

July 2002: To Appear in The Guardian

Facing up to the Data on Racial Prejudice

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If you want to get into trouble in life, speak the truth. Director of public prosecutions Sir David Calvert-Smith has done so. Thunder and lightning has, predictably, broken out. But Sir David should be applauded because he is right: racism is rife.

Overwhelming evidence for the existence of racial bias comes from the annual British Social Attitudes Surveys. Ever since the early 1980s, tens of thousands of randomly selected people have been asked the question *“Would you describe yourself as prejudiced against people of other races...?”*

When I first saw the wording of this survey question, I assumed almost everyone would answer not prejudiced. First, the wording seemed too stark to get people to reveal the truth. Human beings are generally reluctant to make themselves look bad in the eyes of survey interviewers. Second, I imagined that only a small portion of the British people were hostile to people of other races.

The data came as a shock to me. Approximately 30% of British people say that, yes, they are racially prejudiced. It is likely that the true proportion is greater. My experience of survey responses makes me think the correct figure -- of those who are aware they are themselves racist -- is probably around 50%. The only encouraging thing here is that the percentage of Britons saying they are prejudiced has declined slightly since the 1980s.

Unattractive sentiments emerge from another survey question. “Do you think attempts to give equal opportunities to black people and Asians in Britain have gone too far or not far enough?” Too far, say more than a third of Britain’s citizens.

Feelings of racism are one thing. Actions are another; they cut deeper.

Do biases in individuals' minds translate into prejudice in a tangible economic way, perhaps in the workplaces of Great Britain?

They do.

We know from statistical research that black workers earn a lot less than white workers. White men are paid about a fifth more than black men, and white women about a tenth more than black women. If this were because those from ethnic minorities do different jobs from whites, it might not be certain that this is discrimination. But that is not the explanation. Even when we compare workers of identical sorts, with the same characteristics, blacks have much lower salaries than white employees.

Are these things happening because people from ethnic minorities are simply less educated than whites? No. At school, for example, Indian girls outperform all other groups. The proportion of females who get 5 or more high GCSEs is 66% from Indian families. From whites, the percentage of girls doing so is 55%.

Boys do less well generally, although nobody really understands the reason. Again, however, Indian children outshine all comers. The proportion getting 5 good GCSEs is 54%. In the white population, only 45% of males achieve that.

Admittedly, Caribbean black boys perform badly at school. We do not yet have data on how the children of new immigrants from Eastern Europe are doing.

There are other signs of achievement in the non-white population. Among white males, for instance, 17% have a university degree. Among ethnic minority males, 20% are graduates.

It is illogical and immoral to discriminate against people using criteria over which they have no control. Ginger hair, extreme height, gender, blackness – none is a choice made by a person.

Another reason to be against racial prejudice is that it is inefficient. Black employees get paid the wrong amount to bring about equality

of demand and supply in the labour market. They are promoted too rarely. We therefore waste British talent.

A third worry is that it is socially dangerous to alienate ethnic Britons. We all have to get on, from Land's End to John O Groats, for our children's sake as well as our own.

Moreover we are not talking about small numbers. One in fourteen people are from a minority ethnic group. There are one million Indians in Britain; one million Pakistanis and Bangladeshis; and slightly more than one million African and Caribbean blacks.

But now to action. How, as a nation, ought we to respond to evidence of racial bias? Should the country counteract these inequities and inefficiencies by having 'affirmative action' policies in which there is actual positive discrimination? That would entail having rules to favour non-white workers. If two employees with similar qualifications were coming up for a promotion, for instance, it would be the black worker who was deliberately preferred.

I must say that, highly charged though this area is, I vote no.

The famous Chicago economist Milton Friedman had the best argument. Do not practise positive discrimination, he warned. It will just make bias worse in the long run. If, as now, black workers are systematically discriminated against, only the best blacks make it through to senior positions in companies. These people then have to be better than the equivalent whites. Bit by bit, that embarrassing superiority becomes obvious to all. Those who argue to the next generation that black employees are less good than white employees look foolish.

Let talent speak for itself, said Friedman. Discrimination will slowly be banished. Bringing in positive bias merely promotes the poorer candidates and gives long-run ammunition to those who are racist.

Moreover, would you want to get a job because of the colour of your skin? Positive discrimination is insulting to black people.

This is an emotive area of life. Yet freedom of information -- publicizing data like those collected in the British Social Attitudes Surveys and statements like Sir David's -- is our simplest, and most effective, defence against intolerance.

'Positive discrimination' would be a mistake. Let's simply stick up for the truth -- painful though it certainly is in this case.