

EQUALITY ACTION
PRESS RELEASE IN RESPONSE TO THE SEWELL REPORT

We are extremely disappointed with the Sewell report on institutional racism.

The Sewell report says that Britain is no longer a country where the system is 'deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities' and that very few inequalities are directly to do with race. It claims that the influence of families, socio-economic background, culture, and religion have a more significant impact on life chances than the existence of racism. The report asserts that the term 'institutional racism' is used in confusing ways and denies that it persists in the UK. The report individualises both the experience of racism and the responsibility for overcoming it, indicating that members of BAME communities must themselves work to surmount inequality and discrimination.

We find key aspects of the report particularly problematic:

- The report focuses almost exclusively on educational attainment while ignoring experiences of exclusion and incidents of racism in schools, and lack of diversity in the educational professions in which 90% of teachers and 97% of head teachers are white (Kalwant Bhopal 'White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society'). In focusing on educational attainment, the report has neglected to consider the relationship between education and employment opportunity. As Matthew Ryder QC noted in his BBC interview, research from Aberdeen University has identified what they have called a 'white working class paradox' where young white men who have fewer educational qualifications still have better employment prospects than their black peers.
- We directly challenge the claim in the report that 'Society has 'defined racism down' to encompass attitudes and behaviours that would not have been considered racist in the past. This is one reason for the rising sensitivity, the language of microaggressions and safety, and stretching the meaning of racism without objective data to support it' (p.45). This claim minimises lived experiences of racism and disconnects these experiences from social and institutional structures in and around which it is enacted. As a result, the report denies the persistence of institutional racism in the UK and confines racism to the realm of interpersonal experience, which crucially places issues of racism beyond the purview of government policy.
- The report disregards race as a persistent structure through which power and inequality is performed and instead, frames concern about the persistent experience of racial discrimination as 'pessimistic narratives' which have 'been reinforced by a rise of identity politics' and amplified by 'well organised single-issue identity lobby groups' (p.48). Thus experiences of racism become a matter of 'perception' by BAME individuals and communities (p32). This is symptomatic of the report's unwillingness to acknowledge racism as experienced by BAME communities and to position the issue of race in the UK as a problem of perception rather than of reality.
- On the basis of scant evidence, the report reduces increases in hate crime, specifically following Brexit, to improvements in reporting and recording by the police, claiming that 'police-recorded hate crime figures are rising because of improved police recording processes, and a greater awareness of what constitutes a hate crime' (p. 29-30). This assertion implies that the UK should see rising hate-crime figures as a cause for celebration, rather than as evidence of the disturbing prevalence of racialised violence.
- There are just two references to the Windrush scandal: it is mentioned in the foreword along with Grenfell, as an instance 'where ethnic minority communities have rightly felt let down' but implies that would not count because it was not intended 'or deliberately targeted'. However, an independent investigation into the causes of Windrush found 'institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness' on race issues, with officials apparently

believing that racism is 'confined to decisions made with racist motivations, a misunderstanding of both the law and racism generally' (Wendy Williams). Windrush is mentioned in passing in the conclusion as an exceptional example of things going wrong. The failure to complete the reparations and the connections to the hostile environment policy are ignored.

- The report denies that health inequalities affecting the BAME community, particularly in relation to Covid-19, can be attributed to issues of race (p.31) and instead locates them as issues of class and socio-economic status. In doing so, report fails to recognise the intersectional relationship between race and class, and ignores the wealth of evidence on poorer health outcomes for BAME communities across a wide range of health issues (see for example evidence cited by the NHS on BAME women's health outcomes in maternity settings <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mat-transformation/achieving-equitable-maternity-outcomes/>). The failure to recognise the link between race and health inequalities is all the more insulting as the overwhelming majority (95%) of doctors/consultants that died from covid were of ethnic minority backgrounds, despite making up 40% of the NHS medical workforce (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56500589>).

We are deeply saddened by the reports failure to grapple with the realities of racism in the UK but are not surprised by it. The Commission that produced the report was chaired by Dr Sewell, an education consultant, and Munira Mirza, Director of No 10's Policy Unit had a role in setting it up. Both had previously denied the existence of institutional racism in the UK. This undermines the claim that this was an independent commission making a genuine effort to understand racism. We note that No 10's race adviser, Samuel Kasumu, has resigned.

As an organisation Equality Action remains committed to campaigning against racism and discrimination and all its forms and will continue to deliver much-needed services to black and ethnic minority communities in Charnwood and beyond. We will, contrary to the recommendations of the report, continue to use the term BAME in order to recognise the ongoing discrimination faced by, and solidarity between, people across the spectrum of black and ethnic minority communities.