

Racist bias in Europe

By Gwynne Dyer

TWO headlines last week showed just how racist western Europeans are. One, quoting a Commission for Racial Equality survey, revealed that 90 per cent of white people in Britain have few or no non-white friends.

The other was Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's blunt statement that "we see the spread of the wildest anti-Semitism (in France)....If I had to advise our brothers in France, I'd tell them one thing: move to Israel as soon as possible. I say that to Jews all around the world, but there (in France) I think it's a must, and they have to move immediately."

There is no doubt that anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise in France: from 593 reported attacks or threats against France's 600,000 Jews in 2003 to 510 in only the first six months of this year. There's not much doubt that racism flourishes in the United Kingdom, either: in last month's elections for the European Parliament, British

voters sent eleven members of the upstart UK Independence Party, whose rhetoric includes a lot of coded racism, to represent the country in Brussels. And yet...

Yet, this picture seems much too stark and simple to me. I have lived in London for a long time (though I am not British), and while I know that things are different in rural parts of England and in some post-industrial urban slums up north, what I see in my own streets is a society that is pretty much at ease with racial diversity and (especially in the younger age-groups) happy to party together. More like Toronto than Chicago, if that means anything to you.

We spend a lot of time in France, too. Some of it is in Paris, looking after my wife's almost-bag-lady aunt, who lives in the rougher part of town and is now pretty much alone in the world. She's an unashamed racist — she's in her late seventies, and she lost her husband in the Algerian war — but people of every race in the neighbourhood are very good about looking after her. She tolerates it, and they tolerate her tolerating it. It

doesn't feel like a racist hell.

So how to explain the gulf between these personal observations and those alarmist headlines? Start with this wave of anti-Semitism in France. Even Ariel Sharon conceded that this is not a revival of traditional Christian anti-Semitism. "In France today, about 10 per cent of the population are Muslims," he explained, and "that gets a different kind of anti-Semitism, based on anti-Israeli feelings and propaganda."

Fair enough, though the real figure for France is 6 per cent Muslim — but in that case why is there no similar wave of anti-Semitism in Britain, where at least 3 or 4 per cent of the population is Muslim and the Jewish population is second only to France's in Europe? The answer, obviously, is that most Muslims in France are Arabs, who feel strongly about Israel, while most Muslims in Britain are from non-Arab countries, principally Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Turkey, where the Arab-Israeli dispute is much further down the local agenda.

What has been happening in

France is ugly. In the low-cost, high-rise tracts of housing that ring the big French cities, gangs of poor immigrant kids have begun to harass poor Jewish families that live in the same vicinity. They are not exclusively Arab gangs. They will usually include Turks, East Europeans, West Africans, and Afro-Caribbeans, as well as white French working-class kids whose families have been dumped in the same high-rises. But all these kids have adopted the stone-throwing Palestinian children of the intifada as their model of defiance to 'the power' that marginalizes them. French Jews, redefined as honorary Israelis, then become the targets of their wrath.

Only one French Jew in a thousand has reported a threat or an actual attack this year. President Jacques Chirac has launched a national appeal for racial and religious tolerance in France, and the number of French Jews who will actually leave for Israel this year is estimated to be around 2,500 — less than half of one per cent of the French Jewish community — Copyright