of the visible minorities".

Rocky Jones also says that the crown corporations of the federal government are no better in their token commitments to black employment. The entire maritimes operations of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, he pronounces, have only two blacks on staff.

CBC Public Relations officer Gordon Smith can't be sure about that. "There's no place on employment forms to indicate a person's colour," he says. Smith says the provisions of the Human Rights Code, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of colour or other social factors, are strictly enforced in CBC hiring practices. A check with the broadcasting network's Human Resources offices might unearth a breakdown of employed blacks, he says. Five hundred and eighty employees work in the CBC's six Maritime centres.

A frequently-heard chorus in the realm of the black situation is that tough economic times are behind the present plight of Nova Scotia's blacks. Not according to Rocky Jones: "Whether it be boom times or hard times," he says,

"blacks are the last hired, the first fired."

Black issues: filler for the local media

The local media is by Jones' account "a very racist industry". He says there are almost no blacks in the local media fields and they have done almost nothing to assist the black community, particularly in shaping public attitude. "Except for the odd interview to fill in time," charges Jones, the media has ignored blacks.

Education has often been mentioned as a solution to the problems of black peo-

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ple. There are problems with this attitude, says Jones, because "education doesn't eliminate racism". First of all, he says, schools do not relate to the needs of black students. Jones compared the situation of a black student to that of an Acadian student attending an English school—the values and aspirations, he says, may be different from those of the system. "You have to be exceptional to make it through."

He noted that many blacks go through university "only to find the same barriers to employment and a lot of the same social barriers". Jones says that blacks, by and large, do not get the advantages of the university facilities although they pay taxes. Blacks are also used by universities to attract grants to study the black status—with no eventual benefits to the black community.

Only Dalhousie University, he says, has made any attempt at establishing an affirmative action education program (called the Transition Year Program). St. Francis Xavier University has also instituted an affirmative action program on its campus.