

# The UK race commission report and its racialist opponents: Apologists for capitalist oppression

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5 April 2021

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has produced a politically rotten report on race, commissioned after the protests against the murder of George Floyd last summer.

The report, published by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, attacks those protestors for "alienating the decent centre ground" and describes the UK as a "model for other white-majority countries".

Its authors advocate "a new story about the Caribbean experience which speaks to the slave period not only being about profit and suffering but how culturally African people transformed themselves into a re-modelled African/Britain."

Large sections are dedicated to the hobby horse of the commission's chair, Tony Sewell, arguing that the root of disadvantages suffered by black communities is "broken families" and "father absence".

For Black and Asian workers, Johnson's race report is yet another slap in the face—the latest in a long list of proofs of his government's right-wing, racist character. Some will have been angry while others will have treated it with the cold disdain it deserved. For the official "left" and liberal media and the trade union bureaucracy, however, it was the opportunity for cynical political grandstanding shrouded in mock outrage.

The *Guardian* proclaimed in its editorial, "Mr Johnson and his allies have dishonoured this moment, using it in bad faith to pursue a grudge match against people of all ethnicities who want greater fairness."

Halima Begum, chief executive of the Runnymede Trust, described it as "government-sponsored gaslighting, and a clear repudiation of any intent to achieve genuine racial equality in our country."

In the *Independent*, Amanda Parker, founder of Inc Arts, a campaigning group for increased diversity in the arts sector, complained of government advisers having "abandoned a clear opportunity to make positive anti-racist progress."

Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady stated, "We hoped that the Commission would recommend action to stamp out insecure work and make employers act to close their ethnicity pay gaps. Instead, the Commission has chosen to deny the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic workers".

Lord Simon Woolley, founder of Operation Black Vote and trustee of police charity Police Now, ennobled by Johnson's predecessor Theresa May, took home the Oscar. He wrote in the *Guardian*, "Many will either have screamed with anger or cried with sadness" in response to the report, which should have been the beginning of "a potentially transformative conversation" and "our 1945 moment".

Really? When so many who know better feign shock and outrage that a Tory government led by the likes of Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel has produced a racist report rather than a "transformative" social inquiry, political alarm bells should start ringing.

Nothing the Tory government has done is even remotely shocking. Multiple leading members of the Tory Party, Patel foremost among them, publicly denounced the George Floyd protestors as a "dreadful" bunch of "thugs".

As for outrage, this is a commentariat which has passed through a year of the pandemic and government social murder on an industrial scale with little more than a furrowed brow.

The breast beating over the report expresses the reactionary politics of a liberal milieu which has no interest whatsoever in challenging the capitalist system underpinning all oppression. It is designed to maintain the fiction that the state could carry out substantial reforms if only its representatives were more responsible and moral. The more Johnson tears this myth to pieces with his actions, the more "astounded" newspaper columns must become.

The social interests motivating this reaction were especially upset by the report's declaration that "the roots of advantage and disadvantage for different groups are complex, and often as much to do with social class, 'family' culture and geography as ethnicity." It also refers to the "disadvantage" suffered by swathes of the white population in income, education and health outcomes.

This acknowledgement of social class as a key factor in determining lifelong social disadvantage is beyond mere cynicism on Johnson's part. It was clearly inspired by the lumpen intellectuals of the right-wing libertarian publication, *Spiked*. The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities was put together by former *Spiked* writer Munira Mirza, a close ally of Johnson.

*Spiked* is a product of the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party, which abandoned all pretence of a connection with left-wing politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union and sent its leading members to work in various think-tanks and front-groups such as the Institute of Ideas. They have pioneered a right-wing critique of multiculturalism, championing Brexit, UKIP and the Football Lads Alliance as true expressions of working class feeling, and a laissez-faire, individualist approach to social problems.

Their influence is plain where the report asks, "Racial disadvantage often overlaps with social class disadvantage but how have some groups transcended that disadvantage more swiftly than others?" The reference to social class is used as a trojan horse for explanations of disadvantage rooted in "cultural" differences between different ethnicities.

*Spiked* gleefully commented after the report was published, "At last, the myth of 'institutional racism' is collapsing" and "Where the left sows discord, may this report bring harmony".

Anyone remotely connected to a socialist vision of society and genuinely concerned with a struggle against oppression would naturally point to the hypocrisy of a Tory government raising the issue of social

class. Instead, the various purveyors of identity politics, including the pseudo-left groups, speaking on behalf of layers of the affluent middle class of all ethnicities, are collectively outraged that it is raised at all. Rather than throw the term back in Johnson's face in a struggle for the unity of the working class against capitalism, they have united to insist that the fundamental societal division is race.

Accusing the government of launching a "culture war", setting white workers against ethnic minority workers, the racialist commentators proceed to do the same. The *Independent* complains in its editorial that the report concludes "it is white working-class lives as much as anyone's that are being undervalued and blighted by inequalities."

Labour's shadow women and equalities secretary, Marsha de Cordova, writes with eyebrows raised, "The report appeared to claim that socioeconomic conditions drive inequality more than racism."

The *Guardian* tries to square the circle, writing of how, "The report evinces concern for white working class people, yet people from ethnic minorities can obviously be working class, too—just ask a Bangladeshi kitchen worker or a Somali Uber driver." This neatly avoids specifying whether Uber drivers or kitchen workers face brutal exploitation primarily as workers, or because they are from Somalia and Bangladesh.

Frances O'Grady declares, absolving the corporatist union bureaucracy of blame, that it is "institutional racism" which "traps too many Black and Minority Ethnic workers in poverty, insecurity and low pay."

The *Guardian*'s invocation of a Somali Uber driver and O'Grady's reference to poverty and pay were lame attempts to present criticisms of the race commission as being given in the name of black and ethnic minority workers. But the working class and its social concerns are entirely absent from the endless pages of debate over the race report. The government's critics are articulating the interests of the petty-bourgeoisie who are waging a struggle against "institutional racism" not to end privilege and fight for social equality but as a means of securing a place within the upper echelons of the state, academia, and industry.

This was most nakedly expressed in a comment by the Black Young Professionals Network, cited as a stakeholder in the government's report, to the *Guardian*. Having raised nearly £900,000 in an equity crowdfunding campaign and received backing from Sky and the London Stock Exchange last year, the organisation states that the government's report "implies... that disparities are due to social class and this is categorically untrue."

Numerous similar groups took part in the report's working group on employment and enterprise, led by the British Business Bank, the *Observer* reported sympathetically. They submitted 11 recommendations "emphasising the need for greater access to capital for minority ethnic entrepreneurs, embedded institutional support and mandatory reporting on ethnic pay gaps." Gary Stewart, chief executive of FounderTribes, an "app that democratises entrepreneurship", explains how they "highlighted the impact of institutional racism on entrepreneurship." Michael Eboda, chief executive of Powerful Media, Izzy Obeng, managing director of Foundervine, "set up to encourage new business ventures," joined in expressing their disappointment.

In his article, Woolley of Operation Black Vote recommends making "boardrooms do far more to bring in racially diverse talent" and "polic[ing] with consent for all communities".

In fact, many of the organisations now savaging the report collaborated with it and are simply expressing their dissatisfaction—and covering for a degree of political embarrassment—that their efforts to use the government to advance their own particularist agenda foundered on the rocks of Tory Party racism.

The nation was even asked to sympathise when Samuel Kasumu resigned his £70,000-a-year role as a No10 Special Advisor following the report's publication. Kasumu, a skilled self-publicist, founded Elevation Networks, a social enterprise supposedly helping graduates and "under-

represented groups" to become "more competitive" in the marketplace.

These organisations and individuals represent a tiny, extremely comfortable layer of businesspeople and professionals, whose selfish desires are amplified by large sums of money and dedicated newspaper column inches into the supposedly authentic voice of the black and Asian community. For all their phrase-mongering against injustice, they, and various less openly pro-business, more "community oriented" groups orbiting the Labour Party and the trade unions, all accept the report's premise that "social mobility" is the ultimate good, for which capitalism provides ample opportunity if only racial prejudice did not interfere.

What results is a degrading scramble for position among the upper middle class of each ethnicity, making some fabulously rich, the rest simply very rich, and leaving the working class divided and prevented from mounting a unified offensive against big business. That is why what is studiously avoided in the government's report and all the "critical coverage" of it alike is any questioning of the vast inequalities *within* all ethnic groups.

Nothing progressive can come of this. Nor is it meant to.

The furious debate over the race report is a fight in the privileged middle class over the spoils of capitalist exploitation and not a socialist critique of capitalism. Class society, the fundamental source of all oppression, including racism, is deliberately left untouched.

The pseudo-left groups do not challenge the racialist agenda but accommodate themselves to it and promote racial divisions. The Socialist Workers Party portrays a struggle against "institutional racism" as inherently anti-capitalist and socialist, claiming, "For a growing number of people, institutional racism best explains why it is that patterns of prejudice are repeated throughout capitalist society."

Workers may or may not understand that the racism they face in employment and other areas of life is an expression of the realities of the profit system. But clarifying this essential relationship and making it the basis of political struggle is an essential responsibility of socialists. The SWP has no such aim. It is oriented rather to an array of semi-official petty-bourgeois "social movements" that dominate official political discourse, and which cite "institutional racism" as an argument for black business ventures and the balancing of social privilege and exploitation across identity groups, rather than ending them.

The SWP complains, "Sewell and his collaborators" advance a narrative "that the 'white working class' is specifically disadvantaged as a result of being white," but then focus exclusively on how workplaces "where low pay and insecurity is a feature... are disproportionately filled by ethnic minorities." They state that "the lives of most black and ethnic minority people are blighted from birth by the interaction of race and class," while making no appeal whatsoever to the millions whose lives are "blighted from birth" by capitalism, regardless of their ethnicity.

Workers must reject all attempts to divide them by race or any other "identity" grouping. They face a common struggle against a capitalist system whose brutalities worsen by the day. Less than a year after the mass reaction to the George Floyd events, which prompted the government's report, the police are violently assaulting people of all ethnicities demonstrating against a Police Bill which tears up the right to protest. Globally, workers continue to suffer the consequences of the ruling class's herd immunity response to the pandemic and efforts to make them pay the costs of the economic crisis.

Opposing this assault means taking up the struggle for the unification of all sections of the international working class in the struggle for socialism. The racism experienced and poverty disproportionately suffered by black, migrant and many ethnic minority groups of workers cannot be seriously addressed in any other context.



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