



A question of equality

Councils should ‘be consciously biased against those who refuse to see us as individuals beyond our skin colour’, argues **Claire Fox**

Dear councils, I am here to encourage you to rebel. You have a long tradition of rejecting the way things are done in Westminster, so I am hoping you will reject the utterly barmy decision that the House of Commons is going to pilot ‘unconscious bias training’ for all MPs.

Sir Keir Starmer started the trend. After criticism of his language around the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, he told radio host Nick Ferrari on LBC that courses on unconscious bias would be made available across the Labour Party, and that he’d ‘lead from the front’ in taking it. Now, every parliamentarian (and indeed their staff) is to follow suit.

Since the brutal killing of George Floyd, international abhorrence has led to a well-intentioned desire among many involved in UK politics to use this moment to challenge racism. However, this positive aspiration is being sullied by a prescriptive redefinition of racism that not only does nothing to fight bigotry, but is divisive, anti-democratic and likely to stir up racial tensions.

The critical race theory (CRT) was once largely confined to leftist academic circles. It is now being mainstreamed and institutionalised as it is championed by the identity politics activists who have emerged as key political players around the BLM movement.

CRT determines that white people are inherently racist and have unearned ‘white privilege’ granted to them by their skin colour, whether they know it or not. And yes, even if they’re homeless or poor.

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‘colour-blindness’ or ‘meritocracy’ are now described as tools of maintaining white power. This expansive definition inevitably leads to the conclusion that Western democracies and all its institutions are steeped in racism.

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There is little formal opposition to this skewed and simplistic narrative; raising even the mildest challenge is seen as proof of white privilege and unconscious bias. Ethnic minorities who refute the essentialising orthodoxy that skin colour is all-determining are told they are in denial. Not being a racist is insufficient; the demand is for public affirmation of this particular form of anti-racism.

The premise of unconscious bias transfers racism from the public realm of society and politics (where it can be debated) into the darkest recesses of individuals’ psyche.

Citizens judge politicians based on their conscious attitudes and policies. If a political ideology such as racism is treated as a psychological, unconscious condition that people aren’t even aware of, the electorate’s judgement becomes usurped by an algorithmic test.

Mandating use of this unproven pseudo-science means that MPs must subject themselves to training to have their biases rooted out; to be re-educated into the ‘correct’ thinking. In a democracy, are we happy that elected representatives should be treated like children and answerable for their political views to unelected consultants, whose job is to remould their attitudes to race in line with a contentious dogma? Where are the voters in all this?

If voters are encouraged to see all social problems through the prism of race, this could lead to stirring up tensions in multi-ethnic communities. Already opportunistic far right white nationalists are exploiting a climate that emphasises racial difference.

By contrast, in the 1980s and 1990s, I was an anti-racist and trade unionist: black and white workers stood, marched and fought together as equals. Our solidarity was based on Martin Luther King’s dream that people should be judged by character not skin colour. If our political leaders continue promoting an agenda that focuses on ethnicity as the determinant of attitudes or aptitudes, such solidarity will be impossible.

I say now is the time to choose to be consciously biased for equal treatment, to be consciously biased against those who refuse to see us as individuals beyond our skin colour – whether reactionary racists or CRT culture warriors armed with training courses.

Claire Fox is director of the Institute of Ideas

soapbox



By Dr Arianna Giovannini

Italy was the first European country to enter national lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and was, for a while, one of the nations that was hardest hit by the pandemic. However, after a few first months of real struggle, the spread of the virus has been effectively contained through a concerted effort that has involved all levels of Government. Sadly, the same cannot be said for England.

In Italy, local and regional authorities have constitutional protection and there are several permanent committees that provide forums for regular and constructive dialogue between central and subnational government representatives. There is also clear distribution of power, responsibilities and funding across levels, and local and regional governments have a wide range of direct competences, including on health.

Collaboration, dialogue and subsidiarity are the foundations of the relationship between central and local authorities. To be sure, in the context of the pandemic there were times, especially at the early stages, when central Government had to intervene directly and made decisions on regional and local matters. However, as the country adapted to the ‘new normal’, co-operation, autonomy and local leadership were reinstated. As such, while consultations and sharing of information/data takes place regularly with central Government, regional bodies work in earnest with local authorities in the day-to-day response to the pandemic – with responsibilities on testing, contact tracing, data, monitoring, prevention, and health and care provisions. Through negotiations with central Government, they also develop ‘regional security protocols’ tailored around local characteristics/needs – acting as point of guidance and contact for businesses, workers and civil society, while also providing a clear, unequivocal messages to local communities.

This is not to say the Italian model is perfect. Mistakes were made by central Government and mayors along the way. And yet, there’s one very important lesson we can learn from Italy: co-operation, co-ordination, consistent communication, mutual trust and diffused leadership can have a much more positive effect on policy decisions and crisis management than centralised, place-blind responses. ■

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