

# Race Equality and the Liberal Democrats

**A Paper by Lynne Featherstone MP**

with responses from **Professor Harry Goulbourne**, London South Bank University and **Dr Claire Alexander**, London School of Economics and Political Science

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# Foreword

Race equality is a core value that transcends political boundaries. No mainstream UK political party seeks to operate racist policies, and all would agree that racists hold an illogical, immoral, and untenable position. This does not mean that the priority given or policy developed to tackle race inequality is not highly political. Political decision-making is crucial to creating a successful multi-ethnic Britain. Political decisions matter in areas as diverse as legislation to protect against discrimination and promote equality, the regulation of practice in public, private and voluntary sectors, the funding of voluntary sector organizations, redistribution through taxation and spending, enabling good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, security and counteracting terrorism, and responding to race inequalities in education, health, criminal justice, housing, employment and representation. While there is broad consensus among mainstream parties that racism is unacceptable, political parties take very different positions on the role of government and the state in the necessary steps to eliminate it.

Runnymede has initiated this series of papers in order to enable senior representatives of mainstream political parties to set out their views on what action is necessary to tackle race inequality and create a cohesive ethnically diverse society at ease with itself. Political parties and their representatives give voice to particular world views – they work from ideology and principle to develop legislation, policy and practice to shape our society. These world views or political traditions act as motivations for their actions, shape the debate internally within parties, and inform their interaction with other parties to political debate.

Our febrile political discussions do not often provide enough space for reflection on the relationship between core principles and political decision-making. This is likely to be even more the case during election campaigns, such as that we are due to enter in 2010. Runnymede is keen to create the space for senior politicians to reflect on what their political tradition has to offer contemporary debates on race equality and good race relations. We believe this to be particularly important given that so much of modern politics is subject to Macmillan's famous dictum; 'Events, dear boy, events'. The mixture of cool and collected thinking, political bargaining, 'kite-flying', focus groups, and triangulation that goes into producing manifestos is often quickly superseded by the need to respond to events. At these points it is crucial to understand the core principles that will underlie the likely decisions to be made.

Whichever political party (or parties) finds themselves in government after the general election, it is important that organizations that are focused on race equality engage with political representatives of all hues. This already often occurs at a local level, but at national level there is a requirement that our political debate recognizes that all have a role to play in delivering a successful multi-ethnic society.

In this paper, Lynne Featherstone MP, Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Youth and Equalities, sets out a Liberal Democrat vision for race equality. In the spirit of open debate, the author was keen to hear responses from expert academics in the field. We are particularly grateful that Lynne Featherstone was amenable to hearing critical voices on policy. It is all too rare in stage managed modern politics for engaged critique to be given space alongside political discourse. Here, Professor Harry Goulbourne (London South Bank University) and Dr Claire Alexander (London School of Economics and Political Science) express their criticisms of the Liberal Democrat approach to race equality, highlighting the gap between the policy and political debate on race equality and theoretical and academic positions. We hope that by bringing these papers together we can create further ongoing discussion and contribute to building policy interventions that come closer to meeting the needs of all citizens.

We have invited senior politicians from the Conservatives, Labour and Scottish National Party to engage in a similar way, in a series of papers to be published before the general election 2010.

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A healthy political debate about race demands that all political traditions create the space for reflection and decision-making that will provide improved outcomes for all in our ethnically diverse society. We hope that this contribution, alongside our hosting of the re-constituted All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community, regular parliamentary briefings, and regional events bringing together local MPs and community organizations will play a significant part in creating debate and improving intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain.

**Dr Rob Berkeley**

Director, Runnymede

# Race Equality and the Liberal Democrats

## Lynne Featherstone MP

Over half of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African children in the UK are growing up in poverty. Infant mortality is more than twice as high among Pakistani and Caribbean groups than white British children.<sup>1</sup> Almost every ethnic minority group earns less than white British workers in the same profession.

These are some of the problems that underline the need for a real, long-term solution to alleviate the vast inequalities faced by Britain's minority ethnic groups.

The problems that face ethnic minority groups today are substantial, but what do the Liberal Democrats propose can be done to address them? How can our unique approach to these issues counteract the failures of successive Conservative and Labour run Governments? These are the questions that will be answered in this paper.

Labour's commitment to fighting inequality cannot be doubted. Their success in achieving their aims, however, has been minimal. The Tories are starting to talk the talk, but they are new to this. Fighting inequality and privilege has been at the forefront of Liberal thinking in Britain for over 100 years and will continue to drive our policies into the forthcoming election and beyond.

## Introduction

Diversity is the bedrock of British culture and respect for those people who are different to us is a cornerstone of our democracy. A cohesive society is not one where values and priorities are shared and agreed upon, rather it is one where difference is respected, understood and indeed celebrated. An equal society is not just one where individuals have equal life chances, but where they are also allowed to form their own values and priorities and have these respected as equal to those of another. And deprivation is not just about economic deprivation, but also cultural and religious deprivation.

<sup>1</sup> Office of National Statistics (2009) *Infant and Perinatal Mortality Rates in England and Wales by Social and Biological Factors 2008*.

The concepts of equality and freedom are at the very heart of Liberalism. A belief in equality of opportunity underpins all of our policies. As Liberal Democrats, we believe that the role of the state should be to enable all citizens to be free to develop their talents to the full. As such, we reject all prejudice and discrimination based upon race, religion, colour, age, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

Liberals have long fought for a society in which all individuals are treated equally. We are the party of Lloyd George – the party that introduced national insurance, regulated working hours and laid the foundations for the modern welfare state. We fought Section 28 and today we fight detention without trial, ID cards and the inappropriate use of the DNA database.

Twenty-first century Britain is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, diverse society. Britain is stronger as a result – socially, culturally and economically. However, it is all too clear that a decade into this century, the welfare and life experiences of individuals still vary enormously as a result of the overall combination of circumstances.

## The Need to Tackle Inequalities

New Labour's current thinking about racial equality – exemplified by John Denham's recent claim about race no longer being a major factor in determining life chances – is confused. Ask the one in four members of our black population who are on the DNA database whether they think race is no longer an issue. *The Guardian* reported that black men are six times more likely to be stopped and searched than white males.<sup>2</sup> Do Labour realize that a Home Office report showed that black people have lower offending rates than their white counterparts?<sup>3</sup> One in twenty white Britains are on the database.

<sup>2</sup> The DNA database betrays the racism of those behind it', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Home Office (2005) *Minority Ethnic Groups and Crime: Findings from the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey 2003*.

Many minorities are still over-represented in terms of poverty, unemployment, educational underachievement, school exclusions, stop-and-searches and criminal convictions, despite the best efforts of the current Labour Government. The poverty rate for Britain's minority ethnic groups stands at 40 per cent, double the 20 per cent found amongst white British people. There are also key differences between minority ethnic groups with two-thirds of Bangladeshi living in poverty compared to around one in two Pakistanis and Black Africans. Over half of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African children in the UK are growing up in poverty with a staggering seven out of every ten Bangladeshi children growing up poor.

These problems stretch beyond economic inequality. Only one in five Bangladeshis, three in ten Pakistanis and four in ten Black Africans of working age are in full time work – compared to over half of white British people of working age.

Even with a degree, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men are less likely to be employed than someone white with the same qualifications. Despite a rapid growth in Pakistani and Bangladeshi women going to university, they suffer high unemployment and are much less likely than Indian or white British women to be in professional or managerial jobs. Where is the incentive for minority ethnic boys and girls to work hard at their education if they are not going to reap the rewards that their white classmates will?

The problem is not confined to first generation immigrants: British born people from minority ethnic backgrounds, especially Indian, Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups are less likely to get jobs than their white equivalents.

Furthermore, within occupations there are severe differences between earnings when broken down by ethnic group. A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation discovered that for men, the only ethnic minority to have an earnings advantage relative to a comparable group of White people were those of Chinese heritage.<sup>4</sup> Looking in more detail, for both men and women the greatest earnings differential exists in the professional and managerial occupations. For example, only Indian men in these occupations had an earnings deficit of less than 10 per cent over White men in the same jobs.

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<sup>4</sup> Palmer, Guy and Kenway, Peter (2007) *Poverty among Ethnic Groups: How and Why Does it Differ?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## Legal Framework

Labour have failed to effectively tackle racial inequality. In 2007, the Equality and Human Rights Commission came into being. The Commission took over the responsibilities of the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission. While I acknowledge the need for an oversight body – there are commonalities between groups that suffer from discrimination and many people are a member of two or more of these groups – the Commission spends too much time pontificating about what businesses and public bodies should be doing, and not enough time holding those same groups to account.

Take, for example, the case of Moi Ali, a mixed race Bengali/Irish woman from Edinburgh. A successful professional, Ms Ali first contacted the EHRC in December 2007 having lodged a complaint with a tribunal. It took them an entire year to decide that it could not help her, by which time the case had already been settled out of court. During this year, the Commission had first offered support in the form of free legal representation before saying that this offer had been made in error. While waiting for the EHRC to make a decision one way or the other, Ms Ali was forced to settle out of court as she could no longer handle the stress or cost of managing a complex legal case. What is the point in having a Commission, supposedly tasked with ensuring that equality legislation is properly implemented, if the Commission is not in a position to provide an effective and efficient service?

The responsibility for these failures sits right at the highest levels of power. A report by the National Audit Office published last July revealed that at the time when the EHRC became operational, there were 140 positions unfilled out of an agreed compliment of 525. After agreeing that 25 directors were required to properly manage the Commission, only 10 were in place. To help deal with this issue, seven members of staff who had previously left under severance schemes were re-hired. Amazingly, despite incurring £629,276 in severance costs for these seven individuals, the Commission then paid out £323,708 in consultancy fees to those very same members of staff upon their re-hiring.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission could do so much good – if only it were resourced correctly. The Liberal Democrats believe that the Commission could be a real champion, standing up for the rights of the oppressed. But it can only do this if it is properly managed and given the support that it needs – financially and politically.

## The Need for Enforcement

The poor management of the EHRC is just one example of this Government being unable to follow through on their good intentions about addressing equality issues. Much of the existing equality legislation is fit for purpose. However, without the necessary support structures, it is severely weakened.

Although the law exists for individuals to take claims to an employment tribunal if they feel that they have been discriminated against in the work place, in reality it just is not that easy. Firstly, you have to be quite brave and assertive to take a claim forward. It takes real guts to stand up and shout your case in what can be a David versus Goliath situation – more often than not, the employer will have far greater resources at their disposal to fight the case. This is why my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have argued for the Equality Bill that is currently making its way through Parliament to allow for ‘representative action’. This would mean that a group of individuals who have been discriminated against in the same way – for example, those from an ethnic minority who are paid considerably less than their White colleagues doing the same job – could be represented as a group. This representation could be by trade union or, in what would be a really strong statement in the fight against inequality, the Commission. Unfortunately, the Government decided that such an idea is too complicated at the present time.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of representative actions would have another benefit in helping equality law to be properly applied. By grouping actions together, the number of cases that go to tribunal would be significantly reduced. According to the Employment Tribunal Service, equal pay claims have risen almost 500 per cent over the last four years for which figures were available. While it is good news that more people are taking their cases to tribunals, the fact that the Equality Bill makes

no provision for additional resources for tribunals means that they are straining under the pressure.

The past two years of statistics show that tribunals have accepted over 100,000 equal pay claims. Yet during this time not even 10 per cent of the claims have been completed.<sup>6</sup> This has created a mammoth backlog in the system, further reducing access to justice for wronged individuals.

Further to these arguments, another anomaly that exists in equality law is that currently individuals can only bring cases in relation to one of the protected characteristics – that is, if a person is female, homosexual and from an ethnic minority background, they have to choose just one of these when filing a discrimination case. In reality, this does not reflect the true nature of the discrimination. Why not allow for cases to be filed for multiple reasons? This would surely increase the effectiveness of the legislation and further the equality agenda.

Another way in which Government policy could help address the inequalities that exist in our society would be through the implementation of our name blank application policy. This is a simple idea that could easily be adopted. Just as we give a number for children to write on their exam papers so that there can be no bias in marking, so job applicants could use their National Insurance number. This would remove the very first bias that can lurk behind the first sift of applications – even when this bias exists subconsciously.

As Liberal Democrats we also believe that firms should be subjected to mandatory pay audits. This means that companies would be required to publish the pay for all of their employees – not individually but aggregated by job type. This would allow staff to see whether they are being paid the same as other employees doing the same job. Any employees who then thought they were being discriminated against would have ready evidence to take to an employment tribunal. This fact would incentivize firms into ensuring that they were not discriminating so as to avoid legal proceedings. The tribunals – which we’ve already learnt are overstretched – would then have a lower case load and have the tools to process cases faster.

<sup>5</sup> Hansard: HC Deb, 2 December 2009, c1163.

<sup>6</sup> Freeth Cartwright LLP. URL: <http://www.freethcartwright.co.uk/newsandbriefings/2009/05/05/briefing-template-date-here-63/>

## Social Policy

While a robust, effective and efficient legal framework is a 'must have', when it comes to addressing equality issues there are also societal issues in play. As previously argued, many minorities are overrepresented in the economic poor. As Liberal Democrats, we would raise the income tax threshold to £10,000, removing over four million people from income tax altogether. What would the effect of this be for minority ethnic groups? Around 180,000 Bangladeshis and over 200,000 Black African would live in households no longer paying income tax. Upwards of 400,000 Pakistani households would be taken out of the income tax system, with families being about £700 a year better off.

Labour have also destroyed social housing, something which disproportionately affects ethnic minorities. The social housing stock has been left to dwindle by successive Governments, removing the safety net for those who desperately need it. This causes a great deal of conflict between ethnic groups, and especially between new immigrants and second and third generation settlers who have been subject to 'the system' for too long and see the newcomers as queue jumpers.

In my own constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green, I often hear people say 'It's not fair because immigrants and asylum seekers get the house first'. This issue has been investigated by the EHRC, who found that such claims are unfounded, but the suspicions are still strongly held. My constituency is wonderfully diverse with a range of different communities. But the demand for social housing far outweighs supply.

The realities are that if you want a two bedroom property, you'll be waiting for over five years; for a three bedroom house, over seven years. And for a four bedroom property, you will be waiting for over eight years before you are likely to get a suitable place for you and your family.<sup>7</sup>

According to the charity Shelter, almost one in five of all households live in social housing. And of these, over a quarter are ethnic minority households.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> URL (as of May 2009): [http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/housing\\_and\\_planning/housing/needahome.htm](http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/housing_and_planning/housing/needahome.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Shelter, *Who Gets Social Housing?* URL: [http://england.shelter.org.uk/housing\\_issues/Improving\\_social\\_housing/Why\\_we\\_need\\_more\\_social\\_housing](http://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_issues/Improving_social_housing/Why_we_need_more_social_housing)

We need an absolutely fair system of allocation that addresses the clash of need against entitlement. Not only does the system need to be fair, it needs to be seen to be fair, so housing policy needs to be published and audited. Right now, housing allocation rules are often obscure and unpublicized, which feeds rumours and hatred. For people to understand and agree with the fairness of the system there needs to be participation in the decisions on the process and systems in the first place. We need equality of who gets what, why and where in housing allocation. People need to see it and agree to it so that the BNP cannot work up the hatreds that are so easy to prey upon when there is a fight over scarce public resources.

## The Rise of the BNP

This leads me to a major issue that desperately needs addressing. The abhorrent rise of the British National Party should be a concern for all. Sure they utilize lies and a very questionable use of history and statistics, but they have tapped into something that needs to be addressed. They are playing on the feelings of disillusionment and fear that have become more and more common in the past decade.

What fear am I talking about? Islamophobia.

We need to bridge the discrimination against, and fear of, Muslims. The drip, drip, drip over time of linking the words 'terrorism' and 'Muslim' has created a culture of fear – and fear breeds hatred. Since September 2001, we have been constantly exposed to pictures of Muslim men, and women, alongside atrocities the world over. But when do we ever hear of those Muslims who are taking the fight, both physically and spiritually, to the extremists?

Lately, our news outlets gave Islam4UK untold publicity by over-reporting their 'proposed' march in the town of Wootton Bassett. Yet the necessary permission for the march had never been given – and likely never would have been, due to the vast numbers of police that would have been needed – and the date had never been set. All-in-all, was this ever anything more than a publicity stunt by Anjem Choudary, the leader of the now banned group?

Choudary almost certainly speaks for some of the British Muslim population – how many people he represents is open to question. As Jamie Bartlett of the think tank Demos rightly says, he certainly does not speak for the majority<sup>9</sup> – even Choudary does not believe that he does. But how much media coverage has his cause been given compared to that of the moderate Muslim – the average, majority Muslim? Where is the proportionality?

I have spoken of the link between the words 'terrorism' and 'Muslim', but where are the links between the words 'victim' and 'Muslim'? The disparity, clear for all to see, is nothing less than pernicious.

How do we go about addressing this? Part of the solution is to remain firm in our values. We hold our democracy dear and within this system no group – be it Muslim, Christian, Black or White – has a right to express disagreement with a democratically elected Government by any means other than peaceful protest or political campaigning. This is a non-negotiable principle that must be respected not only by groups within civil society, but also by the state.

Any strategy for future race equality must involve improved communications. It is time to abandon Labour's penchant for a funding system that deals with inequality in silos. Instead, the Liberal Democrats would fund initiatives and schemes that encourage communities to come together, fostering a greater degree of mutual understanding and cultural awareness.

The challenges are real. The challenges are many. But they are surmountable and a Government can be at the forefront of creating a fairer, more equal, and more cohesive Britain.

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<sup>9</sup> 'To what extent does Anjem Choudary represent the Muslim population?', *The Guardian*, 7 Jan 2010.

# A Response to Lynne Featherstone

**Professor Harry Goulbourne**  
**London South Bank University**

In her paper Lynne Featherstone sets forth her political party's position on race equality in Britain. She correctly points to a number of inequalities, misrepresentations, and injustices that different ethnic minority groups experience, and few would disagree with her account of the present situation: while there is some progress, there is need to be vigilant about progress in the workplace, aspects of housing allocation, and the portrayal by parts of the media and extremist politicians (such as the leader of the BNP) of new minorities who have come from outside Europe. In this General Election year, it is not surprising that the paper contains a number of proposals to address what are generally agreed public issues. She suggests that the state could enact measures to have 'representative action' (where groups, rather than individuals, bring an action in the courts); 'multiple action' (where issues of 'race', ethnicity, gender and other matters are taken together in the courts); raise the tax threshold (to benefit specific poorer communities and families); and establish a fairer system for the allocation of council housing.

While a close discussion of these proposals would no doubt reveal their relative merits and possible unintended dangerous consequences, I wish to comment on three aspects of Featherstone's exposition of potential policy and her apparent underlying vision of what is commonly but inadequately described as 'multi-cultural' and sometimes 'multi-racial', but which I prefer to see as the evolution of a broader 'post-imperial' society with a wide range of possibilities or futures.

First, of the policy areas mentioned there is little that can be said to be exclusively or specifically to do with 'race equality'. To be sure, the issues addressed affect the country's new racial and ethnic minorities, but the issues also involve members of the majority ethnic communities. Tax reduction, housing allocation, and even fairer media representations would be of benefit to all, and do not require selling on the basis of any particularistic interest. In addition,

the suggestions about 'representative action' and 'multiple action' in the courts as ways of addressing injustice appear very muddled and illogical. For example, how would we recognize the issues that affect whole groups of people, such as the categories we label as 'Muslims', 'African Caribbean', 'Africans', 'Asians', not to mention the range of recent entrants to the country who no doubt will, in time, begin to assert their identities, not only to maintain dignity but also to access resources, since this is what the British political establishment expects.

Might it be that there is confusion here between the official categorization of people (such as employed/constructed by the Office for National Statistics) and the social consciousness that individuals, families, and wider groups have of themselves. It is one thing to 'call' people in terms of these categories; it is another thing as to whether they think of themselves in such ways. Of course, this is very confusing and may be especially so for our political leaders whose tasks may be perceived to be to respond to issues as they are represented in our fast-moving media and oppositional political articulations. For example, the overarching categories into which people are forced willy-nilly may be rallying points when individuals, families and groups of people feel threatened by other real or perceived groupings – we might call this 'reactive' or 'negative' identity. But this might be an insufficient basis for social action beyond the opposition to something in their lives.

Second, whilst proposing some relatively minor changes to law and policy, the statement makes little attempt to consider the underlying philosophy of race relations or equality. The statement is a little vacuous or short on this point. While there is a list of specific areas of national life, there is an absence of an explicit expression of the values informing this party's or spokesperson's position on the pressing issue of 'racial' equality in the society that is evolving in post-imperial Britain.

After all, the fundamental problem facing the society that is being forged in our lifetime is not merely about the mechanisms of administration or the efficiency of one government or another (perhaps the main concern of the paper), but is about the contentions over the values that are likely to shape a common community for all who share the hills

and mountains, valleys and rivers within shores that benignly look out to the rest of a complex world. With the entry and settlement of significant numbers of people from outside the historic composition of Albion, it may be taken that inevitably there will be a period of turbulence as indigenes and newcomers adjust. This is not new to Britain. Indeed, this pattern of entry, adjustment, accommodation resulting in a new social formation is the very essence of becoming and being British for at least the last two millennia.

British Liberalism should have a great deal to contribute to this wider, more fundamental, discourse. I am disappointed that no such attempt is made here, perhaps beyond a meek genuflection to David Lloyd George, and I doubt whether the great George can supply us with the creativity we presently need to address problems and issues that are very different from those of his days when Britain was still – even if on her last legs – a world empire. The question here for the Libs, if not for the Dems, of the party is this: in what ways do historic strands in Liberal thinking and tradition illuminate the debate about the abolition of ‘race’ as a factor in post-imperial Britain?

Third, this absence of the broader picture strikes me as being characteristic of the superficiality of much current political debate in general, which tends to produce and reproduce inadequate policies focused on the near-horizon. But the tender-footed approach exhibited here in tackling the set of issues involved with the forging of a fairer post-imperial British society is not limited to the Liberal Democrats. The LibDems’ position mirrors a national miring in the pool of despond that our political leaders and many so-called or would-be ‘public intellectuals’ wallow about in and thereby fail to provide viable routes into the future.

Characteristic of this general malaise is an unwillingness boldly to tackle the issues of ‘racial’ inequalities. Instead, discrimination based on race is mixed into a cocktail of related but different issues about cultural diversity. Religion, particularly since the Rushdie Affair from the late 1980s, but reinforced by reactions to 9/11, 7/7, and subsequent threats to the nation’s security, has become central to so-called ‘race’ discourse. The related and just struggles over gender, physical disability, sexual preference, and so forth have also become intertwined with that about ‘race’. The establishment of the EHRC is perhaps the clearest expression of this development with regard to policy; at its centre is the view that all ‘inequalities’ are equal and can therefore be logically addressed in a singular manner. This conflation and confusion results in

the negation of ‘racial’ injustices and inequalities, as Featherstone’s paper implicitly demonstrates. One conclusion or implication may be that it is time we come clean and drop entirely the notion or concept of ‘racial’ in the debates about inequalities, because much of the debates about ‘race’ today is substantively about other matters, particularly religion and attendant cultural matters. In the meanwhile, racial discrimination may be running amok, taking new forms, and being ignored in the land.

I have more than once mentioned my notion of ‘post-imperial society’ with regard to the making or development of British society since the end of empire. This is not the place to explain and elaborate what I mean by a post-imperial society, but suffice to say that it involves the willingness to shed aspects of the cultural baggages of all real or imagined groups and communities in Britain, both indigenous/historic majorities and relatively new minorities, and for all to accept the resulting accretions. This is a very difficult ask for all of us. This may be particularly difficult for the majority indigenes, the historically well-embedded, more so than for those of us who have undertaken to cross the seas and continents to make Britain our home. After all, leaving our starting points already suggested a willingness to abandon and to embrace, and therefore participate in the adventure of transformation. One remarkable feature, therefore, of our society over the last half century or so, has been the capacity of individuals, families, neighbourhoods, etc., to break down boundaries, transform self-definitions, and to invent new, multiple and overlapping identities.

The maturation or settling-down of this process will take time, and will require leadership by forces and institutions in civil society – individuals, families, communities of faith, non-faith schools, mixed clubs, etc.

In this election year, we cannot but remind ourselves that there is a vital role for the state as well. If the Aristotelian view that politics are the supreme art has value, then our trust in our politicians ought not to be an act of naïveté; rather, we should be looking to them to guide how our *res publica* are conducted. Sadly, I do not see on the politicalscape or indeed on the intellectualscape much of a promising glimmer of hope that might take us beyond the quagmire of despond that Race Equality and the Liberal Democrats by Lynne Featherstone depicts. This is not just a case of living up to our national tradition of ‘muddling through’ our problems. This may be a case of quagmiric wallowing.

# A Response to Lynne Featherstone

**Dr Claire Alexander**

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In their landmark report at the turn of the new Millennium on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain (CFMEB), established by the Runnymede Trust, asserted 'If Britain is to develop as a successful community of communities... there must be a reduction in inequalities, both between communities and within them' (CFMEB, 2000: 77). The report posed the question 'How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally, the need to treat people differently and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion?' (CFMEB, 2000: xv). Ten years on from the report and from the Race Relations Amendment Act of the same year, which embodies New Labour's attempt at addressing their electoral commitment to racial equality, and 45 years on from the country's first equal opportunities legislation, it seems these questions remain as resonant, and as unresolved, as ever. The statistics, as reflected in Lynne Featherstone's paper, paints a picture where inequality of race, ethnicity and religion are persistent and seemingly entrenched, where the past 60 years of mass BME settlement has seen patterns of disadvantage become more diverse and more complex, but where, in the last instance, being a minority ethnic Briton still carries a social and economic penalty.

Featherstone asserts that 'Fighting inequality and privilege has been at the forefront of Liberal thinking in Britain for over 100 years' and further that 'the concepts of equality and freedom are at the very heart of Liberalism'. The proclaimed commitment of the Liberal project to achieving racial equality may indeed be sincere, and certainly the marginality of the Liberal Democrats within the national polity in the post-war period has the virtue at least of giving the party some claims to distance and innocence from the failures of successive Labour and Conservative administrations to address racial inequality. On the other hand, the lack of a track record at national level, combined with the lack of a diverse membership at the national level and a somewhat

chequered history at the level of local government give pause for thought. With the prospect of a hung parliament at the next election looming large, and the potential for the Liberal Democrats to make a definitive impact on policy making at the national level in the ensuing confusion, what the Liberal Democrats can offer on racial equality has never mattered more.

It is unfortunate, then, that Featherstone's policy statement is short on context, offering us the statistics but silent on the explanation and reticent on the policy implementation – it is, to mangle a well worn New Labour phrase, 'tough(ish) on racial inequality but woolly on the causes of racial inequality'. The focus, in true liberal tradition, is on the individual level, on 'deprivation' and 'inequality' as the cumulative outcome of 'prejudice and discrimination' by individuals towards other individuals – racial inequality without racism. Featherstone points out some stark inequities – around stop and search, the DNA database, levels of unemployment and household poverty – but the cause is nowhere to be found. This raises the question, then, of how precisely these inequities can be tackled. For Featherstone the answer seems to be in a colour-blind approach, in which racial discrimination is the outcome of individual 'bias' and racial inequality is an extension of broader processes of social exclusion. The solutions follow accordingly – industrial tribunals for the former and tax relief for the latter. What this equation fails to account for, of course, is precisely why social disadvantage impacts disproportionately on BME individuals, the collective or communal nature of this disadvantage and its persistence across class boundaries, contexts and generations. The simple (and simplistic) insistence on treating people equally works to erase the specific and explicitly raced experiences of BME communities and thus perpetuates rather than ameliorates racial disadvantage. At the same time, it individualizes and privatizes what are political, social and structural processes, negating the role and responsibility of government. Without acknowledging and addressing these broader societal and structural processes, it is hard to see how any tangible process can be made.

As the report quoted above (CFMEB, 2000) also makes clear, equal treatment must be balanced too with the recognition of communal and collective

identities and cultural diversity. The focus on the individual erases their location both as part of larger local or cultural communities and as part of a broader national, or indeed, increasingly international picture. These can be viewed as a resource, but are also targets for unequal treatment on a group scale – indeed any discussion of racism or Islamophobia must acknowledge the collective basis of hatred and discrimination. Featherstone’s liberal individualistic perspective carves out and separates issues of racial inequality from the larger context in which these take shape and in which the state plays such a vital, but often ambiguous, role. This gives rise to a series of deafening silences – is it possible, for example, to denounce Islamophobia without acknowledging the impact of foreign policy in demonizing or politicizing British Muslims, and while reaching out in the same breath to ‘moderate Muslims’? To point to the media as inflaming anti-Muslim tensions without recognizing the damaging effects for British Muslims of the slew of anti-terror and securitization legislation and measures? To criticize the rise of the BNP without acknowledging the role of successive and increasingly right wing governments in racializing issues around immigration and asylum? To assume, moreover, that these much vaunted measures to defend our borders have no effect on issues of race equality or claims to citizenship for settled BME communities? Can we really criticize the BNP’s version of history while championing ‘British culture’ and ‘values’ of democracy, equality and freedom?

Of course, Featherstone’s perspective shares much, if not all, with the other mainstream political parties, and, perhaps, this is the most worrying aspect of all. Her paper employs the same language of cohesion, values, diversity and Britishness as that of New Labour and the most recent Conservative incarnation. While at one time the LibDems were the only party prepared to take a public pro-immigration stance, for example, the appearance of Chris Huhne last year on the infamous Question Time with the BNP clearly showed that there is now little clear water between the policies of all mainstream parties on issues of race, migration and integration – at least when the prospect of real political power is at issue.

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