

## Stand in my shoes: race and culture in Parliament

### A ParliREACH report

#### Introduction

1. ParliREACH is the workplace equality network for race, ethnicity and cultural heritage. We are a staff network, run by staff for staff and have a membership of approximately 350 across both Houses, which includes Members and Members' staff. This report is the outcome of focus groups which ParliREACH organised in the aftermath of a survey of our members and the Cox report to explore the views of staff across the organisation about race, ethnicity and cultural background at work.
2. The findings confirmed our view that there is insufficient focus on and actions to challenge racial bias (both conscious or unconscious), and that many BAME staff expend effort each day to defend their right to work in Parliament and to progress through the organisation.
3. This report has been sent to the management boards of each House.

#### Background to the report

4. In 2018 the ParliREACH Committee decided to survey the network's members to help guide our work and ensure the Committee was meeting the needs and expectations of its membership. The survey was open to all our members. The responses were striking in two respects. They showed that:
  - only 54 percent of respondents felt that they were confident (to some extent) to raise issues of concern in relation to race and ethnicity in the workplace, and
  - only 56 percent of respondents stated that they felt comfortable being themselves in the workplace.
5. After our survey, the House of Commons 2018 staff survey results showed that black staff were the least likely to agree that the House service provides an inclusive working environment. Just 48 percent of Black or Black British respondents, the lowest percentage of all the ethnicities, felt the House of Commons was an inclusive workplace.
6. The House of Lords conducted a staff survey towards the end of 2018 and we are awaiting the diversity figures from that survey.

#### What we did

7. In response to these findings, the Committee decided to explore in more detail why so many of our members and Black and Black British staff members felt this way through a series of focus groups on race at work. In November and December 2018, we ran seven focus groups for staff to discuss their experiences of race while working in

Parliament. The sessions were facilitated by an independent external facilitator, Cherron Inko-Tariah.

8. The sessions were open to all staff of both Houses, PDS and Members' staff. Each group had a mixture of staff from different grades and different teams in it. The exception to this was the session which we organised specifically to get attendance from cleaning staff. We organised the sessions over three days, and ensured we held them at different times and in different parts of the estate.
9. Because of the nature of the sessions, it is not possible to distinguish whether comments were specifically about working for the Commons, Lords or PDS, or from Members' staff. However, many of the points raised were consistent between the sessions. We would, therefore, suggest working on the assumption that the way BAME colleagues feel at work as described below is not unique to particular parts of Parliament. We consider that the summary below indicates how many BAME colleagues across the parliamentary community feel.

## Findings

### *Lack of diversity*

10. In all the sessions, colleagues commented on the lack of diversity in Parliament. There were frequent comments such as, "I am often the only BAME person at a meeting" and people spoke about how visible that lack of diversity was to them. It was also noted that there was more diversity of staff at the lower grades but the further up the administrations you looked, the fewer BAME staff there were. This demonstrated that Parliament was not inclusive at all levels.
11. The response of some colleagues to the lack of diversity was to feel under pressure to take the lead in promoting diversity and in challenging discrimination. This emphasised their difference from white staff, who they felt were under no such pressure. While some colleagues were comfortable to taking a proactive and empowered approach believing it was their "responsibility to change peoples' perceptions", others were less comfortable with this role and spoke about worrying that they would be seen as "calling the race card" and feared recriminations. As a result, they felt they had to be cautious to "pick their battles carefully".
12. Some staff responded to the visible lack of diversity by feeling a need to conform and change their personas at work to minimise aspects of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. In one group colleagues spoke about this as a "need to be invisible" resulting in a "death to self" while at work.

### *Discrimination at work*

13. During the sessions people gave examples of times when they felt that the lack of diversity and understanding of race had resulted in racist (inadvertent or otherwise) behaviours. These included:
  - senior managers getting people's names wrong or mixing them up with other BAME colleagues;

- BAME colleagues having their competence, their seniority, or the value of their contribution assumed to be less than it would be for white colleagues;
  - disparaging remarks being made when issues of diversity and inclusion were being discussed (e.g. “oh, you sound just like xx or xx [reference to two BAME MPs]” said as a derogatory remark);
  - two members of staff being asked why they were speaking Spanish because “everyone here in Parliament speaks English”;
  - some parts of Parliament having a “macho bravado” or “banter” culture which encouraged and allowed inappropriate behaviours to be normalised and accepted.
14. All groups described themselves and other BAME colleagues being more frequently and more forcefully asked to have their passes checked. This included several first-hand accounts.
15. Many said that more overtly racist behaviours were not unknown.
16. More generally, the lack of diversity combined with a culture that was seen as being hierarchical and deferential—and often with a lack of respect for staff at lower grades—was *de facto* discriminatory.

#### *Tackling discrimination*

17. Underlying these concerns about a lack of diversity among parliamentary staff was a sense that the administrations lacked the will, procedures or understanding to tackle discrimination fully. While overt racism might be dealt with under existing procedures, colleagues felt that micro-aggressions and other less overt forms of prejudice were poorly understood and could not therefore be tackled.
18. Attendees also felt that while other protected characteristics were better understood or prioritised—the Cox Report, for example, focussed on gender-based bullying and sexual harassment—the complexities of race, ethnicity and cultural background were not. People were seen to be much more comfortable discussing protected characteristics such as disability, sexuality or gender than they were discussing race. This led to the neglect of issues related to race and ethnicity which was exacerbated by a lack of empathy or emotional connection with the experiences described by BAME staff.

#### *Increasing diversity and talking about race*

19. People were concerned that the culture of the Houses and the systems in place did not seem to be effective at removing discrimination or increasing the diversity of staff especially at higher levels. People spoke about the lack of progression for BAME colleagues compared to white colleagues. As a result there was a visible lack of BAME staff in senior positions. There were questions asked about how Parliament recruited graduates to make sure they were recruiting from as diverse a pool of people as possible.
20. Some focus groups discussed the fact that some senior leaders demonstrated a lack of understanding for why a diverse workforce was good and important. This view was also reflected in colleagues questioning why it was necessary to complete an equality analysis on a piece of work or undertake diversity training. It was felt that some colleagues were

emotionally disconnected from diversity and inclusion, unable to put themselves in another person's shoes or relate to matters that did not directly affect them.

21. In all the groups, colleagues agreed that it was uncomfortable talking about race at work and that there was still much to be done to improve racial, ethnic and cultural diversity in Parliament.

### The Cox Report

22. The focus groups were asked specifically how they felt about the findings of the Cox report and whether they had contributed to it.
23. There was a general feeling in the focus groups that the Cox report captured the experiences of hierarchy in the organisation and attendees were not surprised by the findings.
24. Some staff said they did not contribute to the report as they did not have in faith in the process or that anything would be done. There was a general view that BAME people are disempowered because of the culture of deference in the organisation.
25. There were also discussions around people not engaging with Cox due to events having taken place in the past and a reluctance to engage due to the personal nature of sharing experiences.
26. There was a recognition that the Cox report had created a momentum in Parliament and an opening of communication channels with managers. However, there were fears that this would not lead to any real change.
27. However, some thought that Cox was a missed opportunity to address the religious and racial discrimination that takes place in Parliament because of its focus on gender, sexual harassment and bullying.

### Suggestions from the focus groups

28. As part of the discussions in the focus groups, staff were asked how the situation could be improved. Some of the suggestions made were:
  - The two administrations should promote the work they are already doing better. Many attendees were unaware of initiatives such as the Talent Management Programme, Direct Graduate Recruitment or the steps arising from the Diversifying Senior Leadership working group.
  - The hierarchy of access to restaurants, toilets and other parts of the Parliamentary estate should be removed. These reinforce power relationships and lead to a disproportionate number of BAME staff being questioned when trying to use Parliamentary facilities.
  - Parliamentary Security Directorate should work to ensure the way security checks are carried out are not biased (either consciously or unconsciously).
  - The two administrations should have a more active and visible ownership of diversity issues. BAME staff should not feel that they are the only ones speaking up about racial or cultural bias.

- There should be targeted programmes—sponsorship, mentoring and leadership work—to help BAME staff realise their potential in order to address the lack of people of colour at the top of the organisation.
- Managers should be better trained on issues relating to race and ethnicity in order to be empowered to stand-up for their BAME staff members and to tackle racist or discriminatory behaviour (including their own). Training managers to provide emotional support when required, acknowledging when actions and behaviour are not right and making staff feel valued would be welcomed.
- More use could be made of upward and 360-degree appraisals as part of managing the performance of senior managers and evaluating their success or otherwise of meeting diversity and inclusion objectives.

### ParliREACH conclusions and recommendations

29. It is clear that there is some distance left to travel for Parliament to become a workplace in which colleagues from all racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds feel equally valued. While direct racist comments were uncommon, there was a level of low intensity acts—casual insults and dismissals—sufficient to re-enforce a racial hierarchy.

30. We acknowledge that there have been a number of good initiatives in the diversity and inclusion strategies of both Houses. We are particularly pleased that the House of Commons strategy will now include targets for BAME representation. This is a step in the right direction but will not, on its own, make the necessary progress.

31. More importantly there was a clear lack of knowledge about many of the initiatives already begun in both Houses to improve diversity. The teams in both Houses must do more to publicise their activities and the results of those to staff at all levels across Parliament.

32. To make progress, the administrations must openly and adequately recognise the experiences described in the focus groups and that they are caused or perpetuated by policies, example and leadership. Without recognition of the lived experience of people from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds an organisational culture in which those colleagues feel discriminated against will continue.

33. It is for the administrations of the Houses to decide how to respond to the sentiments and experiences described above. As a minimum response to this report, the ParliREACH Committee makes the following recommendations for action:

- **Both Houses must commit to publishing a race/ethnicity pay gap audit for 2019.**
- **Diversity (explicitly including ethnic, racial and cultural diversity) should be one of the key objectives in both Houses' corporate strategies and in all team strategies. This would demonstrate the importance of diversity to the organisation and Parliament's commitment to improve.**
- **Grade and role related access restrictions for toilets, restaurants, bars and other Parliamentary facilities in both Houses should be removed with**

immediate effect and only reinstated after one year if a business case can be made for particular restrictions.

- **A leadership programme designed specifically to enable BAME colleagues to progress in both Houses should be established. This has previously been approved by the Commons Executive Board but has since stalled. We would like to see progress on this in the Commons within a year. The Lords should agree to participate in and support such a programme.**
- **There should be a review of the openness and transparency of current recruitment and promotion processes across both Houses. Recruitment and promotion policies should ensure that:**
  - **all roles and promotion opportunities are properly advertised,**
  - **a report is produced on the diversity of the outcomes of each board, and**
  - **the Press Pause mechanism is used more widely, for internal and external posts, across both Houses and at least include all posts at A grade and above in the Commons and HL 8 and above in the Lords.**
- **For all senior managers, their performance in promoting and supporting a diverse workforce at all grades and challenging excluding policies, behaviours and discrimination should be assessed in annual appraisals.**

#### Actions since the drafting of the report

#### 34. Security attend ParliREACH Committee

On 13<sup>th</sup> February ParliREACH invited Deputy Director of Security, Fay Tennet to our committee meeting to discuss the issues around the checking of passes that have been identified in this report. Fay spoke about some specific training that Security Officers had received around looking at behaviours rather than appearance. At this meeting Fay welcomed the reporting of any issues with Security Officers, particularly around repeat offenders and that this reporting can be done through ParliREACH.

#### 35. House of Commons Executive Board

On 29 March 2019 ParliREACH presented this report to the Commons Executive Board (CEB). At the meeting the CEB acknowledged the findings in the report and the recommendations and has started to identify ways of tackling some the complex issues highlighted in the report. CEB recognised that time is needed to digest the findings and recommendations in the report, and they will continue to discuss and engage with ParliREACH on the best way forward.

## Annex 1: Introduction to the ParliREACH annual report 2017-18

This has been a significant year for ParliREACH in terms of events in Parliament and in the wider community. Most of our activities and achievements are set out in this report which I hope you will read. I want to highlight two significant events.

Within Parliament the allegations of bullying and harassment against Members of Parliament and senior staff in the organisation are concerning. Clearly these allegations harm the reputation of Parliament and of those who work here. ParliREACH has contributed to the working groups and reviews designed to create a better, more transparent and robust system for responding to such allegations and for creating a more inclusive working environment where everyone knows what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Our main focus has been to challenge access and other practices which perpetuate hierarchies and exclusivity. We have also sought to raise the profile of race and ethnicity so that behaviour towards staff based on these characteristics becomes completely unacceptable and can be openly challenged by anyone. We are not there yet and I expect this work to continue for some time to come.

In the wider community, but still very much linked to Parliament, has been the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush in Tilbury Docks. This is a celebration of the contribution of generations of Caribbean migrants to the rebuilding of the UK after the war. In that process society changed irrevocably. As the Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin said at the Windrush lunch in Portcullis House, even if we did not have a relative on that ship, we are all now part of that story and of that larger more diverse community.

Sadly, the celebrations were tinged by the treatment of some of the Windrush generation whose right to live and work here has been questioned. This has raised again the shadow that people of colour are still not considered by some to be properly or fully British. Fortunately, this view did not go unchallenged in Parliament, but it has nevertheless left a bitter aftertaste.

These two events have led me to question why we don't talk more openly about race in Parliament. While we frequently talk about a gender balance, we rarely flag up, in public, the lack of a race or ethnicity balance.

In 2014 Reni Eddo-Lodge wrote a powerful blog which still resonates. In "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race" she wrote:

"I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the existence of structural racism and its symptoms. I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience. You can see their eyes shut down and harden ... It's like they can no longer hear us.

At best, white people have been taught not to mention that people of colour are different in case it offends us. They truly believe that the experiences of their life as a result of their skin colour can and should be universal.

They've never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white, so any time they're vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront."

It's quite a thought-provoking piece and, whatever your views are on the merits of the arguments presented therein, it suggests to me that we actually need to begin more conversations about race and ethnicity.

This year we carried out a survey of our members. Two results are of particular concern and highlight the need for more rather than less talking:

- Of those completing the survey, over 50 per cent said they were not comfortable being themselves at work. Respondents that were not comfortable with being themselves at work offered a diverse range of views. One noted that they have had to change their image to feel included, and they knew of similar cases across the organisation where colleagues have also felt image-based discrimination. One respondent suggested that although they don't feel "very" uncomfortable, they do feel as though mistakes they make are attributed to their ethnicity or nationality;
- Over 50 per cent of respondents said that they were not confident raising issues of concern in relation to race and ethnicity at work. One respondent thought that ParliREACH needs to be "bolder" in addressing issues of concern regarding race and culture in day-to-day conversations. A few respondents thought that ParliREACH does not address "real" issues of concern that BAME members of staff face in the workplace, and that there needs to be a more proactive approach in determining problems that staff regularly face. One respondent felt that race is the "elephant in the room", stemming from senior management within the organisation.

So, there is work to be done. We want to find out more about why our members feel this way and what we, as a network, can do to help. I also want this conversation to take place in board meetings and among team leaders. We will be organising some focus groups on this issue in the Autumn. In the meantime, please do let us know your thoughts.

Eddo-Lodge ends thus:

"Not seeing race does little to dismantle racist structures or improve the lives of people of colour. In order to do so, we must see race. We must see who benefits from their race, who is affected by negative stereotyping of theirs, and on whom power and privilege is bestowed—not just because of their race, but also their class and gender. Seeing race is essential to changing the system."

Dr Anna Dickson

ParliREACH Chair



## Membership Registration

*A workplace equality network to increase awareness and appreciation of  
race, ethnicity and cultural heritage issues in Parliament*

Name:

Name of Office/Department:

Primary work location (building, floor):

Work Email:

Work Phone:

What sort of issues, events or activities would you be interested in?

Please return form to [parlireach@parliament.uk](mailto:parlireach@parliament.uk)

ParliREACH will use this information to keep a record of, and communicate with, its members. The information you provide will also be used to inform our events and activities. Should you have any queries concerning the processing of this form please contact Mems Ayinla, the ParliREACH Membership Officer, or email [parlireach@parliament.uk](mailto:parlireach@parliament.uk).

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As you have voluntarily signed up to be kept informed about ParliREACH activities, you do not need to take any action and will continue to receive our newsletter and other notices as usual. We will keep your personal information private and secure. We will never pass your information onto another organisation. If you no longer wish to be a member of ParliREACH please e mail us at [parlireach@parliament.uk](mailto:parlireach@parliament.uk) and we will take you off our list completely.

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