UK Conservative Party attacks “white privilege” theories, capitalises on identity politics

Thomas Scripps
4 July 2021

The Conservative party-led House of Commons Education Committee produced a report on June 22 titled, “The Forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it.”

Its publication is another cynical move by the Tory government to capitalise on the anti-class identity politics of the affluent petty-bourgeoisie, and has been met with a storm of hypocrisy and racialist reaction in these layers.

By “working class”, the report refers exclusively to pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)—the poorest 20.8 percent of pupils in January 2021, up from 17.3 percent a year before.

The education committee noted that in 2018/19 White British children eligible for FSM recorded the poorest scores by Development Goals, Attainment 8 scores, Progress 8 scores, GCSE English and Maths pass rates, and entry to higher education of all ethnicities other than Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma.

Its report criticises the concept of “white privilege”, calling it “divisive” and “alienating to disadvantaged white communities” and arguing that it “may have contributed towards a systemic neglect of white people facing hardship”.

The Tory chair of the committee, Robert Halfon, told *Sky News*, “The concept of white privilege is entirely wrong-headed, because white working-class boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds under-perform compared to most other ethnic groups.”

He added, “Disadvantaged white children feel anything but privileged when it comes to education. Privilege is the very opposite to what disadvantaged white children enjoy or benefit from in an education system which is now leaving far too many behind”.

The report recommends that schools “consider whether the promotion of politically controversial terminology, including White Privilege, is consistent with their duties under the Equality Act 2010,” and calls on the Department for Education to “take steps to ensure that young people are not inadvertently being inducted into political movements”.

This document has been drawn up by a party which has imposed devastating social spending cuts year after year that are overwhelmingly responsible for “leaving far too many behind”. It is a call for antidemocratic state interference in the education system, used to advance the Tories’ right-wing, nativist appeal to the “White British” population.

But opposition to the naked hypocrisy and authoritarian and reactionary intervention of the Tory government does not imply the slightest support for the proponents of “white privilege” theories, whose racialist irrationalism the Tories have refashioned for their own purposes.

The Tory party has no monopoly on hypocrisy. Labour MP Kim Johnson and her fellow Labour members of the education committee opposed the Tories’ report and submitted an alternative document which begins, “While this inquiry began with a focus on disadvantaged White pupils (specifically, those eligible for free school meals, or FSM), the evidence that we have received clearly indicates that this is an issue of class and often regional inequalities, rather than being about ethnicity.”

Prominent Corbynite Diane Abbott wrote in the *Independent*, “The reality of course is that the education system has failed whole cohorts of pupils because of factors including austerity, underfunding, and efforts to homogenise the curriculum, as well as the underpayment and mistreatment of hardworking teachers and staff.”

These are representatives of a Labour Party that has dutifully implemented rafts of Tory cuts in the major urban conurbations where it holds power.

Both Johnson and Abbott accused the government of stoking a “culture war”, as did the *Guardian*. The newspaper editorialised, “MPs ought to be embarrassed by a stunt designed to whip up animosity without addressing real problems of inequality and disadvantage.” It quoted Maurice Mcleod, from thinktank Race on the Agenda, who stated, “Instead of honestly accepting that children from *all* backgrounds have been badly let down by decades of neglect, this report attempts to create unhelpful divides between children based on their race.”

Such protests are the height of political cynicism. It was not the Tory government which introduced a debate on social disadvantage devoid of class and framed entirely in terms of competing ethnicities. That work was done for them by the same forces now lambasting the Tory Party for its failure to recognise the class roots of deprivation and inequality. The right-wing has walked through the door to ethnic politics held wide open by the putative left.

For years, the *Guardian* and sections of the Labour Party have waged a determined campaign to racialise every aspect of political debate and social inquiry, holding “white people” and racism responsible for the class-rooted oppression suffered by ethnic minorities. Only two months ago, Labour’s shadow women and equalities secretary, Marsha de Cordova, responded to the government’s rotten Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report, commissioned after the UK’s George Floyd protests, with the outraged comment, “The report appeared to claim that socioeconomic conditions drive inequality more than racism.”

The global multi-ethnic protests against police brutality sparked by Floyd’s murder were given the same treatment. The *Guardian* published, “White America has an ingrained fear of blackness”; the *Independent*, “White people, the responsibility of ending racist systems rests on your shoulders”.

Even the pandemic, the sharpest demonstration of the common suffering of the international working class under capitalism, has been routinely described as proof of the fundamental societal division of race. The significance of COVID-19, the *Guardian* ’s contributors have written, is its “ultimate demonstration of the real-world impact of racism”

© World Socialist Web Site

and exposure of "how riddled Britain is with racial inequality". A report commissioned by the Labour Party, partners in enforcing a policy of social murder with the Tory party, described coronavirus as having "exposed the devastating impact of structural racism".

It has taken a transparent political manoeuvre by the Tory party, which poses point-blank the disadvantage suffered by the poorest white children, to force these people, who pass broadly for the "left" in British politics, into acknowledging basic class realities. But this is no road to Damascus moment. Labour and the *Guardian* 's invocation of class is raised only to dismiss the education report then quickly discarded as they return to their own racialist agenda.

The *Guardian* rushes to turn the ethnic appeal by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government on its head, criticising the government for basing its conclusions on FSM pupils alone and claiming, "Official statistics show that for the 88% of pupils not in receipt of free meals, white British children are ahead, in GCSE English and maths, of their black Caribbean, Pakistani and Gypsy/Roma heritage counterparts."

These are carefully chosen figures. Just under half (49.1 percent) of White children get grade 5 or above in GCSE English and Maths—higher than the groups cited by the *Guardian* but lower than Black African (50.7 percent) children and all Asian groups (58.3 percent) except Pakistani.

It is striking that once the focus shifts from the very poorest sections of society, there is barely a social statistic to cite on education that is not based on ethnicity, despite the *Guardian* itself acknowledging that "a majority (60%) of people identify as working class".

In an earlier period, even bourgeois sociologists would speak broadly in terms of class privilege and advantage. Academic reports and government statistics would break down results according to the categories, A (upper middle class), B (middle, middle class), C1 (lower middle class), C2 (skilled working class), D (working class) and E (not working), based on the occupation of the head of household.

These classifications were informed by a sociological narrative aimed at combating the influence of Marxism and the definition of class based on ownership and control of the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and the necessity to work for this capitalist class, the proletariat. Today what is called for from the petty-bourgeois ideologists is not the distortion of a class analysis but its complete obliteration in order to better conceal and suppress the class struggle.

What social research is done in this field proves that ethnic differences are cut across and dwarfed by the influence of class. A study by academics at the London School of Economics reported last August that whereas the average child of parents in "higher professional occupations" gained eight GCSEs, the children of parents in "routine occupations" gained half as many, just four.

It is the same story with Labour's alternative education committee report. After referring to the importance of class in its first paragraph, the authors are compelled to state: "For every £1 of White British wealth, Pakistani households have around 50p, Black Caribbean have 20p and Black African and Bangladeshi have 10p."

What useful meaning can these cited ethnic terms possibly have? "White British wealth" is an aggregate of FSM children and billionaires like Sir James Dyson. "Pakistani households" include Pakistani-British billionaire Sir Anwar Pervez. Bangladeshi households include some of the poorest communities in the country and Bangladeshi-British multi-hundred millionaire Iqbal Ahmed OBE.

The averages show that the richest sliver of the white population holds larger fortunes than the richest sliver of the ethnic minority population. At most they indicate that a higher proportion of ethnic minorities are working class and poor. What the figures obscure is that they share this status with *the vast majority* of the white population. This multi-ethnic class has the shared social interest of overthrowing the whole system of capitalist inequality and exploitation and must be politically united in pursuit of that end. Dividing workers along racial lines serves to undermine that struggle and to promote the interests of a small, affluent layer of ethnic minorities who use the plight of their "racial group" as leverage for personal advancement and securing a larger slice of the wealth in the richest 10 percent of society.

This is the purpose of the "white privilege" racket, which claims that white people in general are conferred social advantages over, and are complicit in the oppression of, non-white people in general, for which whites must atone—usually by financially supporting the BAME bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie.

In the words of Kelsey Smoot, writing in the *Guardian* last June, white people share "culpability in White supremacy", leading her to question, "Would they *truly* want to wake up tomorrow, in an America in which *my life mattered just as much as theirs*, if it came at the cost of all they have come to know and enjoy in the vein of White privilege?"

The answer to their complicity and guilt is "a willingness to *lose things.* Not just the extra $50 in one's monthly budget by way of donating to an organization working towards racial justice. I mean *palpable, incalculable loss.* The loss of the charmed life associated with being a White person in America. Refusing a pay raise at one's job and *insisting* that it be reallocated to co-workers of color who are undoubtedly being underpaid."

The BBC gave a more shamefaced definition of "white privilege" in the aftermath of the education committee report, provided by American rapper JT Flowers, "You might be a white person and still be poor with a lack of access to education or face a language barrier in the workplace. It doesn't mean you can't be disadvantaged in other ways. It just means with respect to that one particular thing—your race and skin colour—you do have the luxury of not being able to think about it."

In this account, all that is left of the concept is the facile analysis that white British people are not the subject of racism, from which is hung the filthy lie that racism flows collectively from "white people" and underlies all hardship suffered by non-whites.

There is nothing left-wing or progressive in these theories. An especially pernicious role is therefore played by the pseudo-left who attempt to give racialist politics a socialist gloss.

Writing on the education committee report, the Socialist Workers Party repeats the line of the *Guardian* et al with the headline, "Anti-racism isn't to blame for Tory education failures". The article maintains the pretence of a class perspective, while continuing to hold out an olive branch to the proponents of white privilege, employing the weasel formulation, "Theories of 'white privilege' are right to point to racism in society. But they don't identify the system that produces it." In fact, these theories identify racism as a universal and inherent divide in the working class and actively oppose any attempt at a class analysis.

The danger of the Johnson government's increasingly strident appeal to "whites" is not that it challenges the identity politics which has been allowed to define the "left" for decades, but that this left, together with the entire Labour Party and the trade unions, has done all it can to undermine class consciousness, sow divisions in the working class and thereby prevent a unified struggle against capitalism. The construction of a mass socialist movement of the working class against all inequality and oppression depends on a root-and-branch rejection of racialism and its ideological siblings.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site