

The elephant in the room

IT'S REMARKABLE how the words 'institutional racism' can strike such catatonic terror into the heart of government.

Yet, every time they're uttered ministers run for cover, making way for industrial cleaners to sweep them under Labour's burgeoning, blood-stained carpet.

Two weeks ago Labour MP John Smith, a member of the defence select committee, accused the armed forces of institutional racism. Not something the mainstream media considered worthy of coverage, as gauged by the lack thereof.

He believes the recruitment process discriminates against black and ethnic minority (BME) candidates, despite a significant drop in applicants overall.

Under Secretary of Defence, Derek Twigg, rejected the accusation of institutional racism and refused to acknowledge that there was a case to answer.

QUOTA SYSTEM

Yet, only last week it was alleged that the army plans a quota system to exclude Commonwealth soldiers, predominately black, from entering the army.

The justification for this is to maintain "Britishness", an increasingly legitimate



OPINION

By Tess Finch-Lees

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euphemism for "whiteness".

If this quota was designed to increase the participation of black soldiers there would be public outrage and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) would be quick to reassure the white community by condemning such a move as illegal.

Bizarrely, the jury's still out at the CRE as to whether quotas to exclude Commonwealth soldiers would be similarly illegal and unacceptable.

Once again the CRE proves about as useful as a lawn mower in Venice.

The very fact that senior officers think it's acceptable to have this discussion is indicative of an endemic racist ideology.

As was the ease with which General Patrick Cordingley used the expression "n****r in the woodpile" on Radio 4's Today Programme, oblivious to the offensiveness of his language.

Recent comments by Tory MP David Mercer, accepting the ubiquity of racism as a

normal aspect of army life, provided further evidence of an army stuck in a colonial time warp.

Politicians dismiss the notion of institutional racism because to acknowledge it would require dealing with some uncomfortable questions, such as: why despite just under 10 per cent of the population being from a BME background, there is only a 4.9 per cent representation in the armed forces; why Commonwealth soldiers, prepared to die for this country, are expected to pay £300 to take a citizenship test in order to prove their Britishness; and finally, why the army would rather have a significant shortfall of soldiers than recruit more Commonwealth personnel?

DIVERSITY

All roads lead to the central issue: lack of diversity at leadership level.

Leaders bring with them an ideology that spreads like a virus throughout the organi-



sation. They dictate what's important enough to prioritise and what isn't.

Meeting minimum standards of the Race Relations Act, such as, monitoring and promoting racial equality apparently ranks pretty low in the army. This in turn sends a clear message down the line about the leadership's com-

mitment to race. There will always be those who take this as tacit approval for covert racism. Others will know they're fighting a losing battle and just leave.

Institutional racism is about the distribution of power. The Commonwealth soldiers attracted negligible media coverage when they

announced their bid to form a union a few weeks ago.

In response, David Mercer accused "many" black soldiers of being "idle" and "useless". The racism they endure is not a story, it seems, but the opinion of a Tory MP is.

What perturbs me is how readily commentators accepted the double standards implicit in Mercer's argument.

Is he suggesting idleness and uselessness should be criteria on which to exclude everyone from forming a union, or just those of a darker hue?

RACISM

Promoting a couple of black soldiers hardly exonerates Mr Mercer from the charge of racism.

They pose little threat, whereas the proposed union, with collective power (to protest against discriminatory quotas, for example), constitutes a direct challenge to the status quo and those who enjoy its privileges.

Experts constantly urge political leaders to recognise and address the 'festering abscess' of institutional racism. Each time their recommendations are ignored and buried in an abyss of apathy and abject denial. Yet, if any discernible progress is to be made we must first recognise it exists.

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The Conservatives are a-changing

OVER the Easter break, between eating a little too much chocolate I have been thinking about how David Cameron has been changing the Conservative party. In particular, our emphasis on how we are trying to be more open and welcoming particularly to women and to people who count themselves as from a minority background. And I have been pondering whether it has worked.

We first introduced the so-called "Priority" list of parliamentary candidates to a great deal of scepticism and criticism, particularly within the party.

LOCAL CANDIDATES

A few months ago we amended this to make room for more local candidates, although provided the final line up for choice included 50 per cent women. This time the criticism came from many who had supported us over the "A" list, including Operation Black Vote (OBV).



OPINION

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We have been very grateful for the help and assistance from OBV and indeed the many other organisations, such as Women2Win, who have helped us broaden the range of our candidates and our structures. This is all part of the effort to meet David Cameron's aim of a Conservative party that looks like and feels like the nation it seeks to represent.

One of the practical examples of this work has been the way in which OBV has worked with us on creating an assisted scheme for interns with a regional or minority background to work in our

headquarters in Westminster and gain some experience at the heart of politics.

This will be starting this summer and details should soon go up on our web site (conservatives.com).

What I am really pleased about is that we are now seeing real progress in the selection of candidates in what we regard as winnable parliamentary seats - now 33% women and 6% from a minority background.

With last week's selection of local youth worker Shaun Bailey in Hammersmith following on Wilfred Emmanuel Jones' selection in



black British candidate in what most people would consider a traditional Conservative area. This also starts to answer the question put to us at the start of this year - 'Will the Conservatives ever have a black representative in the GLA?'

PROGRESS

We are now really making progress and progress that I hope avoids the pitfalls of the Labour party's past efforts in this area - that is female candidates who were written off as 'Blair's babes' and minority background candidates who could only stand for areas with significant ethnic minorities.

David Cameron's Conservative party is showing it has learnt from the past and is prepared to welcome everyone who shares our principles and hopes for this great country which we can all call our own. So yes, I think the changing of the Conservative party is working.

Chippenham and Mark Clarke's selection in Tooting, we now have three black British candidates who will be MPs under a prime minister David Cameron.

At the same time the selection of James Cleverly to stand for the Bexley and Bromley seat in the Greater London Assembly elections again adds another strong

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