



## Minorities Can Effect Change

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In the 1940s classic, *An American Dilemma*, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal was the first to suggest that racism is a “White problem” which can only be truly resolved by changing the attitudes and behaviours of Whites toward Blacks.

The Myrdal insight has far-reaching sociological implications for combating racism in society today.

That is, if racism can be seen as a White problem, then the eradication of racism in all of its various forms – or what has come to be called “anti-racism philosophy” – is also a White solution.

This is neither a knit-picky detail, nor simply a matter of semantics. Anti-racism is much touted today as a “pro-active” and “holistic” approach to dismantling the structures and systems that have generated and perpetuated racial barriers and inequities. Granting this is the case, anti-racism philosophy is also beyond the consideration and purview of minorities. In a very real sense, from a position of subdominance, people of colour cannot on their own accord alter the fundamental structure of power and authority in this society. Without collaborative efforts and support from across the ethno-racial spectrum, the development of all-inclusive organizations and institutions is totally unfeasible. Indeed, to consider anti-racism philosophy outside of the multicultural and interactive contexts of society is precariously abstract, and can be extremely “bad counsel” for people of colour, because of the potential for reprisals, recriminations and reactionary backlash.

This alludes to a small irony of contemporary anti-racism philosophy. It postulates a hypothetical power-play between the opposing forces of good and evil in society, while ignoring or glossing over the reality of asymmetrical power. It is as if people of colour could somehow take the offensive in a world that places them in a systemically defensive position.

### **No Frontal Challenge**

Historically, however, progressive social change in the face of social oppression and racial disadvantage has never been conducive to a full frontal challenge by people of colour, nor has it been sustained without strongly committed outside support. On the contrary, the history of minorities in North America has been a story of defence and resistance. Minority equality-seeking tactics that strike at the legitimacy of the authority structure, have typically induced repressive forces of social control – from escape slave laws, to police dogs and fire hoses, to urban marshal law, and the Job Quotas Appeal Act of 1995.

For Blacks and other minorities, survival has always been predicated on the effective employment of different strategies to resist racism. The restrained direct action tactics of civil disobedience, boycotts, sit-ins, peaceful mass protest marches, (even the current) racial profiling summits, and other kinds of nonviolent dissent are all means of bringing people together to challenge unjust practices or laws without disputing the right of authorities to hold law violators responsible for their actions.

These tactics of resistance, in turn, have been embedded in collective community orientations that have roughly translated as accommodation and assimilation. To be sure, neither accommodation nor assimilation ever pretended to be an uncompromising and holistic approach to the eradication of all forms of social oppression and racial disadvantage. But both have over the years provided a defence against discrimination as well as a platform from which minorities have been able to criticize, negotiate, and advocate.

### **Whites Resist Change**

Over time and in terms of the whole, since Myrdal, sociologists have discovered that the resistance to racism by people of colour has only been exceeded by the resistance of the attitudes of the dominant White majority to change.

In more recent years, though, the Canadian introduction of official multiculturalism has provided for a new community orientation that further enlarges the potential platform for negotiation and advocacy. For, in an increasingly diverse social environment, multiculturalism as a political framework for ethno-racial inclusion has the social mobilization capacity to bring disparate communities together in pursuit of common goals in ways that never before existed. Yet, so far, for many anti-racism activists as well as other equality-seekers, the frustration of being unable to leverage full participation for people of colour in Canadian society, even with their best efforts, has contributed to a general state of confused disillusionment – which has also meant that the collaborative social change potentials of cultural coalition-building and strategic alliances has gone relatively untapped.

Of course, resisting the ever-growing frustration caused by the elusive resilience of racism will as always require a lot of imagination, and a lot innovation; and above all will require the updated skills of community leaders and activists who excel at inter-community consensus building, who are expert at system strategy and operational management, and have the ability to inspire and motivate others. But there has never been better time in Western history for minorities to affect the social environment and help create a climate conducive to change by tapping into multiculturalism as a political framework for shaping the agenda of social policy priorities in the public arena and consciousness.