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PUBLIC OPINION
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“BRITAIN is an ethnically diverse society. Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities make a considerable contribution to its economy. However, just as many women feel the effects of a glass ceiling restricting upward mobility in employment, so too are minorities feeling more than a pinch: BME unemployment is 15 per cent higher than the UK average and only 2.9 per cent of senior civil servants are from BME backgrounds

Ethnic minorities, like everyone else, use public services. Yet research consistently points to a lower take-up of services because of access and appropriateness difficulties among BME communities; not necessarily because of culture. There is also an issue of accountability. It is not enough simply to say that ethnic diversity is a good thing in public services. It is necessary if we regard ourselves as managing good fit-for-purpose organisations where users, workers and managers reflect the mix of its population. The public sector must also demonstrate to all that it supports and values their involvement. The public sector is about public services — a vital part of our society that many see being threatened by the growing preference for private sector involvement. The public sector has been at the forefront to drive equality in services. Yet the appearance is one of ad hoc developments rather than a strategic drive.

A glance at the public sector boardroom equally demonstrates poor levels of diversity. Part of the explanation for the lack of BME success at the highest levels lies in a public sector culture which can pigeonhole minorities,



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limiting both opportunity and aspiration to succeed. The belief that minorities are slotted into ethnic jobs with token roles to speak for all minorities is not a rare occurrence. Or their contribution on matters beyond ethnic issues can be dismissed since it is through the ethnic lens that they are evaluated rather than on their individual merit.

Coupled with a lack of role models or high BME achievers in the public sector, this becomes a real problem. If a prospective candidate feels that he or she is worlds apart from the classic job profile it can have a profound and detrimental effect on his or her confidence in applying for jobs.

Despite these difficulties some individuals break through to make a valid, proven contribution. Yet these achievements also need to be recognised and encouraged for the future to avoid being restricted to a successful few.

Any good diagnosis of a problem requires an holistic view. Public sector reform requires an awareness of existing gaps in personnel diversity as well as the ones to come, and this joined-up approach needs similarly to be applied to its stakeholders: those who access public services alongside BME groups and networks and who can aid policy formulation and implementation.

The Government cannot afford to continue the under-representation of BME communities in public life. This is why projects such as the Ethnic Elder Policy Network, the NHS Leadership Panel and CEMESME (an EU-funded project to make the business case for diversity in small and medium enterprises), are essential. This is not about black people taking white people's jobs, nor are we endorsing positive discrimination. We are saying that a modern, increasingly ethnically diverse society cannot afford — socially, politically or economically — to have a public service and servants which continue to misrepresent its users as much as itself.”

Professor Naina Patel is director of the Policy Research Institute on Ageing and Ethnicity