


The concept of class is absent from political debate, even as inequality in Britain reaches new heights

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In a recent statement, Labour's Chuka Umunna seemed to suggest the BAME population form one homogeneous political group in the UK. **Sean Swan** argues this view is not only inaccurate but it perpetuates the perceived significance of ethnicity and diverts attention from more rational political cleavages. He writes that if Labour is to compete effectively with an increasingly liberal Conservative party, it needs to focus on tackling inequalities of class.*



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Labour MP and former shadow business secretary Chuka Umunna has [warned](#) that Labour “are shedding votes from different ethnic minority communities to the Tories.” Whereas in 2010 only 16% of the black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) vote went to the Conservatives versus 68% going to Labour, by 2015 the respective figures were 33% to 52%. Labour, Umunna insists, “have not a hope in hell of retaining all our current seats, [...] if we continue to lose ethnic minority votes at this rate.”

This argument raises questions about Labour's fundamental view of politics and society. Umunna seems to view BAME voters as forming one coherent political grouping which is constituted by the shared ‘identity’ of not being white. He further assumes this group shares identical socioeconomic – and thus political – interests and that an unemployed black youth in Brixton has the same political interests and concerns as a self-employed Chinese business woman in Edinburgh. But they obviously do not share the same class interests nor is there any good reason why they should share the same attitude to ‘identity’ issues such as ‘Polish plumbers’ or Syrian asylum seekers. Not only is this a strangely class-blind assumption for a Labour MP to make, but it misses the point that Enoch Powell is long dead and the contemporary Tory party is actually socially liberal.

David Cameron recently [announced](#) the creation of a government review in to possible racial bias in the criminal justice system – a review to be headed by black Labour MP David Lammy. Cameron pointed out that,

"if you're black, you're more likely to be in a prison cell than studying at a top university. And if you're black it seems you're more likely to be sentenced to custody for a crime than if you're white. We should investigate why this is and how we can end this possible discrimination."

He has also [called for](#) legislation to ensure that universities are admitting enough BAME students. Cameron, from the very start of his leadership of the Tories, has self-described as a '[Liberal-Conservative](#)'. He told a Conservative Party [conference](#) in 2011 that "I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative." And of course equal marriage was introduced by a Cameron-led government. In the same vein, the current Conservative government's Department for Transport announced that from March 2016 all new contracts would include [gender equality](#) targets. Nor is this only about Cameron, Tory MP Maria Miller was lauded in *The Guardian* for speaking out in favour of gender-neutral passports – '[A Tory championing trans rights? Now that's progress](#)'

We are all social liberals now. There is no social basis in the UK for US style 'culture wars'. The fading significance of 'identity' politics in contemporary Britain is similar to the decline in the sectarian Church/chapel divide towards the end of the nineteenth century. The championing of the cause of the Nonconformist sects by the Liberals made them largely politically redundant once the remaining instances of anti-Nonconformist discrimination had been removed in the early twentieth century. It may be difficult for Labour to accept the fact that the Conservatives have changed, but the voters have noticed it. The fact that Umunna still appears to assume that the BAME population ought to constituting one homogeneous political group suggest that Labour may have missed this development.

Cameron's Conservatives are 'intensely relaxed' on 'identity' issues. Despite the image he may sometimes wish to project, this is also true with regard to migration – an issue about which many Conservative voters are uneasy. While Cameron has made comforting noises on this issue and has resisted calls to take in substantial numbers of Syrian refugees – the most high profile 'migration' issue at the moment – his government has also overseen the [highest levels](#) of migration into the UK ever recorded. As far as 'identity' issues go, there is no longer much to choose between the Tories and Labour. The politics of equality in 'identity' terms of ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation form something close to a post-Millennium political consensus. Whatever remains of Powellite Toryism has largely exiled itself from the Conservative party to the Siberia of UKIP. To the extent that the Tories can still be described as the 'nasty party' it is because its policies exacerbate and perpetuate economic inequality.

The Conservative position on the EU and migration is highly revealing here. It is migrant access to benefits, not migration *per se*, that Cameron seeks to [reduce](#). His target is the welfare state, not migration. Nor should this come as any surprise. Without migration UK GDP would hardly have grown at all in recent years, but this 'growth' is illusory as per capita GDP has gone nowhere. The bold claim that migration is good for the economy has to be met with the question 'good for whose economy?' The economic implications of a mass influx of unskilled labour is very different for employers of unskilled labour and those renting out private accommodation, than it is for the unskilled and semi-skilled working class. As Richard Johnson has already [pointed out](#), "immigration depresses wages below the 20th percentile of the wage distribution" and each "1% increase in the share of migrants in the UK-born working age population leads to a 0.6% decline in the wages of the lowest paid".

Thus the unqualified claim that 'migration is good for the economy' is as much a fallacy as are the claims of trickle down economists that a rising tide lifts all boats (as opposed to lifting all yachts). To make matters worse, net migration into Britain broke [new records](#) at the same time as the assault on in work tax credits was launched and a range of other anti-working-class measures were introduced, such as restricting [council tenancies](#) to 5 years. In plain language, conditions of life for the British working-class have not been this precarious since before the war.

There is an important distinction to be made between BAME communities, migrants and asylum seekers. BAME communities may have their historic origins in migration, but *they are not migrants, they are British*. While there is an ethical requirement to take in asylum seekers, there is no *a priori* ethical requirement to allow any particular level of

migration. Migration is an economic, not an identity, question and is also a class question. The class impact of migration was most clearly, if somewhat sneeringly, articulated by – of all people – Norman Tebbit. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2010 Tebbit [stated](#) that Jon Cruddas’, “champagne socialist colleagues may think high levels of immigration keep down the costs of au pairs and cooks, but his white British constituents in socio-economic groups D and E take a different view”. What Tebbit left out is that there is no obvious reason why the views of working-class members of the BAME community would differ from those of white members of the working-class on migration. A progressive position would be to take in more refugees than Cameron is currently doing, but would judge economic migration in terms of its economic impact on *all* of society – particularly the most vulnerable.

‘Identity’ inequality gaps, whether racial, gender or sexual orientation, while still significant, have never been narrower. Nor has there ever been such a consensus on the need to address them. Economic inequality – class inequality – on the other hand, is both growing and largely ignored. A glance at today’s House of Commons will show far more women, openly gay people and BAMEs than in the past, but it will also show more public school boys. Despite this, it is almost impossible to imagine Cameron commissioning an inquiry into anti-working-class bias in the criminal justice system. On the other hand, his lenient treatment of Google over tax comes as no surprise. The concept of class is absent from political debate, even as inequality in Britain reaches new heights with the [richest](#) 1 per cent of the population having as much wealth as the poorest 57 per cent combined.

Historically, and often for reasons related to discrimination, BAMEs were most likely to be working class. It then made sense for BAMEs – or anybody else who was working class – to favour Labour over the Tories. Today, given greater class diversification amongst the BAME population and an increasingly liberal Conservative party, it would be rather odd if this did not start to change. Viewing the BAME population as one homogeneous political group is not only inaccurate but it perpetuates the perceived significance of ethnicity as a political cleavage and diverts attention from more rational political cleavages. It is economic inequality – class, not identity – which is the primary and growing source of inequality in the UK today. If Labour is really interested in inequality (not to mention winning elections) this is where it needs to start.

Perhaps Umunna’s confusion on this issue stems from an American influence wherein, in a historically more racist society with no tradition of class politics, ethnicity largely serves as a surrogate for class; perhaps it stems from a failure to appreciate that, as the economic climate has hardened under austerity, post-materialist politics such as identity have become a luxury for those who can afford them while materialist ‘bread and butter’ politics have become a necessity for those who cannot.

The Labour Party once knew what it was about – the politics of jobs, wages, housing, social security, the NHS, schools; the politics of life’s necessities and equal access to them. This is what keeps people awake at night, and in a Britain of growing economic inequality, these are the issues that matter. The temptations of the politics of identity are obvious. There is now a broad consensus on it, which makes it safe and non-controversial – non-political, if you will. Advocating this form of politics can lend a sort of pseudo-radical veneer to policies which are in fact deeply conservative, particularly when the debate becomes about symbols, pronouns and statues, rather than the hard politics of resources. The politics of identity can, and should, be pursued by a progressive party in *addition* to the politics of resources, but they cannot be pursued as an *alternative* to it.

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