

Minister for Equalities' speech on the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities' report

Mr Deputy Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement about our work to examine inequality across the population. And set out a new, positive agenda for change.

This government is committed to building a fairer Britain and taking the action needed to promote equality and opportunity for all.

We do however recognise that serious disparities exist across our society. And we are determined to take the action that is required to address them.

Following the events of last summer, our nation has engaged in a serious examination of the issue of race inequality and this Government has been determined to respond by carefully examining the evidence and data. We need to recognise progress where it has been made. But we also need to tackle barriers where they remain.

That was why last summer, the Prime Minister established the independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.

It was tasked with informing our national conversation on race by carrying out a deeper examination of why disparities exist and considering how we can reduce them.

And after careful study, the Commission made evidence-based recommendations for action across government, the private sector and other public bodies.

The Commission was established with ten experts drawn from a variety of fields spanning science, education, economics, broadcasting, medicine and policing. And with one exception, all are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The Chair, Dr Sewell, has dedicated his life to education and to supporting young people from socially deprived backgrounds to reach their full potential.

This distinguished group was tasked with reviewing inequality in the UK, and they focused on education, employment, crime and policing, and health.

As this House will be aware, on March 31st the Commission published its independent report and I will now turn to its findings.

It is right to say that the picture painted by this report is complex – particularly in comparison with the way issues of race are often presented.

The report shows that disparities do persist – that racism and discrimination remain a factor in shaping people's life outcomes. And it is clear about the fact that abhorrent racist attitudes continue in society, within

institutions, and, increasingly, online. It calls for action to tackle this.

However, the report also points out that while disparities between ethnic groups exist across numerous areas, many factors other than racism are often the root cause. Among these are geography, deprivation, and family structure. For example, a Black Caribbean child is ten times more likely than an Indian child to grow up in a lone parent household.

And disparities exist in different directions. People from South Asian and Chinese ethnic groups have better outcomes than the white population in more than half of the top 25 causes of premature death.

The report also highlights the progress Britain has made in tackling racism.

And the report's data reveals a range of success stories.

For example, it underlines the significant progress achieved in educational attainment, with most ethnic minority groups now outperforming their white British peers at GCSE level.

The report also delves into the causes and drivers for some of the most persistent and enduring issues. For example, the Commissioners identified the disproportionate rate of young black men convicted of class B drug offences.

Let me be clear, the report does not deny that institutional racism exists in the UK. Rather, the report did not find conclusive evidence of it in the specific areas it examined. It reaffirms the Macpherson report's definition of the term but argues it should be applied more carefully and always based on evidence.

The Commission made 24 evidence-based and practical recommendations. These have been grouped into four broad themes: to build trust; promote fairness; create agency; and to achieve inclusivity.

Mr Deputy Speaker, there are many things that unite this House: a shared commitment to making Britain fairer for everyone, is one of them. In light of this fact, I urge Hon and Rt Hon members to make the time to read its 258 pages.

There is also another thing which I am sure unites this House, which is abhorrence at the appalling abuse meted out to the Commissioners and the false assertions made about their work in the last three weeks.

It is true that this landmark analysis challenges a number of strongly held beliefs about the extent and influence of racism in Britain today.

The Commissioners have followed the evidence and drawn conclusions which challenge orthodoxy and they were prepared for robust and constructive debate.

However, they were not prepared for the wilful misrepresentation of the report which occurred following its publication.

Such as false accusations that they denied that racism exists or that they wish to put a positive spin on the atrocities of slavery.

Or false statements that Commission members did not read or sign off on their own report – or that they are ‘breaking ranks’.

I have been informed by the Chair and by individual members that the Commission remains united and stands by their report.

This Government welcomes legitimate disagreement and debate but firmly rejects bad faith attempts to undermine the credibility of this report. Doing so risks undermining the vital work we are trying to do to understand and address the causes of inequality in the UK – and any of the positive work that results from it.

For that reason, it is necessary to set the record straight.

This report makes clear the UK is not a post-racial society and that racism is still a real force which has the power to deny opportunity and painfully disrupt lives.

That is why the very first recommendation of the Commission is to challenge racist and discriminatory actions. The report calls on the Government to increase funding to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to make greater use of its compliance, enforcement, and litigation powers to challenge practices or policies that cause unjust racial disadvantage or arise from racial discrimination.

The Government even more firmly condemns the deeply personal and racialised attacks against the Commissioners – which have included death threats. [Political content].

An example of the very online racial hatred and abuse on which the report itself recommended more action be taken by Government.

It is of course to be expected that Hon and Rt. Hon members will disagree about how to address racial inequality and the kinds of policies the government should enact.

However, it is wrong to accuse those who argue for a different approach as being ‘racism deniers’ or ‘race traitors’. It is even more irresponsible – dangerously so – to call ethnic minority people racial slurs like ‘Uncle Toms’, ‘Coconuts’, ‘House slaves or House Negroes’ for daring to think differently.

Such deplorable tactics are designed to intimidate ethnic minority people from their right to express legitimate views.

This House depends on robust debate and diversity of thought. Too many ethnic minority people have to put up with this shameful treatment every day, as some of my fellow MPs and I know too well. This House should condemn it and reprimand those who continue to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the Commissioners' experience since publication only reinforces the need for informed debate on race based on mutual respect and a nuanced understanding of the evidence.

The Government will now consider this report in detail and assess the next steps for future government policy. In recognition of the extensive scope of recommendations, the Prime Minister has established a new Inter Ministerial Group to review recommendations.

It will ensure action is taken to continue progress to create a fairer society.

As Sponsoring Minister, I will provide strategic direction with support from my officials in the Race Disparity Unit. The group will be chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

So, on that note, on behalf of the Prime Minister, I would like to thank once again the Commissioners for all they have done.

They have generously volunteered their time, unpaid, to lead this important piece of work. And the Government welcomes their thoughtful, balanced and evidence-based findings and analysis.

The Government will now work at pace to produce a response to the report this summer.

Let me assure the House that it will be ambitious about tackling negative disparities where they persist and building on successes.

And it will play a significant part in this government's mission to level up and unite the country and ensure equality and opportunity for all, whatever your race, ethnicity or socio-economic background.

I commend this statement to the House.