

Paul Stephenson

A civil rights activist who paved the way for the first race laws in Britain

“Every generation has a duty to fight against racism, otherwise it will find its way into our country and into our homes” Paul Stephenson

Setting the scene

In 1964 it was legal in the UK to refuse service to people on the basis of the colour of their skin. This discrimination spanned many areas of British working life for many years .

Early life

Stephenson was born in Essex in 1937 and his mum was British and his father was West African. He was evacuated aged 3 to Essex where he stayed for 7 years. He went to school in London and he was the only black child in the school. He did his national service with the air force and later in adult life, was Bristol City's first black social worker. He says he was determined from an early age to fight the racism he had encountered as a child growing up in East London and later in Bristol.

The bus boycott

In 1955, in Bristol, the Bristol Omnibus Company decided that “coloured workers should not be employed as bus crews” as they felt it downgraded the job, causing white workers to move elsewhere.

In the city, the West Indian Development council, helped by Stephenson, was set up to fight discrimination of this sort. Paul began a 60 day boycott of the company. This led to the organisation of the “Bristol Bus Boycott”. Stephenson became the spokesperson for this group. Their protests and views soon attracted national interest especially in the media and several well known politicians including Harold Wilson (the leader of the Labour opposition) supported them.

In 1963 on the same day that Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech, The BOC gave in and allowed black workers to be employed. His campaign directly resulted in them revoking its ‘colour bar’.

A one man sit-in

In 1964 Paul Stephenson walked into a pub called the Bay Horse in Bristol and ordered half a pint of beer. The man at the bar gave him his drink but when the manager saw Paul he shouted at him to ‘get out we don't want you black people here!’. Paul refused to move and started a one-man sit-in. Police were called and he spent the night in jail and his subsequent trial hit the national news.

Slow change

The charges against Paul were dropped but he was now known as a civil rights activist. After his trial Harold Wilson the new Prime Minister wrote to Paul saying he was going to change the law. In 1965, the first Race Relations Act was brought into Parliament which outlawed any discrimination in public places. Stephenson's actions contributed towards this Act coming in.

Before this, in 1964, he was invited to the US by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Here he gave speeches about racism in Britain. He was gaining notoriety abroad as well as at home.

However it took until 1976 when legislation was passed in Britain that “criminalised racist actions in employment and housing....and established the Commission for Racial Equality” 2

In 1992, Stephenson returned to Bristol with his family. He fostered a number of children and was always campaigning for the city to face up to its links with slavery.

Later life

In 2009 he received an OBE for his services to equal opportunities. In 2017 he received the Pride of Britain Award for Lifetime Achievement. In 2020 in Bristol, after the statue of Edward Colston was destroyed, the community wanted to replace it with one of Paul Stephenson.

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