

Contemporary Conservatism and the Politics of Diversity

Helen Grant MP - April 2018

Conflation is a tool commonly used by the media these days; the merging of two separate pieces of information, often to create a negative story, where previously none existed. On that premise one could be forgiven for thinking that an invitation to comment on changes in Conservative Party attitudes to race and ethnicity, in the fifty years since Enoch Powell's Birmingham speech, suggests that Powell was the voice of the Tories at the time. The fact that his speech resulted in a unanimously supported summary dismissal from the shadow cabinet strongly indicates that Powell's lines on immigration were very much his own and not a mainstream view. I suggest therefore that the Birmingham speech is not so much a Conservative Party political milestone, but more of a deeply regrettable moment in Powell's personal political life.

Fifty years is a worthy measure for change nonetheless and 1968 is as good a time as any to start the clock on a personal view of my party's attitudes and the extent to which it has become more diverse. I had no contemporaneous knowledge of the 'Rivers of Blood' debacle, being a young girl aged seven, growing up in Carlisle some 200 miles to the north of Powell's seat in Wolverhampton South West. Paradoxically I was, for a while, perhaps the only person with a darker skin living in that far northern city in the sixties. It was not a place where I recall there being any notion of societal take-over by masses of in-bound 'people of colour'.

That's not to say I did not suffer racial abuse because I certainly did but the mischief did not exclusively surround the colour of my skin or the curliness of my hair. The perpetrators were not grown-ups, but school kids, who picked on anyone who was a bit different and being short, or having ginger hair, or wearing thick glasses were all defects worthy of punishment in their minds.

I had little exposure to political parties in my teenage years, let alone their attitudes regarding racism or diversity. My first direct contact with a Member of Parliament took place when I was struggling to obtain a university grant to pursue a law degree. My mother and I contacted the Member for Penrith and the Border to seek his assistance, and our approach paid-off. Thanks to Willie Whitelaw's efforts I was duly funded, and subsequently empowered, to lead a long and happy career as a solicitor and a businesswoman. His help and the respect I held for him was probably subliminal in becoming an MP myself. He became my Willie, as well as Maggie Thatcher's!

For the next 23 years I built a firm that championed the survivors of domestic violence, hate crimes and other forms of abuse. My work informed me greatly about social injustice, prejudice of every flavour and the resulting barriers to social mobility. Looking back it seems almost inevitable that this would lead to a career in politics, but that was never in my contemplation whilst I was practising law.

It was not until 2004 that an urge to investigate party politics first emerged within me. At that time the outward facing public demeanour, social justice rhetoric, and energy of Tony Blair seemed appealing. I joined the Party to find out more, but it quickly became apparent that I was just not aligned with Labour's principles and values, like 'Big State' and central command and control.

The fit was wrong, and I knew it almost immediately. I also felt ignored and unwelcomed by local party members which was not a recipe for a long relationship. A year of quiet introspection ensued and I realised that my politics resonated with the Conservative ethos, albeit to the left of that broad church. A 'hand up' rather than a 'hand out', aspiration, opportunity, enterprise, social mobility, small state, personal freedom, trusting people and allowing them to take responsibility for themselves and their families.

The make-up of the Conservative parliamentary party today speaks for itself in terms of progress in diversity and ethnicity. In 1968 there were no black or ethnic minority MPs and only four female members. I take some pride in recording my own part in our progress, forty years later in 2008, by becoming the first black female Conservative to be selected to defend a Conservative seat, then elected in 2010, promoted to Ministerial office in 2012 and appointed as a Vice Chairman of the party in 2018.

In the 2017 intake there were 19 black and minority ethnic (BAME) members and 67 women and a significant number of openly gay MPs. There is still much to do but I believe we are approaching a critical mass and a wide-ranging acceptance of change needed for sustained progress toward equality of representation.

Of equivalent importance is how the party is outwardly engaging with the electorate in terms of ethnicity and diversity. The first serious moment from my standpoint was just prior to the 2015 general election. The then Prime Minister David Cameron publicly recognised that you can't have real 'opportunity' without real 'equality'.

He also clearly stated at our party conference that he wanted to end discrimination, later setting out his 20:20 vision: by 2020, jobs (including within the police and the army), apprenticeships, university attendances and business loans for people from black and minority ethnic communities would increase by 20 per cent. Strap lines like 20 per cent by 2020 were a little too 'Saatchi & Saatchi' for me, but it was significant because it was coming from the very top of government, and the PM seemed truly committed.

Progress accelerated with the commissioning of reports and reviews into BAME progression in the labour market (McGregor-Smith), on company boards (Parker), on the relationship with the criminal justice system (Lammy) and a more general review looking at 'integration and opportunity' (Casey). The party in government, under David Cameron, was building a head of steam on the diversity agenda and I was filled with hope for lasting change.

The following year, however, an immensely divisive referendum campaign culminated in UKIP's leader Nigel Farage unveiling a highly controversial campaign poster. It was entitled 'Breaking Point' and showed a long line of Syrian refugees trekking toward Britain. It played on the genuine concerns of communities who saw their wages squeezed since the financial collapse of 2008 and felt pressure on local schools, hospitals and housing.

Farage has openly admired Enoch Powell and his immigration policies for years, and just as Powell is credited with whipping up anti-immigration votes in support of the Tories in an election they expected to lose in 1970, so followed Farage in the referendum campaign.

On the morning of the 24th June 2016 I awoke to see and hear the Prime Minister, my Prime Minister, the man who was responsible for my engagement with the Conservative Party, announcing his resignation. It was a personal sadness and I was sorry to say goodbye to a man who had done so much for the diversity agenda.

Since the referendum, we have made progress on improving equality in our society. Upon Theresa May's accession to No.10 in July 2016 she spoke of a plan for fairness for all, and social justice. There then followed a number of significant movements on the BAME landscape: in August 2016 Mrs May ordered an audit into Race Disparity in the Public Sector; in November 2016 the previously mentioned Parker report was published, followed by the McGregor-Smith report in February 2017 and the Lammy review in September 2017.

The wealth of evidence and recommendations we have amassed under a Conservative government, particularly since 2015, shows an immense shift in attitude from the state of things 50 years ago.

Race, equality and diversity are now centre-stage policy areas and we have arrived at a critical juncture where we must deliver, to the whole nation, my party's core messages of self-empowerment, enterprise and social mobility alongside compassion, fairness and social justice.

In the most recent re-shuffle, on 8th January 2018, the Prime Minister demonstrated her recognition of this challenge with multi-lateral measures. In the party she has appointed a mixed race Deputy Chairman, a Vice Chairman of Nigerian blood in charge of candidates and two mixed-race Vice Chairmen (one of them being me) with a brief to engage with diverse, disadvantaged and disengaged communities;

in government there are now junior Ministers with Pakistani, Mauritian and Iraqi heritage and of the 13 new politicians on the government payroll, eight were women and four were black or minority ethnic; at Cabinet level over a third of those attending are now women; and in the whip's office there are now six ladies compared with zero when I came to Parliament almost eight years ago.

In my role as Party Vice Chairman for communities, jointly with Rehman Chishti MP, we have been given a free reign to engage. That is what we are now doing; spending time away from Westminster, in communities across the country, being visible, accessible and available; hearing about the complex and individual reasons behind the many tensions and frictions in modern British society. Furthermore, as the government implements our exit from the EU, we will be taking soundings from the ground to help ensure our national identity and our British values are preserved; values such as diversity, inclusion, mutual tolerance and respect; all the things that have helped make Britain one of the most diverse, outward looking societies in the world.

Compared with 1968 the Conservative Party is in a completely different place. I have witnessed the beginnings of truly transformational change in my twelve years of Conservative activism, where diversity and ethnicity in the Conservative Party now have serious momentum. I will continue to play my part in promoting those agendas and I am proud to have been given the opportunity to do so.
