

‘Focus on race issues as much as economy’



Identifying problems: report authors Keith Lawrence and Raymond Codrington with Myra Virgil of Atlantic Philanthropies, which assisted with the project (Photograph by Blaire Simmons)

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Bermuda’s civic leaders need to focus as much on tackling the Island’s racial disparity as they do on its economic interests, according to a new report.

Keith Lawrence and Raymond Codrington’s 30-page manifesto argues that, while open discrimination is no longer tolerated, white privilege remains “baked into the hardware and software of the political economy and culture”.

But the authors of *Racial Dynamics in Bermuda in the 21st Century: Progress and Challenges* also warn that discussions on race could prove “unnecessary, futile and even counterproductive” if they devolve into finger-pointing and resurrecting past grievances.

They suggest that while special attention should be given to young black men, the same group needs to refrain from “self-sabotage” in fulfilling negative stereotypes about them.

The paper calls for a broader and more committed collective of community figureheads to promote a “comprehensive and sustained social justice agenda”.

“This would be an expanded universe of people in Bermuda who recognise that the society’s longer-term cohesion and prosperity will depend as much on a racial dynamic as on business growth,” say the authors, representing a United States race relations think tank, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.

To compile their paper, the duo spent three years gleaning the opinions of 86 Bermudian civic leaders, business professionals, youth organisers, non-profit community figures and public officers.

They refer to previous studies which have focused on young black males — such as the Mincy Report, the Commission for Unity and Racial Equality Report, the Hopkins Report and the Bermuda Government’s Life-Skills Report — but stress that interventions concentrating solely on that group will not be enough.

The authors continue: “We need to talk about the issues surrounding race openly and honestly — neither cringing nor blaming.”

Noting that Bermuda’s racial imbalance began in the 17th century with European settlement and colonisation, the report adds: “It is vital that white Bermudians acknowledge that they benefit today from a legacy of racial inequality.”

The authors also stress the importance of compiling and studying raw data pertaining to racial issues, as opposed to relying on anecdotal evidence or appealing to emotion.

They point out that more than 90 per cent of black students attend government-supported public schools, “which are widely perceived to be below standard”, while 90 per cent of white students attend privately

funded schools.

This racial fissure continues into the working world, where the majority of black Bermudians (58 per cent) work in blue-collar occupations, and earn less on average than their white Bermudian counterparts, 34 per cent of whom work in lower-paid professions.

Figures from the white-collar sector are equally stark: a 2010 census showed that 65 per cent of white workers on the Island held senior, managerial and professional positions, versus 40 per cent of their black counterparts.

“There are strong suspicions among black Bermudians that race still influences judgments about talent, qualifications and industriousness about where different people ‘belong’ in the private sector,” says the report.

While 98 per cent of the prison population is black, the report states: “Bermuda’s black youth ought to be viewed more as canaries in the racial equity coal mine, that is, as a group whose problems point to deeper society-wide imperfections.”

Dr Lawrence and Dr Codrington warn that social justice leaders also have to tackle “seemingly compelling evidence of ‘self-sabotage’ by young black men”, pointing to the demographic’s propensity for behaviour such as joining gangs and dropping out of school.

Another problem is that the Island’s overall affluence and tranquillity can dampen the urgency for social change, turning the matter into a “hard sell”.

However, they praise organisations such as Citizens Uprooting Racism in Bermuda (Curb) and the Diversity Institute of Bermuda (DIB) for initiating frank public dialogues on race.

“They understand that, painful and provocative though these may be, the conversations need to happen, and that they should push beyond recitations of disparities and grievances to explore how race actually operates from day to day at multiple levels,” they say.

Despite highlighting the difficulties of the challenge ahead, the paper concluded on an optimistic note.

“There may not be a better time for bold, innovative action,” it said. “Bermuda’s special advantages as a nation, and courageous civic voices for social justice, position it well to eventually ‘get it right’ on racial equality in the 21st century.”

Speaking to The Royal Gazette, Dr Lawrence said: “I was very pleasantly surprised to see that Bermudians were willing to take on this contentious and potentially divisive issue.

“It could become a good model for other places.”

Dr Codrington added: “It’s for Bermuda to decide what to do next. I hope people see this not as an end but a beginning.”