

Common Sense on Racism

by Michael Curtis



The issue of racism is on the front burner at a moment when the murder trial of the policeman in Minneapolis for the death of George Floyd has aroused strong emotion and when Britain is still digesting the allegation of Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, about the existence of racism in the British Royal Family. It is fortuitous that a document has now been published in Britain that provides an opportunity for a serious accurate

examination of the nature and extent of racism and discrimination in the country.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities was created by Prime Minister Boris Johnson after the BLM protests in Britain triggered by the death of George Floyd during summer 2020. It published a 264 page report on March 31, 2021. The report of the Commission with ten members, nine of whom are non-white, and chaired by Tony Sewell, born in London of Jamaican parents, well known educational consultant, acknowledges the Commission was established as a response to the BLM movement and the concern about race issues it inspired.

The Report covering health, education, criminal justice and employment issues is a strong, if controversial, rebuke to those propounding theories about race that insist on accentuating differences and take an increasingly strident form of anti-racism that explains all minority disadvantage through the prism of white discrimination. It is unwise, it says, to cleave to fatalistic accounts that insists nothing has changed.

To do so ignores two factors. One is that it diverts attention from other factors that relate to the success or failure of minority groups. Family influence, socio-economic background, culture, religion, and geography, have a more significant impact on opportunities for those groups than racism.

The other is that it ignores the reality that the old class divisions are declining in importance, that identity politics is increasing, and that ethnic minorities have been making progress up the professional and occupational class ladder. It is not helpful if minorities adopt a fatalistic narrative that the deck is always stacked against them.

The crucial finding stated in the foreword of the Report is that "we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities." Impediments

and disparities do exist, and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, but very few are directly related to racism. The Commission held that the existence of racism in Britain must be taken seriously, and it is a real force in the country. The commissioners have an open-minded and balanced view. While Britain is not a post racial society, and overt and outright racism and discrimination persists, ethnic minorities have had success, especially in education and in the economy. While there are disparities in senior positions in the public and private sectors, the picture is improving and there are increasing levels of diversity in elite professions such as law and medicine.

The success of minorities in education has transformed British society over the last 50 years. Indeed, offering greater opportunities for education at all levels is the single most important success story. However, the outcome is mixed. Some ethnic groups have outperformed the national average, though others experience a lower than average educational outcome. Chinese and Indian ethnic groups outperform the white British group by wide margins, probably related to socio-economic status. Black African minority pupils performed above the white British average. A higher percentage of ethnic minority young people attend university compared with white British youngsters, though the latter have the best outcomes at top universities. One qualification is that the black Caribbean group was the only ethnic group who performed lower than white British pupils. The Report indicates that in this regard family is the foundation stone for many ethnic minorities. About 68% of those with black Caribbean backgrounds grew up in one parent families compared with the UK average of 14%, and a much lower average in south Asian and Chinese families.

There are economic differences between groups. Before COVID-19 the rates of employment in 2019 were 77% for whites and 76%

for Indian ethnic groups but 69% for black people, though unemployment differences, except among young people, have been declining. The pay gap between ethnic minorities and the white majority population has decreased to 2.3%, and among younger people there was no significant pay gap for any ethnic minority group compared with the white majority. The white Irish, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups are on average earning more than the white British ethnic group. However, the Report suggests that the pandemic will have an important impact on the economy, reordering employment and possibly leading to a return of sustained high levels of unemployment.

The Commission is conscious the extreme form of anti-racism thinking seeks to explain all minority disadvantage as the result of white discrimination, but it rejects this and finds that factors such as social class and family structure often explain differences in outcomes for ethnic groups rather than racial discrimination. The Commission warns that the term "institutional racism" is used too often to explain different outcomes for groups, without supporting data. Most of the disparities examined, which are attributed to racial discrimination, do not have an origin in racism. The Report cautions that if the term "institutional racism" is used too casually to explain differences, it prevents consideration of other factors that can and do account for those differences. There should be objective definitions of this term and others like "systemic racism."

In recent years the acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) has been increasingly used in the wake of BLM protests. Yet not all consider the term helpful. Ethnic minorities are not a monolith, and the term ignores individuality or distinction. The Report recognizes this. It suggests discarding the term because it masks differences among ethnic groups. Technically, the term does not include people from white minority and mixed ethnic backgrounds. More important, it fails to differentiate between the

experiences of the numerous ethnic groups.

Britain has become a more open society where children from various ethnic communities do at least as well or better than white pupils in compulsory education, and where there has been increasing diversity in elite professions and economically, reduction in ethnicity payment gap.

The challenging thrust of the Report is that Britain is not or no longer a system deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities. Impediments exist, they are varied, but most of them are not directly the result of racism. Too often racism is overused as an explanation. Factors such as geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture, and religion may have more significant impact than racism. Different experiences of family life and structure can explain many disparities in education outcomes and in society.

The purpose of the Report is to help provide a map for racial fairness in order to overcome the real existing obstacles. This becomes more difficult if people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and political advocates, assert that the deck is always stacked against them.

Why do some minority groups do better than others? One factor is what the Report calls "immigrant optimism." Certainly, education is crucial. Black African, Indian, and Bangladeshi students perform better than white British ones., taking in account socio-economic status. Ethnic minority students are more likely to aspire to higher education than white students. A major reason for the concern of minority groups with education is that it is viewed as a way out of poverty.

A number of factors are relevant. In general, it is the second generation of minorities that has been making rapid progress, and caught up with whites. Until COVID-19 struck, the vast majority of young people were in permanent employment, although those from minority groups were more likely to be

unemployed and on contracts. Also, location matters: about 40 % of the ethnic minority population live in London, as does only 9% of the white population. The largest disadvantaged group is low income white boys, especially those from former industrial and coastal towns, and they are least likely to go to a university,

The Report is critical of social media and the spread of mobile phones that amplify critical views on racism. The dominant narrative tends to point to abuses rather than progress in society. One example is that institutional racism is supposedly the cause of mental illness. However, more likely factors are family breakdown, substance abuse, living in undesirable areas, and poverty. It also rejects the assertion that minorities have died disproportionately due to the pandemic due to racism.

The commission, whose purpose is to provide a road map for racial fairness, made a number of recommendations for improvement such as improving the training of police in stop and search operations, investigating ethnic pay disparities, and telling school children the story of contributions of groups to American life. Yet more important is the challenge to those who proclaim that nothing has changed for the better and that the dominant feature of our society is institutional racism and white privilege. That assertion will achieve anything beyond alienating the unprejudiced people in the center ground.