

ANOTHER THROW OF THE ALDERDICE

Will Lord Alderdice's review of barriers to black and minority ethnic members in the Liberal Democrats amount to much? Lester Holloway has his doubts

One of the last leadership hustings in 2015 was before a mainly ethnic minority audience. Tim Farron and Norman Lamb both pledged that, if elected, they would order a 'Morrissey 2' inquiry into how the party treats ethnic minorities. You can listen to a recording on the EMLibDems soundcloud.

Morrissey 2 had already been discussed and approved by the Federal Executive. It arose from a recognition that Helena Morrissey's 2013 report into party culture and processes - following allegations of sexual harassment against Lord Rennard - did not go far enough in addressing complaints that institutional and systemic barriers were holding back black and minority ethnic (BaME) talent. So, this new inquiry would look specifically at race.

Two years later Farron made his first 'race speech' in October 2016, during black history month. He announced that the review would be conducted by the party's former Northern Ireland spokesperson, Lord Alderdice, and that work would start "immediately." It would be a further two months before anyone heard anything more when, shortly before Christmas, Alderdice announced a call for evidence with an extremely short window of just three weeks, excluding the holiday period, ending in mid-January 2017. After long gaps of apparent inactivity, the party was suddenly aiming to complete the exercise at breakneck speed.

Dissatisfaction with lack of progress on BaME political representation had been growing steadily for some years. The party has failed to elect a visible minority MP at a general election since Dadabhai Naoroji became Liberal MP for Finsbury Central in 1892. Our party has never had a person of colour elected to the London assembly or its' previous incarnation the GLC. It's the same with the Welsh assembly and Scottish parliament. We have been overtaken by Plaid Cymru, the SNP and the Conservatives on these fronts. At the 2015 general election Ukip put up more BaME candidates and the Greens made a better pitch for ethnic minority votes. For Lib Dems, wearing equality on our sleeves and in our constitutional preambles did not bring about much visible change.

A common explanation for this continued failure is that Lib Dems have no safe seats. This may be true now but was a lot less true before the 2015 election. For instance, Clegg defended a pretty solid 15,000 majority. In fact Sheffield Hallam has never had a Lib Dem majority of less than 8,000 since the seat was won by Richard Allen in 1997. Many of the surviving eight men were defending large majorities. It was our

women MPs who were in more precariously marginal constituencies. Prior to the last election, we certainly had collection of 'safer' seats which the party were unlikely to lose, save for a Lembit Opik-type candidate.

It is undeniable that even the safest of Lib Dem seats require considerable local activity, often over several decades. However, if BaME hopefuls are unable to secure the best PPC opportunities when they arise it is incumbent on the party to better support BaME candidates in 'development seats' to make them genuinely winnable prospects. Yet there is not a single example of the party doing this. Urban and multicultural development seats are permanently in a state of under-development. Indeed, we failed to support the one BaME MP we had in modern times when Parmjit Singh Gill sought to defend his Leicester South by-election win at the 2005 general election.

Back in 2009, Nick Clegg told a Speakers Conference on under-representation that he would consider all-BaME shortlists if the party had not seen Black and Asian people elected as Lib Dem MPs by "the election after next". All it required was enabling secondary legislation, yet this failed to materialise under the coalition. Those with long memories recalled previous leaders talking about an 'election after next' mirage when the party would have MPs of colour.

There are some grounds for optimism. Amna Ahmad was selected in Sutton and Cheam in case of a snap election, and the 2016 spring conference diversity motion might make more difference than the elitist 'A-list' candidate leadership programme did for black and Asian hopefuls. Since being elected leader Clegg used his patronage to make some headway on visible ethnic minority representation in the Lords, but some individuals were better known for their cash donations to the party than policy expertise and they made little impression on the red benches.

After the party entered coalition in 2010 dissatisfaction about lack of progress on race and representation hardened. Our reputation suffered in government but perhaps no more than in BaME communities who were disproportionately impacted by austerity, as the Equality and Human Rights Commission watchdog has found. BaME voters, who had lent Clegg their vote in 2010, quickly turned against the party. Traditional BaME voters, who had lent Clegg their vote in 2010, quickly turned against the party.

LONG LASTING DAMAGE

Jo Swinson fronted coalition plans to hack a lump out of Equality Act by ditching the 'general duty', a move to junk the ambition of government to reduce

inequality through action by the state. Race equality ministers Andrew Stunell and Don Foster achieved nothing notable on this during their period in office. Lord McNally fronted legal aid cuts that hurt BaME victims hardest. Lynne Featherstone axed the socio-economic duty in the Equality Act. On race equality Lib Dem ministers bear huge responsibility for inflicting long lasting damage to the party's brand among ethnic minority communities.

The general impression within BaME communities was that the government had no interest in tackling racial disadvantage and their policies were actively making life harder. Party polling looking at BaME communities was limited but the results were alarming and demanded action. Action never came. Special advisers naively thought things would be better if BaME party activists just tried harder to sell the party's achievements in urban areas and delivered a few more leaflets.

A report I wrote for Operation Black Vote (OBV) on the 'power of the black vote' was released and covered as the top story in The Guardian. Within party HQ the reaction can best be described as 'that's nice dear'. Meanwhile Ed Miliband's office got in touch with OBV on the launch day to organise an urgent meeting.

Lib Dems produced a 'BaME Manifesto' ahead of the 2015 election without consultation with Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (EMLD). It was a poor document which excluded the only genuine race equality policy the party actually had, a policy which came from the race equality taskforce led by Baroness Hussein-Ece and which was approved unanimously at federal conference in 2013. Ironically, Labour borrowed heavily from this for their own BaME manifesto. Party members met with Clegg's special advisers to discuss how the race equality taskforce report, approved by federal conference, could be taken forward in government. Nothing materialised from government.

A combination of this sidelining of race equality expertise in the party and negative actions by ministers in government was deeply depressing. Then in late November 2014 a thread on Lib Dem Voice (LDV) turned nasty. One regular LDV contributor, who turned out not to be a member, wrote that Africans "don't know what a toilet is." I called this out as racist. The thread developed into what can only be called a battle over the topic of racism between three members of colour and everyone else. No one who was white condemned the racist comment. I resigned my membership.

VICIOUS ATTACKS

What followed shocked me to the core. A thread on the Facebook group Alliance of Lib Dems quickly filled with vicious personal attacks against me. I was accused, completely without foundation, of being anti-white, homophobic, anti-trans, and an anti-Semite. There was not a shred of truth in any of these claims.

The first-ever article I wrote for LDV, in 2009, upbraided the party membership for launching angry personal attacks on BaME defectors like Chamali and Chandila Fernando, Norsheen Bhatti and Sajjad Karim. Instead of attacking them we should reflect on why those members left the party, I argued. As a former secretary in EMLD I learnt of many more stories of members of colour being treated badly. So much so that it has pretty much become the norm.

Some of the most highly-qualified professionals in certain fields have been told they are not experienced enough to seek political office.

My resignation, and the bitter aftermath, promoted EMLD to call a meeting of senior figures where the possibility of a 'Morrissey 2' looking at the experience of ethnic minorities was agreed. The move prompted me to re-join the party.

HQ came up with two possible chairs, Trevor Phillips and Baroness Floella Benjamin. Leading BaME activists in the party put forward two alternative names with long track records advising public authorities and companies on race equality in Linda Bellos and Professor Gus John. HQ rejected these suggestions. Eventually all parties were able to settle on a compromise in Lord Alderdice. His professional and Northern Ireland credentials were not in doubt but some remained concerned about whether he, as a white man, had the depth of knowledge about the dynamics of race and racism to do the job. One BaME member wrote on an online forum that as a party peer Alderdice was himself a beneficiary of the system that he was effectively being asked to investigate with regards to whether it treats members of colour differently to people like him.

Some sketchy terms of reference were produced, which failed to mention institutional and systemic discrimination. A delegation from EMLD met Alderdice and advised him that he should have two advisers with a solid background in race equality. Ethnic minority members wanted the party to back the review with the same commitment and resources as 'Morrissey 1'. They made clear that the timescale for taking evidence should span the spring conference of 2017, and that there should be evidence-taking sessions across the country. All these suggestions appear to have been ignored, raising fears that the Alderdice review will lack a depth of contributions from BaME members and risks also being bereft of serious review of existing studies into political representation and people of colour. So far Alderdice has been saddled with a ridiculously short timescale and scant resources, which suggests it is not being taken seriously enough.

Some ethnic minority members are investing hopes in the Alderdice review yet doubts remain over whether the party given its sufficient commitment to undertake a serious fact-finding exercise, equipped the review to also think deeply about solutions.

Anything less risks turning this into a quick bodge-job which will achieve little and disappoint many. If it turns out to be another missed opportunity which fails to take the party forward on race and representation the blame will rest with the party president, Baroness Sal Brinton, rather than Lord Alderdice.

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