

It Was Worth Staying

– the start of a new job, autumn 1979

His first day in the new job, the first Monday in September 1979, adviser for multicultural education in a shire authority near London. A morning of files, documents and papers, a whirl of introductions, smiles and handshakes. At lunchtime a traditional collective gathering of colleagues at the local pub to mourn the end of the summer and to mark the start of a new school year. Grey suits, suntans, gin and tonics, pork pies, masses of further introductions.

'Welcome,' said someone. 'No, don't tell me who you are. I know. They told me', and he gestured over his shoulder to a group of the grey suits, casually drinking and laughing behind him. 'You're our new man for...' He used an extraordinary, an outrageous, an unrepeatable, racist phrase.

Those first few weeks, autumn 1979. The headteacher who said casually in conversation that the West Indian pupils at their school looked like gorillas – 'but don't misunderstand me, Mr Richardson. I'm very fond of gorillas. I always used to give the gorilla a banana when I went to the zoo.'

The headteacher who said 'I hate immigrants just as much as everybody else, they're ruining my school. But I'm a Christian, and I believe God has chosen Britain – he's going to create in Britain a society where all races are equal. Not, I very much hope, that he'll let it happen in *my* lifetime.'

The headteacher who said their purpose when educating South Asian pupils was entirely clear – 'get rid of their strange and funny ways – their gibberish language, their silly clothes, their awful food, their strange and funny religion.'

That recurring phrase used by white teachers everywhere: 'our own children'. Meaning, white children.

But some of the people he met were marvellous. Very determined, very warm, very resilient, very committed, very brave. It was worth staying.

Meeting up with an old friend and comrade, recalled in a talk a few days later at a meeting of the local branch of the National Association for Multiracial Education, November 1979.

Her: 'I suppose I ought to congratulate you on your new, er, now that you're one of the buggers.'

Him: 'How do you mean?'

Her: 'You're on the other bloody side now, aren't you?'

Him: 'Am I?'

Her: 'Course, you are, now that you're an inspector.'

Him: 'I'm an adviser, not an inspector.'

Her: 'Oh Christ, don't be so bloody wet, your job is to inspect, regulate, control, patch up the system, keep the show on the road, you're a bureaucrat.'

Him: 'Well, I ...'

Source: the start of a personal memoir shared with Reading Association for Multiracial Education, November 1979. Later the memoir was expanded and shared with a small number of friends and close colleagues in October 1985, shortly before leaving Berkshire. The memoir was then shared more widely five years later in *Daring to be a Teacher: essays, stories and memoranda* by Robin Richardson, Trentham Books 1990, pages 177-196.