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Commission on Race
and Ethnic Disparities

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities
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To: Kemi Badenoch MP
Exchequer Secretary and Minister for Equalities
[By Email]

26th November 2020

Dear Kemi,

Since the Prime Minister established the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities on 16th July this year and appointed me as Chairman, we have been working solidly through our terms of reference. I write to provide you with an update on the Commission's progress, and to flag that we will need an extension to our deadline to complete our work.

Commission progress so far

The Commission is taking an evidence-based approach to its work and we know from the data that there are diverging outcomes between ethnic groups.

This report will take a radical new approach to examining and explaining the causes of race and ethnic disparities. Its final conclusions will, I hope, change the tenor and tone of the discourse currently taking place in this important debate.

In the past, the analysis of race disparity has had a narrow focus, which followed a 3-part 'formula'. It has approached the question of racial disparities based on (a) binary *White/BAME* distinction; (b) that all racial and ethnic disparities are negative and (c) that policy formulation should be focussed on "ironing out" these differentials in outcome.

My Commission's report will offer a new way of framing and analysing the question. Our recommendations will be based on a more granular approach to data. We hope this will open up the window on discourse about race and ethnic disparity. As we know, Britain is home to many ethnic groups, which are very different from each other.

What the data tells us

As I flagged in my article in *The Times* on 26th October, differences between ethnic groups are rendering the term *BAME* increasingly irrelevant - it is obscuring disparities in outcome rather than revealing them. Take my own field of education, for example. There, the 'grouping' of all 'Black' pupils together tells us very little specifically, and risks damning a child's achievements and future prospects.

However, the reality presented by the data, when it is disaggregated into specific ethnic groups, is quite different: In 2017/18, 26.9 percent of Black Caribbean pupils achieved a 'strong pass' in GCSE Maths and English. This contrasts with 44.3 percent of Black African pupils, which is a higher percentage than their White British peers.

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The Commission has found similar examples of obscured disparities across a range of its priority areas of focus on the themes of education, health, employment and enterprise, and crime and policing.

How and why disparities can come about

What makes the Commission's approach distinctive is that it is looking at outcomes through a wider lens to understand how disparities like these arise. We are finding that it is because of multiple, interacting factors.

For example, White 'working class' boys are the group least likely to go to University. So we have a duty to identify which disparities are influenced by race, and what else is shaping different people's life chances.

The evidence is showing that many of the disparities are driven by differences in age, sex, class and geography. As a consequence, the reasons for the disparity may in fact have little to do with racism itself. For example, the reasons why so many girls from a Bangladeshi background choose not to go to a University outside of London can often best be explained by looking at things like cultural heritage, religion and parental influence.

If we look at '*disparities of outcomes*' themselves, it allows us to encourage people from ethnic minorities to see themselves as empowered, with agency; not as static cardboard cut-outs with no influence over their own lives. To be clear, this is not to blame those who are victims of disadvantage - we know from previous work that there is evidence to show how cultures and practices embedded within institutions, and also communities, can indeed produce racial disparity. However, as we look across the priority areas of focus, we find a complex picture – including the multiple factors cited above - that can severely impact on disparities.

It is for these reasons, which we believe have been overlooked thus far when considering '*disparities of outcome*', that we would recommend the Social Mobility Commission is now brought under the auspices of Government's wider work on equalities in the Cabinet Office. Doing so would, we believe, support Government in taking a more rounded view of inequalities; where they exist and why; and better inform policy-making to improve outcomes for all citizens, whichever part of the country they are living in.

The Commission's approach to its prospective recommendations

The Commission has been inspired to link issues of racial injustice firmly on the basis of the evidence. In all the areas within our scope, we have managed to unravel a perception of racism that is often not supported by evidence. For example, a popular perception is that young Black men are only perpetrators of serious and violent crime. However, the data shows that they are much more likely to be the victims of homicide. Another couple of perceptions are that Black people do worse in employment figures and social mobility. But the evidence shows that, over the last decade, employment rates for Black people overall have markedly improved, and been comparable to those in other ethnic minority groups. And in terms of social mobility, Black Caribbean people in particular have also made much progress over the last fifty years - although we recognise that they have yet to achieve parity with White people.

These wrong perceptions sow mistrust in many communities. A more evidence-based approach in revealing the reality of racism would engender more confidence and a sense of fairness for

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everybody. We must find ways of sharing data with the public that challenges such wrong perceptions, but also shines a strong light on racial and ethnic injustice.

By considering the Commission's work from the perspective I have described, it also gives us a wider lens to find solutions or recommendations that lie outside the narrow world of superficial changes in 'diversity and inclusion' policies or training. In many instances, we believe that these can be found outside of the mainstream operations of an organisation or government policy. There is also much to learn from communities themselves. For example, we can learn from Indian and Chinese families on how we can better engage with our Education system to achieve more successful outcomes for all pupils.

We also consider that solutions may well be found in changes which are best grounded in raising the bar for everybody - not just for specific groups. One such example is a radical reform in the approach to careers and youth talent development, so that our young people from all backgrounds can get better access to top education and employment opportunities.

Commission extension to current reporting timescales

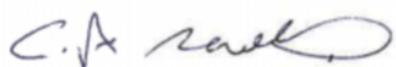
Over the last 4 months, however, we have experienced COVID-19 related challenges to complete extensive and vital engagement activity with public, private and voluntary organisations, frontline staff and citizens in communities across the country. The unexpected 'Lockdown' this month has further exacerbated this for us, as we continue to reach out to hear from all those whom we know want to engage with the Commission's work, and to support our endeavours to understand and address disparities for all.

This is one of the reasons why we issued a public '*Call for Evidence*' towards the end of last month, which will run through to the end of November. It has already received a large number of responses from organisations and members of the public from across the UK, and we expect many more submissions to come over the final few days.

I would therefore like to request a short extension to the Commission's currently scheduled deadline of the end of this year. It is my view that we will need more time to complete the engagements essential to our work; to give due weight to the volume of responses generated by our Call for Evidence; and to consider the evidence provided by these to further inform our report and recommendations. I anticipate that the Commission's work will now be completed, and our report submitted to the Prime Minister and to yourself as Sponsoring Minister, by the end of February 2021.

I would be pleased to discuss this or any aspect of my letter with you should you wish to do so.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Tony Sewell CBE
Chair of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

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