

Taking a Stand

Taking a Stand: Gus John speaks on education, race, social action and civil unrest 1980–2005, published in 2006 by the Gus John Partnership, 4 Ellesmere Road South, Manchester M21 0TE, ISBN 0-9547843-1-6, 607 pp.

Reviewed by Robin Richardson in Race Equality Teaching, 2006

Most readers of *Race Equality Teaching* know or know of Gus John. Those with particularly long memories will recall two texts from the early 1970s, written from his day-to-day experience at that time as a youth worker: *Race in the Inner City* and *Police Power and Black People*. Since then we have known him in many other guises as well: passionate and eloquent public speaker, senior educational administrator, university professor, community activist and organiser, national campaigner, founder and leader of numerous practical projects, and scathing critic of the police and the education system, and of successive government policies. Everyone involved in race equality in education needs to read Gus's recently published *Taking a Stand*, a collection of some 40 short texts written since 1980.

Most of the texts in *Taking a Stand* date from the last few years and are to do with matters that are still entirely current. The context for all of these is the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. They include the schools white paper of autumn 2004 and the failure of the DfES to conduct a proper race equality impact assessment (REIA) in connection with it; civil disturbances and uprisings in 2001 in northern cities and in 2005 in Birmingham; the poor quality of official reports about these; the development of black leaders and managers; and the continuing scandal of the exclusion of black children and young people from school. The texts are mainly speeches and lectures. Some, however, are lengthy letters to official bodies or else substantial submissions to various committees of inquiry. Some are broad-brush but others go into painstaking detail, as for example in the account of a specific pupil under threat of exclusion from their school.

One of the book's many strengths is its sense of history. Concerns and events since 2000 have their roots in earlier decades and in this connection Gus has vivid and invaluable memories of, for example, the events in Moss Side, Manchester, in July 1981 and the murder of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah in the playground of Burnage High School in 1986. The report on the latter event which he co-authored, *Murder in the Playground*, is still a key text on racist behaviour and bullying in schools, and on effective school management. It has long been out of print but there is much material from it in *Taking a Stand*, distilled through historical perspective and subsequent reflection.

But history did not start in 1980 (the earliest text in *Taking a Stand*), nor in 1966 (when Gus first, in his own phrase, first took to the barricades), nor when Gus was born. He recalls in one of the speeches reprinted here ('No Island is an Island') his childhood in Grenada and inspiringly tells of how he was deeply and life-changingly taught there by his family, schooling and community about campaigns against racism, slavery, oppression and colonialism dating back centuries.

Another of the book's recurring themes is racism. In this connection Gus quotes Sivanandan's famous words that 'just to learn about other people's cultures is not to

learn about the racism of one's own. To learn about the racism of one's own culture, on the other hand, is to approach other cultures objectively.' These are words which those of us working in education should never forget. It is alas too much to hope, however, that they will be taken to heart by the government's recently established 'commission on integration and cohesion'. It is also unlikely, judging from early publicity, that the commission will invite evidence from Gus John. We can reasonably hope and expect, though, that he will submit uninvited evidence! His many friends and supporters will look forward to reading it.

How does an individual stay passionate, committed and tirelessly energetic, fighting every day against racism and in defence of human rights, for over 40 years? From time to time in *Taking a Stand* Gus gives glimpses of the answer. The answer is not spelled out schematically, however. You have to read the whole book to get a feel for it. The book ends with a quotation from Nelson Mandela. 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.' Gus John is not afraid of the light.