

FOI/2020/0656: Original email and 5 proposals response

Weekly message 08 June 2020: Original email from Iain Bell

From: [REDACTED] on behalf of Bell, Iain

Sent: 08 June 2020 11:58

Subject: Weekly Message - Monday 8 June 2020

Following the abhorrent killing of George Floyd, there have rightly been a string of protests about bringing an end to systemic racism in America, here and in many other countries. I know it has affected us all and many are feeling raw and upset.

Over the weekend, I took the advice in [REDACTED]'s [blog](#) to educate myself. I listened to Radio 1 Xtra Talks special programme <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000k3yt>. This really brought home to me personally how much of an issue of ongoing racism and injustice there is here in the UK. I've also read more about my white privilege and how that looks and feels to others.

But me reading and listening doesn't change anything, and change is needed to put an end to racism.

It's also clear to me that change is needed in PPP. We have no Black and Minority Ethnic members of the SCS. Below SCS, we don't reflect the communities we work in and this matters, because our role is to shine a light on today's society and we can't do that well if we don't reflect that society and hear the voices and the challenges.

For myself, it worries me how often we have caused offence in the development of the Census question on ethnicity. I know it means as a leader I have much more to learn and do.

So, I'd welcome your thoughts but my initial ones are as follows;

We need to start this conversation and I'd like to meet with Black and Minority Ethnic members and hear your views on what we can do differently and better

We have a vital role to play in shining a light on today's society. But too often the collation of these statistics is done with only White People in the virtual room. I want to discuss how we do this in such a way that ensures we do provide the insights necessary for different communities.

the 8th of June (you'll find it below), but I wanted to lodge a note of protest at such an explicitly political statement being issued by senior ONS staff.

I sent an earlier draft of this message to Iain in private on the 10th of June but I have yet to receive a reply. I did, however, watch Iain's recent 'Your Call' session in which he expressed his shock at having received various emails criticising his position and proceeded to advise dissenting colleagues to further "educate themselves" on matters of racism. I don't know if my email was among those that provoked this response, but having invited free and open discussion I hope Iain won't object to my making this message more public.

As far as I understand it, it is our job at the ONS to collect and collate an accurate statistical picture of the UK – not to engage in moral, social or political campaigns. And this distinction between truth and justice ought to matter to everyone. Without truth there can be no justice. But if one cares about seeking the truth one cannot be pre-committed to a particular political narrative. Those seeking justice are *reliant* upon us remaining impartial lest we jeopardise the validity of our findings, or our credibility in presenting them.

On George Floyd in particular, I know I was as disgusted by the video footage as the rest of the world. But I must protest that it has yet to be established that the murder was racially motivated. Moreover, the notion that police killings in the US are in general biased by race is highly contested among American academics. The Harvard economist Roland Fryer, for instance, has found that when one controls for various features of the interaction between officer and suspect, police are marginally more likely to use deadly force on white suspects than black. Of course given the nature of science there are others than dispute these findings – but to see our very own ONS jumping onboard with a political narrative that flies free of statistical caution is extremely alarming to me.

Let me stress that as an individual I count myself a passionate anti-racist. Indeed, one of the absolute joys of my life as a [REDACTED] for the ONS is the opportunity to speak so regularly with Londoners in all their diversity and to represent them – in some small way – to the decision makers in this country. But the phrase "Black Lives Matter!" with which Iain signs his original email is not a politically neutral expression of the anti-racism I hope we all feel in our bones. It is the name of a specific organisation with an explicitly radical agenda. I invite ONS staff to read the 'What We Believe' section of Black Lives Matter's website which discusses the "disruption of the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure" or to seek out the interview with BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors in which she describes herself as "a trained Marxist".

Indeed, so much of the phraseology of Iain's email stems – I suspect entirely unwittingly – from left-wing academia, especially in the United States. The phrases "systemic racism", "educate myself", "white privilege", "I have so much more to learn", "White People", and so on, are de rigueur among student activists at the Ivy League. I first encountered this language in 2014 upon meeting American students at [REDACTED], and I have watched with some horror as the ideology contained therein has spread to our Redbricks, and via university graduates into politics, journalism, corporate life – and now my ONS inbox.

I emphasise the elite origins of this kind of talk because – as someone who speaks to ordinary people for a living – it couldn't be more obvious to me that this is *not* a grassroots movement for equality

and justice. Iain Bell speaks quite beautifully about his desire for the ONS to reflect the communities we work in, but the college campuses of Portland Oregon or Berkeley California are quite some way beyond our usual sample.

This is not to suggest, for a minute, that racism is not a reality in the UK. In the course of my duties for the ONS I have met many Londoners willing to speak of unequal treatment – perhaps in corporate hiring, perhaps in police stop and search – and I take them deadly seriously. But I have also met many more who tell me what a fantastically tolerant and open society we live in. I have in my mind the Somali man who told me that the difference between the UK and Somalia is that “In Somalia, it is man against man, and group against group. In the UK, you care about each other.” Or I think about the 70-year-old Jamaican woman who told me she hasn’t heard a word of racism since the 1950s when a Teddy Boy cussed her in the street (and she cussed him right back). Or I recall a conversation with a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who told me she does not want her children to think of themselves as ‘black’ - only people - because she knows full well what happens when one’s tribal identity eclipses one’s personhood.

When Iain Bell’s email encourages us to read blogs from the BAME society at ONS, which in turn implore colleagues to raise our children to “see colour”, we might be taking the side of certain activists, but not the woman I describe.

I should say I completely accept that there will be a multitude of views on these topics, and I fully support anyone’s right to rally behind Black Lives Matter, or to agree with the recommendations of our BAME society. But I wonder if Iain has considered the chilling effect his email will have on those members of staff – of any hue – who do not share the politics expressed? In appealing for BAME members of staff to come forward to tackle racism within the ONS, I think Iain is effectively disregarding those black and minority ethnic colleagues who do not find the ONS to be significantly racist. Or those who do see racism at play but who continue to believe in colour blindness as the solution over and above institutional heavy-handedness. I only wish Iain could read the messages I’ve received from black friends in both the US and the UK telling me they have “never felt more silenced” by the current zeitgeist to which the ONS appears to be attaching itself.

I apologise for the length of this email. For the sake of clarity let me distil my protest into five proposals. I put these out for general discussion – but perhaps if there’s broad support then Iain or others might like to comment:

1. The ONS should withdraw its endorsement of Black Lives Matter in accordance with a principle of strict neutrality with regards to political groups or causes.
2. The ONS should champion the right of individual colleagues to their full *political* and *intellectual* diversity and refrain from expressing a singular politics on our behalf.
3. With regards to identity issues in particular, the ONS should recognise the distinction between BAME people and BAME politics (just as it should recognise the distinction between LGBT people and LGBT politics). The ONS should affirm that one can be black without supporting Black Lives Matter, just as one can be gay without celebrating Pride, and so on.
4. If the ONS wishes to initiate a dialogue about racism within the organisation it should invite colleagues of every background and every political persuasion. One cannot have a

meaningful dialogue between people of different backgrounds while barring “White People”, or dismissing them as uneducated, just as one cannot have a dialogue between differing political views while pre-screening for the only acceptable view.

5. As a body concerned with statistical objectivity in an era of intense political and media polarisation, the ONS should affirm its commitment to truth before politics. It must not be seen to be jumping on political bandwagons or collecting data in the grip of forgone conclusions.

I expect this email might raise some passions, but I welcome all feedback – positive or negative. If you don't feel comfortable speaking openly, I'd welcome private communication.

Regards,

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P.S. By way of further “education” I attach the following resources:

- An interview with the economist Glenn Loury discussing the statistics of police shootings in the US, including the Fryer study: https://youtu.be/JE6TgEC_5co
- A wonderful interview with former Black Lives Matter advocate Ayishat Akanbi: https://youtu.be/TuAd_IaKOl4
- A lecture by the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt on why the pursuit of Truth and the pursuit of Justice cannot mix: <https://youtu.be/Gatn5ameRr8>
- An expose of the pseudo-science behind “Implicit Bias”: <http://rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs-192-jesse-singal-on-the-problems-with-implicit-bias-tests.html>
- The philosopher Coleman Hughes on the conceptual and empirical problems with “systemic racism”: <https://youtu.be/zOtVDwnFTzw>

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- 1) We need to start this conversation and I'd like to meet with Black and Minority Ethnic members and hear your views on what we can do differently and better
- 2) We have a vital role to play in shining a light on today's society. But too often the collation of these statistics is done with only White People in the virtual room. I want to discuss how we do this in such a way that ensures we do provide the insights necessary for different communities.
- 3) For too long, we have hid behind small samples as being why we cannot provide information. Yet we must be able to develop sampling and analysis strategies which overcome this. We have an opportunity in the design of the COVID-19 Infection Study to do this. We must take this opportunity properly.

You will have many more ideas, I'm keen to hear them, so do let us know if you want to join the discussion.

Black Lives Matter!

Iain