RACISM IN THE UK IN 2020

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Britain is ethnically diverse and yet despite this it is still very much unequal. How often do we hear of Britain’s ‘proud history’? It may be true, but there is a lot of our history that is not cause for celebration, but rather shame, and we need to acknowledge this unpalatable past. To do that, every citizen needs to be aware of that past, including the structural inequalities generated from the colonial past, by educating our children and young people and ourselves about it.

Recent events, notably the Windrush scandal and then the unlawful killing of George Floyd, have put issues of race firmly back on the agenda.

An independent review of the Home Office’s handling of the historic Windrush cases found:

‘institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issue of race and the history of the Windrush generation within the department, which are consistent with some elements of the definition of institutional racism.’


As a result, Windrush Day (22 June) was created as a time to celebrate the substantial and ongoing contribution of the Windrush generation and their descendants, who helped to rebuild the United Kingdom after World War II and have influenced the United Kingdom’s social, cultural and political landscape ever since.

It is also a time to reflect on righting the wrongs of the Windrush scandal and focus on the fight against racism. The Government’s ‘hostile environment’ measures of 2012 which brought the Windrush scandal to the fore remain.

The death of George Floyd escalated the issue of race inequality and oppression across the globe. In the UK, sadly, there was an almost identical incident carried out by police officers in London in July 2020. The Report of the Runnymede Trust in 2015 found:

‘Systemic and institutional racism persists in policing despite its recognition in the Macpherson Report more than fifteen years ago. In Britain, black and minority ethnic people are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system at every level, from arrests to stop and search, to imprisonment, to deaths in custody.

‘Successive governments’ counter-terrorism policies have resulted in racial profiling and over-policing of Muslim and Asian communities, and have fed a pervasive Islamophobia now affecting British and other European societies.’


It is therefore very clear that whilst we have legislation outlawing discrimination on grounds of race or national or ethnic origins, it is also the case that we have legislation that allows abuse of those rights.

Individuals must also become more sophisticated in being able to identify and speak out against racism, as well as taking action in their own professional and personal capacities to address it.

Employers need to have diversity and inclusion at the heart of their activities. We must embrace allyship within the workplace and be prepared to speak up and challenge oppression where we see it.

As a union, Voice has a ‘Commitment to Racial Equality at Work for our staff and members (www.voicetheunion.org.uk/racial-equality) but it is evident that we all need to do more than merely have a statement.
VOICE FOCUS
RACISM & DISCRIMINATION

BRITAIN’S INVOLVEMENT IN SLAVERY MUST BE TAUGHT TO DISPEL IGNORANCE AND DESTROY DISCRIMINATION

While the British natives are ignorant of Britain’s involvement in slavery due to it not being compulsory in the school curriculum, there is also a lack of empathy towards even footballers who have to endure ‘monkey chants.’

Black people have always fought with Britain, and enlisted in the British armed forces from 1744, yet continue to receive negative stereotypical colonial attitudes. Britain’s involvement in the ‘Triangular Trade’ of slavery must be taught to dispel ignorance and destroy discrimination towards black people, which has continued despite the Race Relations Act in 1965.

‘Race’

The term ‘race’, introduced in 1749 by Georges-Louis Leclerc and Comte de Buffon, prolonged the notion of white being right, good and beautiful, and black being the opposite. Enslavers and governments seized upon this lie to justify their social, political and economic oppression of black people.

At the Rose Garden Ceremony in June 2000, President Bill Clinton with two genome sequencers, Francis Collins and Craig Ventor, said that humans have identical genome sequences, at 99.9%. Ventor added that, ‘the concept of ‘race’ has no genetic or scientific basis,’ and Collins stated that ‘those who wish to draw precise racial boundaries around certain groups will not be able to use science as a legitimate justification.’

Geneticists Kelly Owens and Mary-Claire King stated: ‘Of course prejudice does not require a rational basis, let alone an evolutionary one, but the myth of major genetic difference across “races” is nonetheless worth dismissing with genetic evidence.’ Race is a discriminator.

Discrimination has continued down generations, causing young black people to feel frustrated with continually having to prove themselves, and now deportation threats hang over their heads. They have seen how the Windrush descendants, who rebuilt the country, have been discriminated against by governments, because politicians set the atmosphere with their rhetoric.

Black teachers

Black teachers face the stereotypes that have been constructed over the years against them. The ‘BAME’ [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] title imposes on us the notion that my history is the same as every other non-white person, assuming we all have the same pain and history. As the descendant of enslaved people, the term BAME to me is an excuse to avoid dealing with enslavement issues and their consequences.

Further information

Out of Slavery – Learning about the history of British Black Caribbean People (2004):

> www.amseducational.co.uk/product/out-of-slavery
> www.amazon.co.uk/Out-Slavery-Learning-History-Caribbean/dp/0954742001


By Nardia Foster MA, BSc (Hons) Psychology, CPsychol, AFBPsS; life coach, author of Out of Slavery, and Voice Chairman Emeritus

Scientific evidence suggests the original peoples in Britain were black skinned, with dark curly hair and blue eyes, and their DNA lives in at least ten per cent of the population. Cheddar Man’s skeleton is around 10,000 years old and shows he was of Paleolithic African origins. Repeatedly, ancient historians described the colour of the people found in Britain and were ignored. Black people have been in the UK since the beginning, even including a Roman Emperor, Septimius Severus.

Despite this, Britain eagerly became involved in slavery, which lasted from the 1600s to the 1800s.

When slavery ended, the propaganda about black people continued, reinforced by scientists who described black people as ‘uncivilised’, while rewriting their history. Many descendants of the enslaved today feel marginalised and discriminated, resulting in psychological consequences.

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The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in America shocked the world. His death was a brutal one in a catalogue of many deaths of people of colour.

These questions must be answered:

- Why did no one stop his killing in broad daylight?
- Are black lives seen as expendable globally?
- Is this the experience of BAME (Black, Asian, minority ethnic) communities in the UK?

I was born in Pakistan, a decade after the horrific fracture of post-colonial India. My parents and grandparents escaped with their lives. In 1963, my father answered Queen Elizabeth’s request for Commonwealth people to come to the UK to help rebuild it. Having fought in the British Indian Army against the Japanese and been a prisoner of war, he felt British and left full of pride.

However, he wasn’t welcomed warmly. A lawyer and qualified mathematician, he tried to get work in various professions, but apparently his Indian accent wasn’t acceptable. However, he didn’t lose his love for the Queen, whose framed photograph took pride of place in our lounge. After three years of hard work in the mills, he bought a small house.

I arrived in England in 1966, aged 8, with my mother and two brothers. My parents encouraged us to learn English and prepare for the 11+ test. I passed, but had to re-sit, with an examiner in front of me. They couldn’t accept that an immigrant child, who came with no English, had passed after only two years in the country. My headteacher was furious!

If this wasn’t enough humiliation, I was denied my first choice of grammar school, because they didn’t want a ‘coloured girl’. However, the second grammar school enrolled me with open arms. Some of the girls were racists and called me the ‘P-word’ and the ‘W-word’. I used to cry and question my father’s decision to bring us to such a horrible country.

Our parents encouraged me to study hard and be the best, but I was refused a place to read medicine at all five universities I’d applied to. A white girl with lower grades received five offers. Ironically, she dropped out after two weeks!

After graduating, I became a science teacher. I’ve been overlooked for senior leadership roles – feedback from interviews was always very good, however, there was always a ‘but’. Then, a headteacher friend told me in confidence that wearing the hijab (head scarf) was my hurdle to promotion beyond middle leadership. Islamophobia had reared its ugly head in my adulthood.

Conscious and unconscious bias have been my constant companions through school and in my career. I’ve used my experiences to empower others from different cultural heritages and faiths in my lessons.

Time to decolonise

It’s time to decolonise the school curricula to produce ones inclusive of all pupils and their backgrounds. They deserve to learn about the impact of the British Empire and its legacy in the Commonwealth.

We must address the systemic inequalities inherent in this country and recognise that colonial influences persist within society.

A person’s skin colour, faith and language should be celebrated and not used to crush them. We owe this to George Floyd’s memory. May he rest in peace!

BAME

I feel the ‘BAME’ category is useful in monitoring these communities’ experiences, and don’t see it as divisive. In a perfect society, where people were judged on their merits, we could dispense with such categorisations. I hope for a better future for generations to come.

Editor: Let us know your views (pressoffice@voicetheunion.org.uk).