

When Will Skin Colour Not Matter?

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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The death in Minneapolis of George Floyd while submitting to the control of the local police has shocked America and its friends across the globe.

Can we give a confident answer to the question I raise in most of my talks about the purposes and practice of politics? When will the colour of anyone's skin be only as important as the colour of eyes or hair? I may be described by it; no one should be judged by it nor treated badly or favourably consequently.

For generations in this nation we have made welcome progress in identifying and challenging discrimination in each of its forms, whether on ability, sex, orientation, religion or denomination or lack of it, heritage and skin hue. Is there more to do? Yes.

When I first served as a member of parliament, I backed a local mother challenging inaction by a county council on a major local road problem. After several years she won. She also was elected to her borough council because neighbours felt she would help them as a community and as individuals. I recall no occasion when her family Indian heritage was mentioned.

Here on the south coast in Arun and in Worthing there have been prominent contributions to local life and to leadership in community institutions by people who could be identified by skin colour. It has not caused comment.

We thank Giles York as he retires as Sussex Chief Constable. I report good actions by our local Sussex police tackling cases of racial abuse and threats. Over years I also helped confront a faulty investigation of a racial attack that left my constituent injured and his brother dead.

It is known that I have assisted Black Police Association members facing treatment that could be judged discriminatory. The same has happened in teaching. These are cases that usually I try to work on without publicity. I do praise openly. The good and the bad do not balance: the bad should stop and should be stopped; the good should be noticed and praised.

The Archbishop of York Dr John Sentamu is a friend. When he was priest and vicar in Tulse Hill we served together on Archbishop Runcie's continuing Commission on Urban Priority Areas, after the Faith in The City report. He was treated worst in Uganda. In this country he has been stopped by the police more often than I have; do not think it was because he has been a cleric or that my driving is better.

What stops the kind of prisoner treatment that caused the death of George Floyd? No officer going beyond reasonable force. Every companion officer having awareness and the habit of intervening when something is going wrong. Those in authority must act fairly and with urgent determination to establish the facts and then to speak about them with confidence in public.

Gary Younge has been a distinguished editor-at-large for The Guardian and is becoming professor of sociology at Manchester University. He speaks and writes about his years in the USA, including his investigations into the deaths of young black Americans.

Media coverage matters. Black lives matter. Dr John Sentamu agrees with the words of George Floyd's brother that protest and demonstration matter, and that violence is wrong and not helpful.

Looking forward together, this side of the Atlantic just as over there, we need to be aware of unfairness, we must see bad treatment and we can act in advance of serious trouble. Before the Brixton riots Report by Lord Scarman, too many of us knew the problems. We did too little about them then.