



The Whitewashing of Empire and Britain's Radical Historical Amnesia

By Pieter van der Houwen



It was only when I settled in the United Kingdom that I realised how very different it was to the Netherlands. The genuine fabric of British society had eluded me during the occasional holiday. Both countries qualify as European yet the UK seemed to mirror the United States, its raw and undiluted capitalism, a privatised public transport system condemned to a rundown infrastructure, all the result of a neoliberal philosophy that considers government investment in the public domain a taboo. A harsh binary political environment, bolstered by a biased right-wing media, this all seemed to echo America, far removed from the cushioned social democracy I had left behind, where the political machine is lubricated with coalitions and compromise.

However, overtime I became aware of one distinguishing disparity; the UK was so much more diverse than the Netherlands. An introduction to the illustrious National Health Service (NHS) confirmed this beyond doubt. My medical predicament introduced me to an Iranian surgeon, a Chinese lung specialist, a Pakistani cardiologist and a Kenyan head matron who commanded an army of nurses made up of Ugandans, Malawians, Zimbabweans, Bangladeshi, Indians, Filipinos and countless other nationalities. My bank manager was Nigerian, television paraded an endless stream of people of colour clearly all experts in their fields deliberating everything from cancer research to space travel. This was a far cry from the Netherlands where authoritative voices were predominantly white and where people of colour were only invited on television to discuss music,

sport, or problems within ethnic communities.

The United Kingdom might be able to lay claim to diversity; it is nevertheless a country deeply scarred by racism. I could not escape daily headlines highlighting racist incidents, from the despicable aftermath of the [Stephen Lawrence murder](#), the [Windrush scandal](#) incited by Theresa May's demand for a "hostile environment", the blatant disregard for the [Grenfell tower victims](#), of which the majority of fatalities were from minority backgrounds. And finally Brexit, fuelled by vitriolic xenophobia, convinced me that the United Kingdom is a country steeped in racism.

So how can a country burdened by racism boast diversity? Social democracies like the Netherlands might seem more compassionate, but they are not necessarily inclusive. The prevailing sentiment is that the indigenous population finances the utopian welfare state, thus the demand that the non-native contribute before receiving any benefits, making the service inaccessible to outsiders. The chaotic and deregulated Anglo-Saxon economic system generates a different dynamic, providing a degree of economic mobility to the "outsider" one that gives precedence to the individual at the expense of the collective. Far removed from altruism but more in step with an economic meritocracy.

The United Kingdom cherishes a close cultural proximity to the United States, a shared Anglo-Saxon lineage, once described by George Bernard Shaw as two countries divided by a common language. Labelled by politicians as the "Special Relationship" this alliance provides the UK with a sense of global relevance designed to compensate for the loss of their once expansive empire.

The relationship is by no means reciprocated, for the USA the UK is of no immediate relevance and is regarded with a sense of nostalgia. Some Americans see the fate of the UK as a prelude to their own future, the manifest destiny of a former superpower long past its sell-by-date, desperately struggling with its place in the world. In the wake of Brexit you might think that only the Tories nurture this love affair, but it is ingrained in the British political psyche. Tony Blair's enthusiasm for the Iraq War led by George W Bush reveals the deceitful lengths to which the UK would go to sustain the "special relationship", recalibrating its moral compass for the sole purpose of a prominent place on the global stage.

Brexit has intensified the "special relationship". Johnson proclaims that a free trade deal with the United States would not only be the reward of leaving the EU but would also be more fitting, arguing that both countries with their intertwined cultures are natural allies. In Brexit Britain, Europeans are deemed foreign. For Johnson the natural affiliation is with "our transatlantic cousins."

The protests following the murder of George Floyd on the 25th of May 2020 in Minneapolis traversed the Atlantic effortlessly, finding fertile ground in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle upon Tyne. The Black Lives Matter protests forced the United Kingdom to reflect on its own race relations, confronting the UK with its own colonial past, founded on racist principles. The Statue of slave owner Edward Colston was dethroned and thrown into Bristol harbour. Boris Johnson's idol Winston Churchill, who looms high over Parliament Square, received heightened police protection during the protests.

Johnson immediately distanced himself from the United States; promptly occupying the moral high ground. His government branded BLM a [foreign political movement](#) and labeled institutional racism a uniquely American phenomenon, oblivious to the fact that America's racism is rooted in the European colonial experience.

When London's police force suspended an officer after video footage emerged of him kneeling on the

neck of a detained black man who cried out, "Get off my neck!", Boris Johnson could feel the moral high ground slip beneath his feet and commissioned an official inquiry into institutional racism within the United Kingdom. The result was the now infamous *Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities*, published on the 25th of March 2021.

The immediate response to the report was overwhelming, twelve contributors withdrew their involvement, claiming that their input had been misconstrued to bolster a government narrative claiming that there is no evidence at all of institutional racism in the UK. In addition, the bold conclusion to the report actually implied that the UK was a gleaming illustration of inclusiveness, a shining example for all white majority countries.

The report's cover page is a testimony to its failings, made up of a collage of fourteen images of happy white people interacting with smiling people of colour. This iconography has deep roots in European colonial history and was later adopted by the aid industry; it is intended to depict racial harmony, however research has established that viewers experience these images as white authority versus black gratitude, which was the intention of both colonialists and the aid industry.

The government's *Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities* is littered with crude attack lines articulated by a patronising tone of intergenerational arrogance, a casual denunciation of the politics and passions of the young. With infinite condescension the authors dismiss the belief in institutional racism in the UK as a figment of the imagination of the youth; 'the idealism of the "well-intentioned"'. The authors and the government whose agenda they so faithfully serve are determined to favour comforting national myths over hard historical truths.

It is obvious that the report was devised as a political tool rather than an exhaustive investigation into the impact of racism in the UK. Within a week two hundred and fifty experts on race, education, health and economics had voiced their objections to the report, joining the ever-growing criticism of the commission for brazenly misrepresenting evidence of racism. The ultimate humiliation for the UK government was the denunciation of the report by the United Nations.

The most shocking assumption can be found in the foreword written by Tony Sewell, the commission chairman. Sewell wrote: "*There is 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 remodelled African / Britain*". Astonishingly the authors adopt an argument that was used by the slave owners themselves in defence of slavery 200 years ago: the belief being that by becoming culturally British, black people were now beneficiaries of the system, conveniently circumventing the reality that the subjugation of millions of Africans was a crime against humanity. Tony Sewell's appointment as commissioner was a calculated move by the UK government, his renouncement of institutional racism was well established and the fact that he was of Afro Caribbean descent lent him credence.

The fiercest criticism came from the theologian Robert Beckford, professor of black theology at The Queens Foundation. Beckford stated that the report was consistent with the radical historical amnesia and vicious revisionism of Caribbean and African history by the British far right - "the report had reduced slavery's racial terror and Britain's racial capitalism to a simple exchange of cultural ideas".

The report concludes that Britain is no longer a place where "the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities", despite the continuing Windrush (HL) scandal providing one of the clearest cases in recent history where government decisions caused catastrophic, racially discriminatory outcomes. This perverse conclusion proves that the report is a political instrument and not a reflective exercise. The report is not addressed to communities who experience racism; it

was designed to send a message to those who believe that the fight against racism is the zero-sum battle for resources and recognition, which were once the sole domain of white people.

The *Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities* is the culmination of a long campaign to debase antiracism. It is part of a broad strategy to blame those who oppose racism for the very social divisions that they are identifying. This obscene point of view argues that those people who experience, study and challenge racism keep it alive and not those responsible for maintaining and reproducing it.

The report's interpretation of racism is static, frozen in the past. The reader can only conclude that if racism today does not precisely mirror the experiences of the report's middle-aged authors, it simply is not racism. The authors' understanding of racism is narrowly based on economic achievement. So, because some members of ethnic minorities experience success in terms of income or educational attainment, then racism's persistence for some groups including migrants and asylum seekers (not once mentioned in the report) can be effectively ignored. The narrative of the report is that it is up to the individual to succeed, a genuine example of blaming the victim.

The government celebrated the outcome, which was embraced by its right-wing allies in the media, amongst them the toxic Rod Liddle writing in *The Sun*. It reads as follows:

"SO, it's official. The most important report into racial inequality in the UK for decades has concluded that there is NO PROOF for structural or institutional racism in our country.

Instead, Britain stands as a beacon of integration and fairness. Who compiled the report and wrote up its findings? Boris Johnson? Nope, the brilliant black educationalist Tony Sewell. And how has the Left and the race relations industry responded. They're spitting blood. Absolutely furious.

Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party and as white as the driven snow, says he is "very disappointed" with the report. He'd have preferred it to have said that Britain is a hive of racist white supremacists, I suppose. All the charities, quangos and campaigning groups, which depend upon their living for suggesting that the UK is a horrible racist place to live have screamed blue murder. Of course they have. They depend for their existence on wallowing in a sense of victimhood. In deepening divisions between black and white. The funding they get depends upon it.

Rod Liddle writing in *The Times*.

Tony Sewell smokes out the real racists. A particular nasty form of racism not dealt with in the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities is one that its chief author, the excellent Tony Sewell, is discovering right now. To be black in Britain you must subscribe to a long list of opinions, principally to do with victimhood, or you will not be considered black at all, never mind if those opinions do not fit the facts.

The report fails on all possible fronts, however as a political instrument it is a masterful Machiavellian deflection. As (black) academics wrangle amongst themselves the Tory government could once again confidently reclaim the moral high ground and continue its culture war.

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Editors note: Full Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities [here](#).

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