

NOTEBOOK

Caught in the Headlights: Labour, Race and the Referendum

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23 June 2016: the EU referendum result is one of those moments that will be forever etched in my memory. Like the death of Princess Diana, it is a marker in time. I was working for Stronger In, the official Remain campaign, when the result came through. The rejection felt personal. It was a rollercoaster ride. The Leave campaign won, by the slightest of margins, but with a stench of toxicity that was more keenly felt if one was off-white like me.

I was the national communities lead. My job was to go around the UK, engaging everyone who wasn't a politico or part of the mainstream media, showing that this vote mattered. Reaching out to non-white people was a priority. This was confirmed when I received feedback from community members that Europe was a 'white man's problem'.

One could be forgiven for thinking the referendum was more about immigration than it was about the UK's relationship with the European Union. Immigration has

become the scourge of modern political, social and cultural discourse, even if the issue we are discussing is health, defense, or the economy. The Remain campaign's central message was a familiar one: 'It's the economy stupid'. Received wisdom states whoever wins the money argument, wins the election. For general elections this is true. The EU referendum put forward a choice; a seemingly simple one, should we remain in the EU or not? Presented as a binary yes or no, with scores of chorus boys and girls on opposing sides, this was clearly false. Too much was at stake. Most ordinary people understood that this was an internal Conservative party schism, a colossal thorn in its side, taken to the country in a reckless act of 'democracy'. Throughout the campaign, many of us sighed and shook our heads at Cameron's folly. To take such a gamble without putting parameters in place was naïve at best, political suicide at worse. As we know, the house didn't win and the croupier resigned.

Nobody really knows what this means in reality. How do we exit a decades-old relationship? Who will ultimately benefit remains (no pun intended) to be seen. One thing is clear. The social, cultural, legal and economic chaos that has been unleashed should serve as a warning to the elite and future political leaders. In an unpredictable and often volatile world, poker games should be left in the back room. The main architects of Brexit walked away, cushioned by their privilege while, in ordinary communities, the realities are slowly being felt.

Two Tribes

The first conversation I had with Stronger In included how they were going to engage Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) voters. At that time, December 2015, it wasn't seen as a major issue; more, to my mind a tick-box exercise, albeit one to be completed in pen, not pencil. Initially employed to be the West Midlands regional director, (a role subsequently filled by the formidable Conservative machine that is Simon Jevon), by March we knew we needed a 'proper' campaign to engage communities. The tick box wasn't quite delivering, and in a referendum as tightly fought as this, every vote really did matter. My initial observations of the Stronger In campaign being white, middle-class and London-centric changed somewhat over time as Director Will Straw and other key allies on the board realised the importance of the BME vote. But those London-centric white voices dominated the campaign internally and externally even when their ignorance was harmful.

Knowing that immigration was going to be a major issue, I raised this at my very first meeting. Campaigning in marginal England, you would have to have your head buried in the sand not to know this issue was going to raise its head. We didn't have a credible answer, and the dividing line was drawn on economic stability. It was

understood that the Remain campaign could not win on immigration. Which politicians have been brave enough to be honest about it? This wasn't going to change any time soon. Yet from the inception, that was the multi-coloured elephant in the room. Over the last forty years there has been a persistent rhetoric interlinking race with migration. This campaign was no different. The immigration bogeyman keeps coming back centre stage.

Vote Leave were quicker off the mark in recognising that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) voters could not be taken for granted. Constructing their campaign on the basis of voter apathy in white working class communities, they were perhaps better attuned to the nostrum that 'every vote matters'.

Stronger In, too, recognised that Remain needed to engage with all communities and pro-actively set out to do so. Working with the field team, I produced a Communities Strategy, campaign activities, nuanced messaging and a communities press programme.

But while I wrote a strategy document laying down some of the foundations and pushing for a seamless air campaign, vote Leave were wooing the masses. My first conversation with a prominent online Chinese magazine disclosed a plentiful financial offer had already been made from the Leave campaign. They were serious and understood BME communities in the UK are not one homogenous monoculture. Contrary to popular belief, just because one is of an ethnic minority background doesn't mean we welcome new foreigners with open arms. Surprising to some, anti-immigrant sentiment was turning out to be as much as an issue in BME communities as it was elsewhere.

The strategy entailed us to getting out into inner city communities, taking the campaign to ordinary people in places where they felt familiar and comfortable. An ambitious plan was drawn up (even if we didn't have the manpower to deliver it). The hope was that the voluntary, civil and faith sectors would come on board to claim the campaign as their own. Some did and we built up considerable support in communities across the UK with key activists doing excellent grassroots work. People from Chinese, Bangladeshi, Indian, African Caribbean, and Pakistani backgrounds as well as from all faiths campaigned for us regularly. It just wasn't enough.

Battleground

By mid-March it was becoming clear that these communities were not as secure as we had previously hoped.

From very early on in the campaign, Vote Leave was pushing the Commonwealth versus EU argument. A ‘Muslims for Britain’ group was set up. They pushed a distinct narrative of ‘us v them’, pitching EU migration against Commonwealth migration and exposing perceived unfairness in the system. Divide and rule, a powerful colonial tactic, was just as potent in this campaign. Many in BME communities see different rules for non-EU and EU migrants as discriminatory. When South Asian people were ‘promised’ that their family members would be able to come to Britain if we came out of the EU, many believed it.

The bittersweet binds that colonisation wove were claimed as some kind of get-out-of-EU free card: *‘We have a shared history and things in common. What do they have? They don’t even speak English’*. I heard this throughout the campaign in the West Midlands, Cardiff, London as well as other places. A South Asian syndrome rather than the standard vanilla Stockholm one. Casual racism didn’t stop with Leave’s messengers. Hearing some of our politicians stir up anti-immigrant rhetoric was deeply unpleasant, but not unexpected in the current climate. All political parties have failed to respond to concerns about immigration, perceived or real, in a mature, robust and honest way. This leaves a vacuum. Many descendants of immigrants, maybe in a bid to ‘fit in and truly belong’, vocalised fears about immigration too. Some were also just plain old-fashioned racists. Whatever discrimination they may have faced themselves, tolerance did not stretch to this new lot. Yes, non-white people can be racists too.

M: *We need to vote leave so we can get rid of the throk (rubbish). These Romanians are rubbish and if we leave we can stop the immigrants coming in.*

F: *Weren’t we throk when we came over? Why do you want to stop people coming in when we did exactly the same sixty years ago?*

This conversation took place between a Pakistani woman and man in the West Midlands. I was getting feedback about similar conversations taking place across the country.

Against this backdrop, we knew that we had the mother of all battles on our hands. Any campaigner worth their salt knows that a robust air and ground war are vital. To be successful, both need to work simultaneously, feeding each other with intelligence, data and action. Stronger In ran a conventional solid air war. But the field team were the heart of the campaign, led by the Conservatives’ Stuart Hand and Labour’s Claire Hazelgrove. From early January, they worked tirelessly every weekend, evening and afternoon in high streets and community centres, speaking to ordinary people, laying the foundations. This first step was crucial to feel the mood of the country.

It was the field teams that were my defence too. We had a BME media and engagement campaign, but without the regional teams nothing would have been delivered. When I asked them to go to gurdwaras, mosques and temples to set up stalls they took it in their stride. Some were not used to working with such diverse communities. Nonetheless we worked as a team and went where we had to go. We went into the heart of BME communities and took the referendum to where people were. We set up stalls at Vaisakhi celebrations, the Bangla Mela and the Afro Hair and Beauty Show. In this we out-manoeuvred the opposition; they didn't have the bodies on the ground to match us. We concentrated on our battle-grounds. Every politico knows that the West Midlands is the beating electoral heart of the country, so we didn't waste time. I based myself there and Simon, who led the regional team, was my trusted anchor. His team included the Conservatives' Jack Spriggs and Labour's Niall Hood, two brilliant ground campaigners. Too often, we only hear about the people at the top, the public faces, in campaigns. It is not an understatement to acknowledge that without Simon, Jack and Niall my job would have been impossible. While the main campaign had a body of people, for the most part I was driving the community engagement alone, so the field team became my engine.

Frontline

The first BME media interview I did was a revelation and brought up the challenge of relevance. I was asked, '*Why was the referendum important to Muslims and why should they vote?*'

I calmly explained that, as citizens who live, work and play here, being British, not Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Sikh, should be the priority. I added there was no 'Back Home' option in this debate. This was home and being Muslim didn't insulate one from democratic decisions. ('Back Home' is a cultural term of endearment used by many BME people to describe their or their ancestors' countries of origin).

Vote Leave also understood how important BME media was in connecting with those communities. With estimates of up to seventy per cent of BME individuals using alternative media providers to get news, it was crucial that we utilised them. We had built this in but so had they. While I built relationships with British Muslim TV, the Sikh Channel, BEN TV and others, our opponents were targeting Chinese and Bangladeshi online outlets. For many ordinary people who get their news from BBC, Sky and ITV, it is quite a shock to see the plethora of targeted broadcast, print and online outlets for BME communities. Publications like *The Voice*, *Eastern Eye*, *Asian Image*, *Neehao*, the *Bangla Mirror*, and many more are vital mouthpieces. The

Leave campaign knew this and exploited it to the full. Various outlets were offered a lot of money to push Leave's messages. Issues such as restrictions on visas for chefs in the booming curry industry were used as bargaining chips. Key players were suddenly in demand, and made to feel valued in a new political marketplace. The reality in the field was hundreds of phone-calls, emails, and meetings; persuading, cajoling, arguing and banging my head against the wall. Repeatedly.

Labour's failure to capture its own supporters with a creative campaign was stark throughout. Bradford was one example of abject failure to engage and activate Labour's base. When I raised the issue of campaigning in Bradford there were groans of despair. Understandably. Rightly or wrongly, Bradford has become synonymous with entrenched, tribal and divisive politics. Again it was the field team who stepped up. It was Labour's very able Oliver Coppard, Yorkshire and Humber's Regional Director who led the charge and agreed that we could not just ignore the area. Unfortunately the reality affirmed the reputation. The local Labour organiser, an experienced, intelligent woman, refused to meet with me. She told me she had been instructed not to work with us. She wanted to but was explicitly told not to and didn't have the support to challenge that decision. I was incredulous as central HQ were having daily conversations with Labour In. After spending a day there, I organised two community events. One was with a community group that had close affiliation to the local council of mosques. The next day, I received a call from one of the organisers citing difficulties within the mosque body on taking a position. We worked around it and ploughed ahead. A few days before the event, I had another call saying they were other challenges and suggested we cancel. I refused; not wanting to give in to backroom pressure that was being applied, that I had been informed of. One dedicated local man, a key influencer, supported me and the event took place.

These experiences attest to Labour's bankruptcy during this period.

There were funny moments. I called a prominent Bangladeshi contact who was an 'inner', hoping for a breakthrough. I had been told that Leave was planning an imminent press conference with influential figures from the Bangladeshi community. A few minutes in, he asked me again, where I was from. I told him and he suddenly got very defensive and agitated. It turns out he was an 'outer' and one of the leading figures due to speak at the press launch. Cue a rapid stop to our chat.

Fast forward a few weeks and I ended up having another conversation with the same person. He was now an 'inner'. Apparently the 'higher ups' had convinced him of the benefits of remain and he was now on-board. The planned press conference had been cancelled.

There were also rewarding moments.

Neehao, a leading online Chinese lifestyle magazine described our Chinese community event as ‘*a first of its kind for the Chinese in Britain regarding the EU referendum*’.¹

The Sikh community in general was also very engaged. Many Sikh remainers were pro-active in a way that reflected their strength as a community, straddling multiple identities effortlessly. This was in stark contrast to other minority communities, many of which simply did not want to participate.

‘Go Back to Where You Come From’

By the beginning of June, the campaigns had started to crystallise, with both projects seen as divisive and misleading at ground level. By mid-June, when Nigel Farage proudly unveiled UKIP’s ‘Breaking Point’ refugee poster, there was no doubt that for the majority of BME communities the tone had shifted into a pure xenophobic anti-immigrant tirade. Vote Leave tried to distance themselves but very few people were convinced by their rhetoric.

Yet by the time the result came in, it was clear many BME individuals had voted out. Estimates from the limited data available show up to a million BME people voted the ‘wrong way’. Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future and a member of *Renewal’s* editorial board, believes this is accurate if one extrapolates from Lord Ashcroft’s post-Brexit analysis.² This shows twenty-seven per cent of Black African and African Caribbean voters and thirty-three per cent of Asian voters voting to leave the EU. This reflects that, while the Leave campaign didn’t have the majority of BME communities convinced by them, a significant number did. Their efforts were enough to impact the result in a fundamental way.

We were all surprised when cities with large BME communities, Bradford and Birmingham, voted leave. Not least because the results were so tight. On the night, I stayed at the Birmingham count. The ballot papers made very uneasy viewing, and as the early morning wore on, our opponents – who had conceded defeat much earlier in the evening – realised that they had won. When wards like Sparkbrook voted Leave, it became abundantly clear we had lost.

‘Go back to where you come from’, coupled with ‘Take back Control’, created enough of a schism resulting in the most traumatic vote the UK has experienced in a century. The ramifications, both long and short term, are huge. Not least because of a forty-six per cent plus increase in hate crimes, with acts such as ripping off women’s headscarves taking place openly. Combine this with a government who are

discovering the magnitude of actualising a withdrawal from the single market and the free movement of people and goods. The future looks far from stable.

There are considerably more questions than answers. With the rise in discrimination, many people are wondering what kind of country we live in. Brexit hasn't legitimised racism. We never stamped it out. It has always been lurking in the shadows, even if the majority of the country is made up of decent tolerant people. Brexit has however created an environment where the 'othering' of those who are different has become more acceptable. It has given succour to a minority of individuals who are consumed by hate, and who now feel they have 'their' country back.

Equally the white working class, many of who voted leave, should not be tarred with being labelled racists just because they have fears and concerns about immigration. For many in those communities who feel left behind by a powerful elite, voting out was as much to send a signal that they have had enough as it was about anything else. Ordinary people living in poverty in places like Sunderland stand to lose much more than affluent Londoners if Britain does eventually leave the EU. If you have nothing to lose in the first place, being able to give a two-fingered salute to the establishment, in such a symbolic way, is a powerful motivation.

Politicians of all parties need to take heed and listen. The Conservative government has a heavy burden to ensure that any exit process is rigorous and puts all of Britain's interests to the fore. It needs to recognise the cross-party nature of this campaign was a strength, not its weakness. People came together for a post-party political cause first and foremost, putting aside their rival conceptions of the national interest. It is incumbent the government leads with moral conviction, challenging any racist or discrimination robustly – internally as well as externally. It has had a very poor start in this regard.

For the Labour party, the future looks bleak. The constituent groupings they need to appeal to are disparate and have conflicting demands. First, Labour needs to have one credible message on immigration. For decades it has not managed to do this, to its own detriment. Brexit has shone a light in Labour's house and there is no hiding place. It also needs to recognise large sections of white working class communities (many Labour voters) who are concerned about immigration are not racist or hate all foreigners. They need to understand the entrenched failure of politicians over decades has created a fertile background, where people are scared of the rate and pace of change and feel left behind.

Secondly, it needs to stop ghettoising BME individuals. With three generations of BME communities, they do not fit in to a singular mono-culture of non-whiteness. There are distinct points in time that form the backdrop for these generations. The

Windrush, separation of India, Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh era shaped the first generation, my grandparents and parents. The second generation, mine, were the experiment. The bastard children, recognised but heritage disputed, our discombulated selves swinging, side to side on the cultural pendulum. Like most ordinary British citizens, they have multiple identities and issues other than race and faith motivate many. Significant numbers have a link 'back home' and are proud of their cultural heritage; yet they still pass the 'Tebbit Test'. Worryingly for Labour, the third generations identify as English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh and British. Shedding the identity political baggage of the previous generations, they are not tribally loyal to Labour and like their white counterparts, their politics are transactional. Technologically savvy, the world is literally at the end of their fingers; their influences akin to millennia's globally. The Conservatives are streets ahead of Labour at targeting, giving opportunities and recognising these demographic changes.

Labour also needs to better understand diverse communities, especially in Labour areas where people live within close-knit large extended families and a baraderi system of kinship – (communities linked through geographical, familial or caste system). A lot of pressure was put on people through informal networks, behind closed doors and through religious networks to vote Leave. Issues such as the EU wanting to ban halal meat and the rise of Islamaphobia were given as reasons for the community to collectively justify this. The left often burying its head when it comes to issues of conflict within BME communities did just that. Bury its head.

Herein lies the tension for Labour. Unless it pitches to the middle ground, it cannot hope to retain both groups of voters. The difficulty is the middle ground is shaky and keeps shifting. Advocating for free movement and inclusion in the single market is not palatable to many Labour voters. Making a choice between fighting for market membership and supporting a points-based universal immigration system may be the middle ground for Labour. Possibly the country. That would appeal to both groups, show support for ordinary people who will be hit hardest economically while recognising skilled immigrants are valued and welcomed in the UK. The fundamental point to accept is this is less about detailed policy and more about a socio-cultural game of trust. Labour is not trusted to put the needs of British people first regardless of their ethnic background. It needs to desist from identity politics and project a version of Britain that celebrates its rich history while fighting for a modern state that is proud of its majority heritage. This is about credibility and rebuilding trust within its core voter groups. It needs to if it hopes to govern again.

For future campaigners, there are lessons to learn. The biggest flaw for Remain was the presumption that BME voters were a reliable group. From its inception, the cam-

paing should have included a diverse team embedded centrally and part of the strategic vision. Made up of community activists, civil leaders and ground campaigners. Anyone but politicians. Politicians across the country need to wake up. Taking ordinary people for granted, whatever the colour of their skin, is electoral suicide

People are exercising their power in the most basic but powerful way and as we now know it can really hurt.

Digital media was used in this campaign in ways I have not witnessed before. Social media was utilised much more heavily and will be a key plank of any future movements. But it was WhatsApp that was the driving force of digital activism on the ground. All the messages about halal meat, issues about discrimination, unfair trade blocks for African nations and lots of other messages were shared with thousands across the messaging service. Many were formatted, looked professional with simple clear points. The appeal is apparent; everything is encrypted, it's free to use and information can be shared quickly and easily. The technological revolution is integral for any professional cause. Only a fool would ignore incorporating it fully as part of an arsenal of modern engagement.³

For others lamenting the results, ask yourself, 'What did you do? Could you have done more?' I spoke with so many individuals and organisations who vetoed the chance to get involved, citing all sorts of weak excuses. One faith-based BME organisation categorically refused to take a position. Yet they were one of the first to collate the increase of hate incidents after the result, seemingly oblivious to how the two issues may be connected.

Even with its Conservative roots, the referendum wasn't a party political campaign; it was about the future of the United Kingdom. Taking the moral high ground cannot stem deep-rooted cultural and social insecurities. The referendum debate and subsequent result has changed the discourse about the type of society we want to live in in the UK. Politicians, academics, the media, activists and ordinary people all have a part to play in where we go next. Macro decisions may be distant from communities but at the micro level, issues such as immigration, Europe, security are discussed in supermarkets queues, at bus stops and in doctors' waiting rooms. Relationships have been soured due to the fallout, with familial fault lines being revealed and deepened.

For BME communities this has particular resonance. The cultural existential crisis many undertook is a reflection of what's happening in terms of identity and belonging in the UK. The notion of faith versus nationality is a destructive theme. This was not a choice between a 'white man's problem' or 'back home' allegiances.

Separating oneself from critical issues of national importance is an individual act of responsibility. In an interconnected plugged-in world, we in the west are incredibly privileged. We have the freedom and the luxury to switch off. If one chooses to plug out because the issue doesn't fit in one's opaque notion of faith or race politics, don't blame those who engaged and shaped a future that is not of your liking.

There are no more shadows. The lights are on and shining bright. The trick is not to get caught in the headlights.

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Notes

- 1 'London Chinese community comes out in force for Stronger in Europe event', *Neehao.co.uk*, 16 June 2016 <http://www.neehao.co.uk/2016/06/chinese-community-comes-out-in-force-for-stronger-in-europe-event/>.
- 2 Sunder Katwala, 'How British Asians Saw the Referendum Choice', *British Future*, 2 July 2016 <http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/british-asians-and-the-referendum/>
- 3 Aisha Gana, 'Here's What Muslims who Backed Brexit Think Now', *Buzzfeed*, 16 July 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/aishagani/muslims-who-backed-brexit?utm_term=.yhBVaKx5Q#.haWXEAb7l.