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I want to stand up to racists – as my uncle did

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How come the word paki and the rivers of blood speech are up for debate?

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'Friends are declining offers to go on news shows to debate whether this is hate speech'. Enoch Powell, pictured in 1970. Photograph: Popperfoto/Getty Images

At a panel event I'm doing with Maxine Beneba Clarke and Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, a white man stands up in the Q&A part, and makes a comment. "Can the word paki always be offensive? Is it always a slur?" he asks. "Sometimes people use it affectionately to talk about the paki shop." People in the audience register their disapproval with the question. All of us sitting on the panel are stunned, not sure what to say. I look at the chair. The chair doesn't quite know what to do, so I fire back at the man: "Did you just say that sometimes a racial slur can be affectionate?"

It's 2018 and we're still fielding this comment. We know the word paki is a slur. I'm shocked it even has to be discussed. I leave the event shaking with anger at the casualness of the comment. If you're calling somewhere a paki shop, if you really interrogated why you choose this word, it's really not

affectionate.

The following day, I have a conversation with Mama (my mum's eldest brother and the first in our family to immigrate here) about 1968 and the newly instituted Race Relations Act. In 1968, he tried to buy a house in Huddersfield. He was trying to find somewhere commutable between the town centre and his place of work. He took his parents and his wife and child to see the property. It worked for what they wanted and so they decided to go for it. When he called up the company to make an offer on the house, having secured a loan from his work, the person on the phone asked if he was the "coloured fella" who had come to visit. He said he was. He was told that the company had a policy not to sell properties to coloured people as it would devalue house prices in the area. Taken aback, Mama replied: "Did you know this is now illegal?"

"It's company policy," he was then told.

Mama was the first person in the country to bring a case of racial discrimination under the Race Relations Act in 1968. The judgment was ultimately reserved and then dismissed on a technicality (this was a test case for legislation in its infancy, so they were still finding their feet), but the judge said that despite said technicality, discrimination had occurred. The company was compelled to change its policy. Mama stood up for what he believed to be right and as a result is a small and significant part of UK history.

When we talk about how much things have changed in the 50 years since that incident, he tells me that things feel worse than they did in the 60s; than they did in the 80s when he was attacked by skinheads and hospitalised. Worse. Now. In 2018. I tell him about the court case in 2017 in which a landlord refused to rent properties to south Asian families because they stank the place out with curry smells. I hear him sigh on the phone.

The day we have this conversation, people are talking about Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech and the anniversary broadcast on the radio, whether it's right to broadcast it or not. BAME friends of mine are declining offers left right and centre to go on news shows to debate whether this constitutes hate speech or not. Then there are the scandalous stories of the treatment of people from the Windrush generation. Suddenly, we find ourselves in a week where those things we knew to be true – racism is bad, the word paki is a slur, the rivers of blood speech was racist – are all up for debate.

I think about what my uncle said, that things have got worse, the entire weekend. I feel heavy with the thought. I think back to the man who said that sometimes the word paki can be affectionate and I wondered why now, in 2018, he felt it was OK to ask the question. But mostly I think about what Mama did. Because, regardless of how much things have changed, he stood up for what he believed in, and he fought for what was right, at potentially huge cost to himself and his family. And that's the type of person I want to be.

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