

The Guardian

The last days of a white world

We are near a global watershed - a time when white people will not be in the majority in the developed world, Britain included. Anthony Browne reports

Special report: Race in Britain

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First published on Sun 3 Sep 2000

It was news and no news; the most significant milestone in one of the most profound changes to affect the US in the past century, and yet a non-event. Last week the US Census Bureau issued figures showing that non-hispanic whites made up 49.8 per cent of the population of California.

Anglo-Saxon whites are already a minority in Hawaii and the District of Columbia. Now they are an ethnic minority in the country's most populous state, the one most usually identified with the American dream.

'It's my hope we can all see our state's diversity as a cause for celebration and not consternation,' said California's lieutenant governor, Cruz Bustamante, a Latino. Robert Newby, a white shop-owner who has lived in Los Angeles for 40 years, echoed his optimism: 'This confirms what most of us have thought for years. I am happy for there to be more immigrants - by and large they work harder and have more money to spend.'

As recently as 1970, eight out of 10 Californians were white. Fuelled by immigration at its highest rate since the start of the last century, and higher fertility rates, the Asian and Latino populations of California have risen by almost a third since 1990. At the same time, with limited immigration and low birth rates, the population of non-hispanic whites has fallen by 3 per cent. By 2040, hispanics are expected to be the overall majority in the state.

Where California goes, the rest of America is predicted to follow. At present 72 per cent of the US population is non-hispanic whites; the US Census Bureau predicts they will become a minority between 2055 and 2060.

Not every one likes the new face of America. White far-right extremists predict the break-up of the union. Thomas W. Chittum, a New Jersey-based Vietnam War veteran, declared in his book *Civil War Two*, that the US, like Yugoslavia, will shatter into new, ethnically-based nations. 'America was born in blood, America suckled on blood, America gorged on blood and grew into a giant, and America will drown in blood,' Chittum warned.

The separatists have set up groups such as Americans for Self-Determination. One of the founders, Jeff Anderson, said: 'We are suggesting the US be partitioned into states for blacks, whites, hispanics, and so on, along with multi-racial states for those who wish to continue with this experiment. Now is the time to begin such a multi-racial dialogue about separatism, before a storm of violent racial conflict erupts.'

The shifting sands of the US reflect wider - and highly controversial - changes elsewhere in the world. It is an area in which few demographers dare to tread for fear of being accused of racism. 'You cannot quote me - a word out of place and I get crapped on from a very great height,' said one academic. 'Whatever you say you are deemed racist'.

The past millennium was more than anything the era of the whites. Just 500 years ago, few had ventured outside their European homeland. Then, with several acts of genocide clearing the way, they settled in North America, South America, Australia, New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, southern Africa.

But now, around the world, whites are falling as a proportion of population. The United Nations collects and produces a vast array of statistics on population, but produces none relating to race or ethnic origin. Indeed few countries collect their own figures on ethnicity - in Europe, only the UK and the Netherlands do.

However, the UN's *State of the World Population 1999* predicted that 98 per cent of the growth in the world's population by 2025 will occur in lesser developed regions, principally Africa and Asia. The most significant reason for this is lower birth rates in rich countries: in 61 countries, mainly the rich ones, people are no longer having enough babies to replace themselves.

In its *World Population Profile 1998*, the US Census Bureau predicted that by the second decade of this century all the net gain in world population will be in developing countries. 'The future of human population growth has been determined, and is being determined, in the world's poorer nations,' it said.

The global centre of gravity is changing. In 1900 Europe had a quarter of the world's population, and three times that of Africa; by 2050 Europe is predicted to have just 7 per cent of the world

population, and a third that of Africa. The ageing and declining populations of predominantly white nations have prompted forecasts of - and calls for - more immigration from the young and growing populations of developing nations to make up the shortfall.

Last year net immigration to Britain reached 185,000, an all-time record. The Immigration Minister, Barbara Roche, recently announced plans to attract migrants to fill specific skills shortages, such as in the computer industry.

Last month Edmund Stoiber, the premier of Bavaria in southern Germany, called on Germans to have more babies as an alternative to more immigrants. 'We are having too few children - to a worrying degree, the significance of which is scarcely recognised,' he said. His calls echoed those of a fellow Christian Democrat who earlier this year stood on a platform of 'Children not Indians'. In Britain the number of ethnic minority citizens has risen from a few tens of thousands in the 1950s, to more than 3 million - or around 6 per cent of the total population. While the number of whites is virtually static, higher fertility and net immigration means the number from ethnic minorities is growing by 2 to 3 per cent a year.

One demographer, who didn't want to be named for fear of being called racist, said: 'It's a matter of pure arithmetic that, if nothing else happens, non-Europeans will become a majority and whites a minority in the UK. That would probably be the first time an indigenous population has voluntarily become a minority in its historic homeland.'

Lee Jasper, race relations adviser to the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, predicted a similar future, telling *The Observer*: 'Where America goes, Europe follows 30 years later. There is a potential for whites to become a minority in some European countries.'

In Britain, that is almost certain to happen in London, and in the relatively near future. 'At the moment ethnic minorities are about 40 per cent in London. The demographics show that white people in London will become a minority by 2010,' said Jasper. 'We could have a majority black Britain by the turn of the century.'

British National Party chairman Nick Griffin said: 'I don't think there's any doubt that within this century, white people will be a minority in every country in the world.' For Griffin, however, it is a major cause of alarm: 'Every people under the sun have a right to their place under the sun, and the right to survive. If people predicted that Indians would be a minority in India in 2100, everyone would be calling it genocide.'

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown of the Foreign Policy Centre, who arrived in London from Uganda in 1972, said such fears are basically racist: 'Only white people worry about this. It's because for such a long

time the world has been their own. To talk about it feeds a particular type of racism that says that blacks breed like rabbits. There is an underlying assumption that says white is right.'

She added: 'There is a white panic every time one part of their world seems to be passing over to anyone else. But it's foolish to panic about it. So what if we do become a majority? What difference does it make?'

For Alibhai-Brown, the decline of whites is a question of redressing the balance after they colonised much of the world. 'The empire strikes back really. There was this extraordinary assumption that white people could go and destroy peoples and it would have no consequence. It astounds me,' she said.

But present trends have little chance of redressing the injustices of history. Native Americans used to have the lands to themselves but are now less than 1 per cent of the US population, with little chance of becoming a majority again. The biggest growth is among Latinos (largely derived from Spain), and Asians, particularly from China and the Phillipines.

Jasper said the concerns of the British National Party are based on outdated ideas. 'The racial mix of nations changes all the time. There is no way that ethnicity of blood can be tied to a specific geographic place in a global world. You can no longer look at ethnic states, saying that Germany is Anglo-Saxon and so on.'

Jasper felt the process would strengthen Britain. 'Diversity strengthens a country. It makes it more exciting. We have hundreds of languages spoken, when we go out to eat we never eat English, we eat Thai or French or Indian. It makes London a very cool place to live and work.'

Nor does it seem likely that whites will become marginalised in terms of influences, even if their numbers decline. David Owen, of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at Warwick Univer sity, said: 'Population has never been the main determinant of influence - it's wealth and income. White people still have their hands on most of the levers of military and economic power.'

Even so, Griffin warns that, as in Germany and the US, the rise of ethnic minorities will lead to a backlash. 'It's going to put race to the top of the political agenda,' he said.

But that seems unlikely. Britain has far less of a track record of racism and right-wing extremism than other European countries. Alibhai-Brown insisted that rising numbers of ethnic minorities could even help reduce what racism there is: 'The right-wing parties are growing in Somerset, not Brixton. The idea that more black people means more racism is not born out by the research. The more of us there are, it reduces racism.'

Back in California, in a land built by immigrants, Bustamente put a positive spin on the end of the white majority: 'If there are no majorities, then there's no minorities.' In Europe, with its 40,000-year-old indigenous white population, the rise of a non-white majority may not be greeted with such equanimity.

- In the United Kingdom, the number of people from ethnic minorities has risen from a few tens of thousands in 1950 to more than 3 million now.
- In Italy, the birth rate is so low that, without immigration, the population is predicted to decline by 16 million by 2050.
- The United States government predicts that non-hispanic whites will become a minority in the country by 2055.
- The United Nations predicts that 98 per cent of world population growth until 2025 will be in developing nations.
- The population of Europe is expected to drop from 25 per cent of the world total in 1900 to 7 per cent in the next 50 years.