



UK's Changing Attitude to Racism: 1970–2025

Introduction

The period from 1970 to 2025 in the United Kingdom reflects a profound evolution in how racism is perceived, legislated against, and challenged by society. Over these five decades, public opinion, political will, and grassroots activism have intersected to move the needle from overt hostility towards more inclusive, though still imperfect, frameworks. This report traces key milestones, societal shifts, and legislative landmarks that showcase this transformation.

1970s: Open Hostility and First Legislative Steps

In the early 1970s, hostility towards non-white residents was widespread. Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968 catalysed this sentiment, with a Gallup poll showing 74 percent public agreement at the time. The growth of the far-right National Front and frequent "Paki-bashing" attacks underscored the precariousness of daily life for Black, Asian, and mixed-race Britons. Although the Race Relations Act 1968 outlawed discrimination in certain public settings, enforcement remained weak and racism was entrenched in housing, employment, and policing practises.

1980s: Rising Awareness and Institutional Responses

Racial tensions flared into riots—Toxteth in 1981 and Brixton in 1985—highlighting systemic grievances over policing and socioeconomic exclusion. High-profile enquiries and the establishment of the Commission for Racial Equality signalled a growing institutional recognition that piecemeal measures were insufficient. Community defence organisations, supplemented by Black supplementary schools and cultural centres, empowered minority communities to assert their rights and preserve their heritage. At the same time, amendments to the Racial Relations Act 1976 broadened protections against discrimination in workplaces and housing.

1990s: Shock of Stephen Lawrence and Public Conscience

The racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 became a watershed moment. The subsequent Macpherson Enquiry (1999) branded the Metropolitan Police as "institutionally racist" and recommended sweeping reforms in policing and criminal justice. Public outrage spurred deeper introspection on everyday racism, leading to expanded hate-crime legislation and the establishment of independent oversight bodies. Schools and workplaces also began rolling out diversity training programmes in response to recommendations for cultural competence.

2000s: Embracing Multiculturalism and Legal Reinforcements

The 2000s saw multiculturalism enshrined as official policy, with government campaigns celebrating

diversity. The Equality Act 2006 created the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, streamlining oversight on race, gender, disability, and more. Hate crime laws were strengthened under the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and later acts, enhancing sentencing for racially aggravated offences. Public opinion surveys recorded a marked decline in overt racist attitudes, even as subtle biases persisted.

2010s: Social Media, Intersectionality, and Ongoing Challenges

The rise of social media platforms both amplified hate speech and empowered anti-racist movements to mobilise quickly. High-profile global events resonated in the UK, prompting marches in London and beyond. Research during this decade highlighted that while explicit prejudice declined, structural disparities in education, employment, and health outcomes remained stubbornly high. Intersectional approaches began influencing policy, recognising how race, class, gender, and migration status interlock in experiences of discrimination.

2020s: Renewed Activism and Far-Right Resurgence

In 2020, nationwide protests followed the murder of George Floyd in the US, with UK cities seeing tens of thousands rally against domestic racial injustice. In 2024, peaceful anti-racism demonstrations continued, even as far-right groups exploited tragic events to foment violence—riots in several towns eroded trust in community cohesion and multicultural values. The incoming Labour government pledged to repeal repressive protest laws and address the “socio-economic duty” under the Equality Act, yet challenges persist in fully redressing the rights of the Windrush generation and other marginalised groups.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

From the overt bigotry of the 1970s to the nuanced debates over structural racism in 2025, the UK’s journey has been neither linear nor complete. Legislative milestones have often lagged behind shifting public attitudes, and grassroots activism remains vital to driving change. Looking forward, embedding equity in education, policing, health, and economic policy will determine whether the UK can close persistent racial gaps. Continued vigilance and honest reckonings with the past will be essential for nurturing a genuinely inclusive society.

