



A COMMISH-MASH: HOW MOVES TO SET UP A SINGLE EQUALITIES COMMISSION SIDE-LINED A BLACK AGENDA

By Karen Chouhan Chief Executive 1990 Trust

The 1990 Trust wants your views and sign up to a coalition to challenge whether or not the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights (CEHR) is in the best interest of BME communities.

Operation Black Vote, Unison Black Members and many others are also in agreement with this questioning. From the outset we have had serious concerns about the new body, as we believe that it will dilute anti racism and a Black agenda for race equality.

History has shown us that the merging of race to a one size fits all equalities body has been bad news in the fight against racism. The Greater London Action on Disabilities has similar concerns around the disability agenda and are partnering us in this campaign.

There should be no confusion about our position. We have always and will continue to fight against race discrimination within British society, and to ensure that race equality can be delivered. This requires that the communities most affected have a say at the decision-making tables.

We also are very concerned that Human Rights and equality are afforded to everyone and as such there must be at least equal powers of enforcing non-discrimination in regards to religion or belief, gender, disability, age and sexual orientation.

There are existing commissions for race, gender and disability but as yet none exist for age, sexual orientation or religion or belief. New legislation will shortly come into effect for new areas, but only in employment.

Therefore there is a minimum requirement for an upgrading and equalising of equalities legislation and beyond this the new areas must be assured that they

have a powerful body that can enforce their rights. The CEHR in its current form cannot do this.

We present our concerns on grounds of Process, Content and Context

Process

Firstly we are appalled at the process for development of the CEHR with a government appointed task force discussing what will be in the new White Paper for the single equalities body. (Some say the White Paper has already been written and the role of the task force is to give it an air of respectability). On the task force, as we have reported previously on www.blink.org.uk, the two people appointed by the government, representing race are two white women.

This isn't personal, and it isn't to say white women cannot help in the fight against racial discrimination. However, there are no Black-led grass roots organisations despite us asking to be represented. If we request a representative task force and are denied this, what hope is there for a truly representative or effective commission?

Even membership of the Equality and Diversity Forum shows remarkable overlap with membership of the CEHR taskforce, and issues of ethnicity and black representation on both these bodies raises serious questions.

How would women feel if men were heading the equalities argument for women, or if we were talking about a movement for Jewish equality being headed by a non-Jew? All these people can help with race equality but they must work with those that have a Black led agenda if they are to have any credibility or resonance within Black communities.

We want to engage in debate but have been denied this in the taskforce. We vociferously reject the type of patronising approach that states, 'we'll talk to us and we'll note down your views'. If our views are important, why have we been refused a seat? The filter process we are supposed to use through those who already accept the inevitability of a SEB is completely unacceptable to us.

We say once again both to the Government and the Task Force this debate demands equitable representation from Black led organisations

Content

We know from we experience that when race issues are subsumed in a wider equalities debate the Black agenda gets lost in a sea of generalist liberal toolkits that will not address the structural inequalities and lack of human rights for Black people.

The tendency is to concentrate instead on operating within the comfort zones of white middle England arguing for cohesion and integration all the while continuing to lambaste Black communities with the message that they do not belong and are second-class citizens.

We are pleased that the process seems to be inching, one painful step at a time, towards a more sensible position on enforcement powers. However there must be a levelling-up of powers, and it is crucial that a single equalities body has the resources to deliver.

Without enforcement powers the whole process will be completely unacceptable, and without adequate funding it will become a lame-duck.

We are pleased that Lord Herman Ouseley is taking a firmer line than many. He warned in October last year of his fears that the new body would be focused on soft areas like equalities promotion rather than taking on organisations who consistently discriminate. He said: "If we've got legislation that isn't capable of being enforced effectively because the body are busy doing promotional work, and are fudging their responsibilities under the law, then it won't work."

Trevor Phillips the current chair of the CRE is also clear that if it isn't right the CRE will not support the CEHR. We share the caution of both Trevor Phillips and Lord Ouseley as we reserve the right to oppose the new body if we feel it will not deliver on race equality.

A false economy of scale is being propounded saying that putting all equalities bodies together will save money. It shouldn't. We need more money not less for each of the areas. For in order for a commission to be effective it has to have local centres of excellence in all the major cities which can put forward a rights based approach and have excellent legal advice to hand. We are done with the softly, softly educational approach.

Educating white people takes forever and they can still choose to opt out. Training Black people in how to demand their rights and be treated as first class citizens, take cases and use the legislation is a much better investment.

However the signs are that funding to localised initiatives are being eroded (take for example the withdrawal of funding from the Northern Complainants Aid who were widely respected in the Black communities for taking case with excellent

legal advice). What hope is there for delivering on any equalities from a centralised white elephant of a body with inadequate resources, very limited enforcement powers on either equalities or human rights, and which is completely in the pocket of Government?

We demand that any new body follows closely the Paris Principles of 1991 set by the UN at a gathering of Human Rights Bodies

- ? Independence guaranteed by statute
- ? Autonomy from government
- ? Pluralism including in membership
- ? Broad mandate based on universal human rights and standards
- ? Adequate powers of investigation
- ? Sufficient resources

We would add here:

- ? Accountability (to communities it is supposedly helping)
- ? Enforcement powers (extended from existing position and resources to ensure enforcement)

Context

The context for race in Britain right now is all about 'blaming Black people' getting them to have ID cards, act nicely, become good citizens, swear allegiance to the queen, integrate and cohere, marry from this country, learn English, hard lines against immigration because too many of them is bad for race relations, etc. Put this together with the beating of Delbo King in Manchester and we have the ground set for uneasy, unsettled communities.

This vituperative agenda which returns to the assimilationist politics of race of the 1960s or the multiculturalism of the 70's at best, amounts to an escalating catastrophic situation for race relations in Britain.

Just reflect on these points

- ? **Cohesion** agendas suggest that Black communities live parallel lives and need to integrate more - this is just rude. We have seen countless efforts of Black communities to be inclusive and work with all sorts of groups

(email us with your examples). Also how can Black communities integrate more into white areas if you can't choose better schools because of catchment areas, you can't move house because of lack of properties or prohibitive house prices, lack of facilities and services and RACISM. Let's ask the questions the other way – why do white communities (on the whole) stick to their own areas? Why don't they integrate more? Why not force more integration on them?

- ? **Citizenship** debates have emerged from a Nationality and immigration Act. They should have emerged from a debate on the British constitution and have meant citizenship testing for all and swearing allegiance for all. As it stands the equation is 'immigrants = bad citizens, until we teach them about our customs and laws'. Well let's start with the BNP. Let's make citizenship testing compulsory for all 'Britons' they will have to agree to all the provisions of the Race Relations Acts, the Human Rights Act etc, and they have to believe in respect for other cultures. They would also have to understand what the British did in the days of empire in the Asian and African continents and the responsibility they have for the murder of upwards of 40 million people and the imposition of British rule. They have to know too that this was based on a belief of white superiority and that the British government is still refusing to see slavery as a crime against humanity. If the BNP or anyone else does not pass this test let's deport them to an island for fascists and racists – or are they already there?

- ? **ID cards** are being introduced to combat fraudsters, criminals and terrorists and are being rolled out first to Foreign Nationals and commonwealth citizens - why? Because the equation is Black people = Fraudsters, criminals and terrorists (particularly Muslim).

- ? **Asylum and Immigration** – divisive and inhumane policies are seeking to stigmatise Asylum seekers as scroungers and benefit seekers. Myths about cost and numbers abound while simultaneously ignoring the rights of Asylum seekers under international conventions and the fact that many come from countries where the British have been instrumental in the trouble in those countries. For accession states to the EU there seems to be a softer line for potential migrants 'we need you to come to work as long as you don't claim benefits, To Asylum seekers the message is 'you can't work and you can't have benefits if you haven't claimed at the port of entry' This doesn't make sense. If we need labour in this country why not give work to asylum seekers and allow more to stay? Why does this anomaly exist? Because asylum seekers are equated with immigrants and immigrants with Black people (and many of them are

Black) whereas EU accession states are European, not so Black and de facto much more welcome.

Many Asylum debates also link Asylum seekers with criminals and terrorists (and therefore Muslims). Hence headline news about an Asylum seeker's prison sentence when he knocked down and killed a young boy. Don't read this wrongly, it was horrific, but why don't we see headlines of the killers of hundreds of other people in car accidents every day in Britain. The BNP have been able to use the fear of terrorism to stake up vicious attacks on Muslims and try and divide communities and the government has played straight into their hands with more and more terrorist legislation and the linking of asylum and Immigration to these debates.

- ? **The far right.** Why is the British government still trying to appease the far right? Don't they know by now that the more ground that is conceded the more that will be demanded? Even white British history shows that from the last war. Why did Churchill take over from Chamberlain? How can it be that the labour party is so far to the right that Michael Howard has to go left?

- ? Talking about wars, the same argument that has been put supposedly to stop attacks for Jews is now being put for Asylum seekers and Black people, that is to have good race relations we have to stop immigration because immigrants (de facto Black people) are causing the problem:

As Sharf (1964) tellingly argued:

“One basic assumption emerged, whether all its implications were consciously understood or not. If more Jewish refugees meant, or might eventually mean, more anti-Semitism in host countries, then the cause of anti-Semitism was – the Jew. And, since anti-Semitism, at least in its more virulent form, was clearly wrong and barbarous, the only course was to prevent any notable increase in our own Jewish population.”

Lets be clear, the problem lies in the contemporary racism that emerged from the view of white superiority that justified imperialism, colonialism and slavery, and with no apology for this history there is an escalating neo colonialism and neo fascism right now in Britain.

Conclusion

Given that we now have a situation in Britain where

- ? Once again fascists are allowed to be respectable;
 - ? Racists like David Goodhardt are allowed to be dressed up as liberal progressives, (please see Gary Younge's excellent counter article on www.blink.org.uk);
 - ? Intellectual debates completely miss and diss communities;
 - ? Where we have witnessed the beating of our own Rodney King Black man Delbo King; and
 - ? Witnessed the racism in the police despite the Lawrence inquiry (The Secret Policeman),
 - ? Where disproportionality in the criminal justice system (particularly in imprisonment and stop and search) continues
 - ? Where discrimination and inequality is still rife in Education, Housing, health and employment
 - ? Where white people once again assert an agenda of white superiority telling us what we must do – it is time to say stop,
1. We must unite to challenge the CEHR process and content and to press for what will deliver on equalities
 2. We must organise to stop the fascists in local elections in June of this year

3. We must not let the asylum debate divide us we need to ensure this is a Black agenda item and that we continue to oppose the inhumanity of the measures
4. Continue campaigning against ID cards, cohesion and integration agenda which seek to see Black people as the problem
5. Reassert an even stronger definition of Institutional racism (send us your suggestions) and direct it at those who are guilty.

It is time to reassert the Black¹ agenda for race equality, to say to phoney white progressives get out of the kitchen with your fancy ways, big plates and no food and make way for authentic chefs, with organically and ethically grown produce.

**IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THE SINGLE EQUALITIES COMMISSION
SIGN UP TO OUR COALITION HERE...**

¹ African, Caribbean and Asian