The impact of migration related diversity upon political participation in Britain

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EMILIE - A European approach to multicultural citizenship: Legal, political and educational challenges.
EMILIE is a three-year research project funded by the European Commission Research DG, Sixth Framework Programme (2006-2009).
EMILIE
A European Approach to Multicultural Citizenship.
Legal, Political and Educational Challenges

EMILIE examines the migration and integration experiences of nine EU Member States and attempts to respond to the so-called ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ currently affecting Europe. EMILIE studies the challenges posed by migration-related diversity in three important areas: Education; Discrimination in the workplace; Voting rights and civic participation, in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Poland, Spain and the UK. EMILIE aims to track the relationship between post-immigration diversity and citizenship, i.e. multicultural citizenship, across these EU countries, and to identify what kind(s) of, if any, multicultural citizenship is emerging and whether there is/are distinctive European pattern(s). EMILIE Project Reports, Events and Research Briefs are available at http://emilie.eliamep.gr

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Contents
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4
Political rights ..................................................................................................................... 4
Political participation conceived as an exercise of franchise ........................................... 6
Ethnic minority voter registration .................................................................................. 6
Figure 1: Reasons for not voting in the 2001 general election ......................................... 7
Ethnic minority voting behaviour ................................................................................... 9
Figure 2: Self-reported levels of turnout in 2005 relative to registration ....................... 10
Figure 3: Voting patterns by ethnic group in the 2005 General Election survey .......... 11
Text Box 1 - “I took the Muslim vote for granted - but that has all changed…” .... 12
Satisfaction in electoral systems and representation ...................................................... 13
The rise of the Far Right ................................................................................................. 14
Political representation and the role of parties ............................................................... 16
Text Box 2 David Cameron speech to Ethnic Media Conference ................................... 18
Labour party black sections ............................................................................................. 19
Case study of ethnic minority political participation: .................................................... 21
Figure 5: Ethnic minority MPs elected according to party in 2005 ............................... 21
Candidature Selection ..................................................................................................... 22
Text Box 3 - Rushanara Ali, Labour Party Parliamentary Candidate ............................ 23
Text Box 4 – Historical ethnic minority figures in Parliament ....................................... 24
The House of Lords ........................................................................................................ 25
Text Box 5: Baroness Lola Young’s Story: ................................................................... 26
Conclusions ....................................................................................................................... 27
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 28
Appendix I – Interviewees .............................................................................................. 30
Introduction

This report explores the remit of political rights conferred to migration related minorities, the extent of their political participation and the scale of their political representation. Each of these issues sufficiently overlaps so that the focus can be described as being concerned with minority political engagement. This will inevitably include a discussion of the broader discourses surrounding different kinds of identity related claims-making that should also allow us to ascertain whether Muslim identity political engagement should be conceived as an outgrowth or departure from what has preceded it. There are five parts to this report. In section one, we outline the relationship between political rights and citizenship conferred to migration related minorities, and the routes this can take. In section two we narrow the focus to concentrate on formal political participation and examine electoral matters in terms of voter registration and other factors informing voter activity, before discussing the political party choice amongst ethnic minorities. In section three we begin to broaden the discussion with reference to political party identity, appeal, and strategy in the recruitment of ethnic minority participation. In section four we elaborate our case studies of black and ethnic minority Parliamentary representation in the House of Commons and House of Lords. Finally, in section five we draw together the proceeding discussion and offer our interim conclusions.

Political rights

Full political rights (encompassing a range of entitlements beyond voting rights) in Britain are only secured if an immigrant becomes a UK citizen. This requires a minimum of five years legal stay in the UK, of which at least one year must be classed as indefinite leave to enter or remain. As described in work-package one, these categories denote the immigration status conferred to a person who does not hold the right of ‘permanent abode’ but who has been admitted to the UK without any time limit on their stay and so is free to travel to and from the UK, and to take up employment or study and so forth without restriction. So while it remains the case that full social and political rights are only secured if an immigrant becomes a UK citizen, including access to social welfare, it is also the case that people with ‘leave to enter’ or with ‘leave to remain’ in Britain are entitled to vote (and this potentially covers any length of time from three months to many years, but of course excludes a person who has entered the country illegally).

It is important to bear in mind, however, that this describes the formal legal arrangements which are not necessarily taken up, or are inhibited by convoluted opportunity structures. This is particularly evident in the practical issues surrounding the formal political participation of some ethnic minorities in general, as described below, but is perhaps most starkly illustrated by the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. As Jonathon Ellis, Director of Policy and Development at the Refugee Council UK maintains, the political participation of these migration related minorities who have applied for and achieved one or another status of indefinite leave, on route to seeking permanent residency and full citizenship, can be subject to a number of obstacles:
I think there are barriers around information. I think knowing how to engage, how
to go about it. I think its mixed messages being set out around whether the country
wants refugees to take on citizenship. For many people the cost of doing it is quite
substantial, the cost of going through the process. For some people it’s thinking
about whether they actually want it in terms of their relationship with their own
country [of origin], whether it’s something they want to take on; the hope that they
would return and how that might play in terms of going back… So it’s a bizarre
contradiction that you’d have people who for their very political activity were
forced to leave [their country of origin], then not be politically active in this
country! (interviewed 3 September 2008).

Issues of ‘newness’ are not limited to asylum seekers and refugees, however, though as
discussed below there appears to be additional factors informing the non-participation of
other ethnic minorities.

The status of new non-EU member migrants, including asylum seekers and
refugees, is further complicated by the formal arrangements stipulated in the
Representation of the People Act (1983 and 2000) which states that Irish and
Commonwealth citizens are also entitled to vote in national elections. The right of Irish
and Commonwealth citizens to vote in British elections is perhaps unusual compared to
the arrangements amongst European counterparts, and partly stems from the earlier
Representation of the People Act 1918. This laid the ground to eventually extend the
franchise to ‘British subjects’ which at the time included the people of Ireland — then
part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland — and all other parts of the
British Empire. During de-colonisation, until they acquired one or other of the national
citizenships of newly post-colonial countries, formerly British subjects continued to
retain their British status which conferred a right to the franchise (see Lester, 2008). This
was enshrined in the 1948 British Nationality Act which also granted freedom of
movement to all formerly or presently dependent, and now Commonwealth, territories
(irregardless of whether their passports were issued by independent or colonial states) by
creating the status of ‘Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies’ (CUKC) (so
although most of Ireland and the majority of the colonies became independent nations,
their citizens have retained the right to vote in British elections if they live in the UK).\footnote{1}

One outcome of this arrangement is that immigrants without leave to enter or
remain, but who are Commonwealth citizens, are entitled to vote, whilst immigrants
without leave to remain from non-Commonwealth countries are not eligible vote. This
means that any citizen of the 53 Commonwealth member states with its nearly 2 billion
citizens can in theory, if residing in the UK, be registered on the electoral register. In
practice, however, it is not uncommon to find that significant numbers of resident ethnic
minorities bearing Commonwealth citizenship are unaware of this right and, moreover,
do not register for the variety of reasons elaborated below (Mortimore and Kaur-
Ballagan, 2006). This contradicts the specific arguments put forward by Migration
Watch, a prominent lobby group which advocates radical limitations upon immigration to
Britain, and which argues that Commonwealth citizenship categories are overly
subscribed on the electoral register (Briefing Paper, 8.15, 12 April 2007).

\footnote{1 The 1981 Nationality Act tried to delineate this further through the creation of three categories
of British citizenship: (i) British Citizen, (ii) British Dependent Territories Citizen or (iii) British
Overseas Citizen (see work package 1).}
The important fact to bear in mind is that Britain has one of the highest ethnic minority citizenship with a right to the franchise in Europe (Hansen, 2000: 3), and this can be very much part of the self-identity of civil society groups promoting ethnic minority political participation. As Ashok Viswanathan of Operation Black Vote (OBV) reminds us: “Britain has an exceptional set of circumstances where many of them [black and ethnic minorities] have been in this country for a long time…and have had full citizenship rights, which can’t always be claimed for people of African or Asian descent in Germany or in Spain or in other parts of Europe” (interviewed 7 October, 2008).

People from other European Union member states irrespective of immigration status, meanwhile, who are classed as citizens of the European Union (which would exclude some ethnic minorities such as visiting German born Turks without leave to remain in Britain), may vote in local elections and in elections for devolved assemblies (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Mayor of London) but not in general elections. Conversely, British citizens living abroad can register as overseas electors and are eligible to vote in the UK and European Parliamentary elections for up to fifteen years after they have left the country.

Political participation conceived as an exercise of franchise

Ethnic minority voter registration

The formal political participation of ethnic minorities by means of voting is, therefore, inevitably premised upon their levels of electoral registration. This is not an easy figure to ascertain, however, for as Fieldhouse and Cutts (2008: 336) note: “obtaining reliable registration rates can be a difficult and imprecise process given uncertainty about the size of the eligible voting age population (because of census under coverage, temporary residency of foreign nationals, etc)”. An obvious methodological implication of these contingent factors for our analysis is that if a section of the population is underrepresented on the electoral register, the level of turnout will appear artificially high, and not necessarily offer the most reliable account of formal political participation. While it is a legal requirement to be registered to vote if you are a resident British citizen, of whichever category, individuals have only been prosecuted for actively avoiding electoral registration in order to commit fraud (local authorities, instead of a national body, have responsibility for compiling and updating individual electoral registers). According to one study produced for the Electoral Commission (2005) by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) just before the last general election in 2005, national registration figures were reported to be at 92-93%. How, then, are levels of electoral registration in Britain affected by ethnicity dynamics associated with migration related minorities?

Firstly, it is widely accepted that young people are more likely not to be registered to vote than older people, and because the age profiles of minority communities, 

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2 Changes introduced in 2001 served to make registration easier with the introduction of a rolling registration programme. The register is now updated each month and people can register to vote in the weeks before the election, but not once the election has been called. There was a 1.3% increase in the number eligible to vote in 2001 compared to 1997 (The Electoral Commission, 2001).
particularly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, are substantially lower than those of white people (ONS, 2008), some ethnic minority communities are disproportionately affected by the lower levels of registration among younger voters (see Russell et al., 2002). Secondly, evidence suggests that fewer ethnic minority women register to vote than men, and following the 2001 general election an Operation Black Vote (OBV) opinion survey reported that only 44% of black and Asian women were registered (as compared to 60% of black and Asian men) (OBV, 2001). Other factors affecting ethnic minority registration, not only disproportionately in relation to the wider population but also singularly, include an unfamiliarity with institutions and procedures or a ‘newness’, language difficulties, concerns over anonymity and confidentiality, fear of harassment, fear of officialdom, administrative inefficiency, and anxieties over residence status (Anwar, 1990, 1996, 1998). There is also the issue of housing tenure since disproportionately high levels of black African and black Caribbean minorities reside in social or rented housing which can lead to frequent movement and thus a requirement to continually re-register (though, conversely, there are disproportionately high levels of home ownership amongst some Asian communities, see Modood et al 1997). Given the transitory nature of contemporary migration from EU accession countries, it can only be assumed that these patterns of residence are being replicated, although we are yet to generate large-scale meaningful data on this (see Favell, 2008).

Research by Mortimore and Kaur-Ballagan (2006: 7) on the levels of voter registration at the 2005 general election found that a little over eight in ten (83%) of ethnic minority respondents claimed to be registered, with 14% not registered and 3% who did not know. They were also able to confirm significant differences across subgroups, notably age, with only 75% of 18-24 year olds registered to vote, as compared to 95% of those aged 55 and above (a similar pattern to white Britons). While these sorts of discrepancies have led Anwar (1998) to conclude that registration offices have not sufficiently developed their strategies to service ethnically diverse electorates, what is interesting to note is that where research has expressly sought to ascertain why ethnic minorities are disproportionately not registered, rarely has it reported that they do not want to participate in politics. For example, Le Lohe’s (1998) surveys of Bradford found that only 0.9 percent of all Asian respondents missing from the register did not want to participate in politics, and a study conducted by the Electoral Commission (Purdham, Feildhouse, Kalra and Russell, 2002: 35) reported that less than 1 percent of ethnic minorities who said that they did not vote in the 2001 general election did not do so because they were uninterested in politics. As figure 1 outlines, the most significant factors for non-participation concern issues of convenience.

**Figure 1: Reasons for not voting in the 2001 general election.**
The majority of this research is of course based upon attitudinal surveys of representative population samples, and there is clearly “a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do” (Purdham *et al* quoted in Cutts *et al* 2008: 398). The potential unreliability of such data is illustrated by Purdham *et al* (2002) who refer to a MORI survey undertaken shortly after the 2001 general election that presented self-reported levels of turnout amongst ethnic minorities to be around 80% and 70% for whites, when in reality the turnout for the election as a whole was only 59%. But until such data is created and made available we must work with the data that is already in existence (and as the data used in this report confirms, research referring to ethnic minority political participation is becoming more sophisticated with each election).

A brief summary of the changing levels of ethnic minority electoral registration can therefore illustrate the progress that *has* been made since the early 1960s when Deakin (1965) showed that only half of all settled Commonwealth immigrants were registered. By the mid-1970s, a follow-up study identified that when people who had very recently arrived were excluded from the sample, around 32% of ethnic minorities were not registered (27% Asians and 37% Afro-Caribbeans) compared with 6% of the white population (Anwar and Kohler, 1975). During the early 1980s the now defunct CRE reported that in inner-city areas 20% of ethnic minority communities in comparison with 17% of the white population were not registered to vote (Anwar, 1984), and by the early nineteen nineties an Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) (cited in Anwar) report stated that 24% of black people, 15% of South Asians and 24% of Other ethnic groups, compared which 7% of white people, were not registered (Smith, 1993). As these categories gave way or were complemented by others, Saggar’s (1998) analyses of the 1997 general election found that people of black African heritage had one of the lowest registration levels at 87.1% compared with those of black Caribbean (96%), white (96.9%), Indian (96.9%), Pakistani (90.2%) and Bangladeshi (91.3%) heritage. The lower level of registration amongst Pakistani groups reported by Saggar appears anomalous, however, given other sources and is further queried by the more recent data contained in figure 2, as is the higher levels of registration amongst black Caribbeans. This is returned to below.

The important point is that the levels of registration among ethnic minority communities have increased substantially in recent years, albeit in varying degrees across and within different communities, and specific initiatives in certain local authority areas have shown that there is scope for significantly increasing registration levels among ethnic minority communities. Recent campaigns by Operation Black Vote (OBV), which was set up in 1996<sup>3</sup> in order to increase the political participation of ethnic minorities,

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<sup>3</sup> As one of its founding members Ashok Viswanathan describes: “Operation Black Vote was formed twelve years ago to really look at democratic reform and look at the democratic deficit that exists within the Black communities and try and get those communities fully engaged in the democratic process because we believed that unless all communities are playing a full and positive role, democracy as a whole suffers. That’s really the origins of the organisation and there were a number of volunteers; two who are now the Director and the Assistant Director, myself and Simon Woolly, and also other people working in civil rights arena who were working in human rights and who are working around democratic reform” (Interview).
including in terms of voter registration, have had a considerable impact.\(^4\) This kind of activity convinces Raj Jethwa, Ethnic Minorities Officer for the London region of the Labour Party, “that the reason for this [lower participation] is actually not to do with the fact that ethnic minority voters are less inclined to vote per se but we lack intermediary organisations to channel and assist this interest” (interviewed 13 September, 2008).

**Ethnic minority voting behaviour**

Such intermediary organisations and campaigns require local political mobilisation, but it may also be that other forms of politics are also operating in some local authorities, including the political implications of increasing the registration levels of largely Labour-supporting sections of the electorate, and so it is important to consider relationships between voter registration and voter turnout, for Saggars’s (2000) research on the 1997 general election found that while 87.1% of black Africans were registered only 64.4% actually turned out to vote, and that the voter turnout among registered Indian voters exceeded that of registered white groups. More specifically he reported the following levels of turnout of those registered during the 1997 general election – Indian: 82.4%, Pakistani: 75.6%, Bangladeshi: 73.9%, contrasted with 78.7% for white voters. Anwar (2001) too has established considerable differences between minorities, not least the comparably lower electoral turn out of registered Black Caribbean as compared with registered Asian groups, while Purdham *et al* (2002) have identified a higher level of turnout from Indian groups compared with other minorities. According to Mortimore and Kaur-Ballagan (2006: 7), the turnout amongst ethnic minorities at the last general election was higher among those from the main Asian national-origin groups than among the main Black groups: three quarters of all Bangladeshis, seven in ten Pakistanis and two-thirds of Indians said that they voted, while the figures fell to three in five for Caribbeans and a little over half for Africans (see figure 2). Much lower still, though, were turnout rates among “other” ethnic minorities and among those of mixed race; in the latter case, however, this may partly reflect that the mixed race group has a much younger age profile than do the other ethnic groups, as turnout was very much lower among the young than among the middle-aged and old across the board.

\(^4\) The 1998 OBV local election campaign included registration cards, leaflets and posters and the setting up of over 90 registration points in venues such as colleges, religious centres and community centres. It is estimated that over 2,000 people directly registered to vote during this campaign (OBV, 2000). In the 1999 European Parliament elections, OBV, along with a number of local authorities and race equality councils, conducted a major registration drive which also resulted in a substantial increase in ethnic minority registration. Other campaigns were conducted across the country in relation to the devolved government elections, the 2001 and 2005 general elections, and most recently the 2008 London Mayoral elections. Such a dramatic impact provides further evidence that given guidance and encouragement, ethnic minority communities are not against being registered to vote.
What, then, of party choice? Every survey of ethnic minority voters that has been conducted since the 1970s confirms that ethnic minorities favour the Labour Party so that in each general election since 1979, Labour has been the preferred party choice of no less than two-thirds of ethnic minority voters. A contrast between the voting patterns between the 1997 and 2005 general elections will allow us to elaborate on the continuity and contemporary dynamics of these trends in ethnic minority voting behaviour. The vast majority of all ethnic minorities voted Labour in 1997, and this was particularly accentuated amongst Black groups, but a significant minority of the Asian groups also voted Conservative. As outlined in figure 3, however, two general elections later in 2005, the support for the Conservatives amongst Pakistanis subsequently dipped, reasons for which vary but include two very negative anti-immigrant electoral campaigns (2001 and 2005). The main beneficiaries of these shifts in allegiance were the Liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, what is particularly noteworthy is that while support for the Labour party decreased amongst all ethnic minorities in the last general election, it did so radically amongst Bangladeshi groups, which indeed virtually halved, with the most dramatic example being the defeat of mixed race female MP Oona King in the London constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow (where 39% of voters are Muslim), by George Galloway, a former Labour MP, who led the anti-War Respect party. These conflicts raise two important over whether a discernable ‘Muslim vote’ has emerged. As it is

5 According to Anwar (2001), however, a significant minority of the Asian groups also voted Conservative and, indeed, Pakistani minorities were more likely than their white counterparts to do so. This appears anomalous, however, when contextualised in the general pattern, and it is important to bare in mind the area variations in such support. For example, Anwar (1998) reports that in the constituency of Bradford West, during the 1997 general election campaign, a majority of Pakistanis (61%) voted for the Conservative candidate compared with the labour candidate (35%). For the Indians this pattern was the opposite with 74% who voted for the Labour party candidate and 23% who voted Conservative. While this constituency was home to long established Pakistani communities and was considered to be an important barometer of electoral preference. This outcome was connected to the fact that the Labour Party fielded a candidate with an Indian background, and the Conservatives fielded a candidate with a Pakistani background.
elaborated with the example of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) vote card below, it is clear that Muslim organisations campaigned on a distinctive equality agenda that centred on the vilification of Muslims and focuses on the way Muslims have become victims of the anti-terrorism campaign and related Islamophobia (Modood, 2005). While this campaign put them partly on the same side as the Liberal Democrats, they did not dramatically shift to the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats, and thus in figure 4 we find that 21 percent of Bangladeshis voted for none of the main three political parties. There are at least two clear implications that can be discerned from this outcome. The first is that voting patterns amongst Asian groups and black groups continue to be differentiated and fragmentary with about 80% of all Black groups continuing to support the Labour party. Secondly, there is a marked contrast between Muslim and non-Muslim Asian groups.

Figure 3: Voting patterns by ethnic group in the 2005 General Election survey (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat</th>
<th>Other refused to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/other</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ipsos MORI/Electoral Commission (2008: 4)

There is more than one plausible explanation for this. Government foreign policy has generated a particular opposition among certain ethnic minorities and this played itself out during the last general election, specifically in the opposition amongst Muslim Asians to the government’s military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq. The figures may demonstrate a general affect displaying no more than a residual loyalty to Labour among older ethnic minority voters, who feel a historical gratitude towards the party, and which is less widespread among younger ethnic minorities whose political memories do not extend back so far. As Raj Jethwa, Ethnic Minorities Officer for the London region of the Labour Party describes:

Ethnic minorities have traditionally been very loyal to the Labour Party. In terms of policy and principle; [Labour] have been fairly supportive of tackling racism and encouraging diversity… this is what the Labour Party has to think about: we are used to working with first or second generation migrant communities and actually compared to traditional indigenous white communities the level of generation upward mobility is much greater in some ethnic minority communities which means over time you are going to see people emerging in higher socio-economic groups…and it’s not inconceivable that some of these communities are not uncomfortable being involved in the Conservative Party despite the politics of the party maybe twenty or thirty years ago around immigration and Enoch Powell for example (interviewed 17 September, 2008).
This general effect might specifically be in evidence amongst Bangladeshi groups who yield a much younger demographic spread than other groups. This in itself might begin to explain the willingness to shift allegiances to the Liberal Democrats, which would then be accentuated by the opposition to foreign policy and the movement towards the Respect Party. It is important not to over emphasise these shifts, however, since the vast majority of Asian Muslims still voted Labour at the last general election, and other factors, such as increases in social mobility, would also need to be explored in explaining any kinds of realignments.

Text Box 1 - “I took the Muslim vote for granted - but that has all changed…”

Former MP and Deputy Leader of Labour, Roy Hattersley - The Guardian, 8 April, 2005.

For more than 30 years, I took the votes of Birmingham Muslims for granted… if, at any time between 1964 and 1997 I heard of a Khan, Saleem or Iqbal who did not support Labour I was both outraged and astonished. […] The Muslim view of Labour has changed. Back in Birmingham this week it was clear that the Khans, Saleems and Iqbal have developed a new - and more healthy - attitude towards politics. Anxious immigrants who throw themselves on the mercy of their members of parliament are now a minority. Their children and grandchildren will only vote for politicians who explicitly meet their demands. […] George Galloway chose the name of his new political party with care. Respect is what the Muslim community - more confident than ever before - demands. They are not sure that it is available within the present political system. And they are certain that the west's war on terror has made its achievement far less likely. […] Muslims expect something approaching a personal relationship with their members of parliament. They demand audible and visible support - particularly in face of the fashionable suspicion of all things Islamic. […] There is a real fear that, in the present climate, the whole community will be labelled as the enemies of democracy. Shafique (the chair of Labour's Sparkbrook branch) insists that his party, which has gained so much from Muslim support, has done too little in return. Part of his complaint concerns the perennial dispute about whether or not the Sparkbrook-Small Heath constituency (where in one ward 80% of residents are classified as "ethnic minority") should be represented by a Muslim MP. But he also insists that "the authorities" have an oppressive "attitude" towards his community. […] "In your day," he told me, "Muslims needed Labour MPs for protection. Now most of them can protect themselves." In future they will pick and choose between the parties and ask: "What have you done for me?"

What is important to recognise, however, is the extent of Muslim political electoral participation and how it is, as Fieldhouse and Cutts’ (2008: 333) recent study of the 2001 general election reports, “closely connected to the size of the local Muslim population [which] indicate that registration, like turnout, is affected by the forces of mobilisation” (ibid. 348). One example of Muslim electoral mobilisation was much in evidence during the last general election when the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) issued a ten point check card to encourage Muslim voters to evaluate various politicians’ positions on matters concerning both domestic and foreign policy. The reception of such a strategy is vividly illustrated in Text Box 1 above, and in which a former leading Labour politician

6 See: http://www.mcb.org.uk/vote2005/
ruminates on the electoral impact of attitudinal and social shifts amongst the contemporary Muslim electorate of his former constituency. The central thread running through his account is that of a confident Muslim democratic engagement, and which is further illustrated by Sher Khan of the MCB:

Our position has always been that we see ourselves as part of this society. I do not think that you can be part of it if you are not willing to take part in electing your own representatives. So, engage with the process of governance or of your community as part of being a citizen of this community. We think it is imperative.  

These sorts of initiatives inherently concern matters of political participation and exemplify what Saggar and Geddes (2001: 28) describe as “the transition from migrants and their descendents as ‘objects’ of policy – as a public policy problem to be managed by tight immigration control and the paternalistic apparatus of race relations – to ‘actors’ in the political process”. To develop and unpack these points further we need to expand the discussion of political participation through a consideration of political representation, and how this relates to shifts in identities, the discursive character of citizenship, and broader perspectives on political engagement that impact on how minorities see themselves in terms of political participation.

**Satisfaction in electoral systems and representation**

In 2004, Mori, on behalf of the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society (2004) conducted an ‘Audit of political engagement’ and reported that only 30 per cent of ethnic minority respondents are satisfied with their MP, compared with 42 per cent of white people. These and other findings have informed organisations such as OBV’s position that “there is very much a symbiosis between those communities that vote and what would make them vote so there is a direct link between people seeing Black faces in high places and feeling that the democratic process is something that belongs to them and something that they want to take part in” (interview with Viswanathan). It is unsurprising then to learn that ethnic minority Parliamentarians are contacted by ethnic minority electorate from outside their ward on the basis that they are more likely to respond to their concerns (Purdam, 2001). As Diane Abbot MP describes:

I think that ethnic minority people think that I am their MP. Keith [Vaz MP], when he started had Asians coming to him from all over the Midlands with immigration. We’ve never run from being an ethnic minority MP, obviously you can’t take all cases that come to you from over the country otherwise you wouldn’t have time to do your own work, but I’ve never run from being an ethnic minority MP, it’s a privilege (interview).

It has been argued that the direct link provided between voters and their local Member of Parliament in the first past the post (FPTP) system would be lost if certain systems of proportional representation were adopted. This need not be the case, however, if a hybrid

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PR system was used, such as the Additional Member System (used for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly) or alternative vote top-ups (suggested by the Jenkins Commission). The multi-seat electoral system used in the Republic of Ireland ensures every voter has a direct link to not one, but between 3 and 5 members, directly elected by their constituency. But would this redress the issue of ethnic minority under representation? Not according to Dianne Abbot MP:

One of the reasons I was able to get elected was when you have first past the post, the MP has a much closer relationship with their constituency than with multi member constituencies. PR would be detrimental because PR means, in effect, MP’s are chosen by the centre. I can tell you if Neil Kinnock [former Labour leader] had been asked to select Black MP’s from the centre, he would not have done so. It was local parties that said in Hackney, in Tottenham, in Leicester, in Brent we want a Black MP. It came from the bottom up (Interview).

This is not a universally held position amongst those seeking greater ethnic minority political representation, however, as some organisations consider electoral reform as being tied to a wider concern of democratic representation. This tension is captured by Ashok Viswanathan of Operation Black Vote:

The fact is that if you come out of an organisation that believed in democratic reform, anything that makes democracy more modern and more relevant to everyday people is something that we would welcome, but what we would also caution is although we would agree with electoral reform we think the case has to be made to Black communities who feel that PR will make it easier for the far right and other extremist groups to gain seats in areas, especially in local and European elections (interview).

There are then several issues at stake that go beyond an ambivalence to electoral reform, and these inevitably give rise to a concern with the electoral possibilities afforded to far right groups. As Raj Jethwa describes: “I’m not sure whether proportional representation would necessarily solve the problem here. […] I’m opposed to PR slightly on the grounds that for example the BNP has got a seat in London and it gives them legitimacy if they can win in systems like that” (interview). It is to this issue that we now turn.

The rise of the Far Right

The British National Party is not represented in Parliament. In the last general election it secured less than 1 per cent of the popular vote (around 0.7 per cent), and this gave it the eighth largest share of the vote (though it only contested English seats and came 5th in these). During the May 2008 local elections it secured a total of 58 elected councillors in local government in England, which is less than 1% of the total number of seats available, though it now also holds one London-wide seat on the London Assembly. This does not, then, amount to a significant electoral presence, which may be contrasted with situations of EU counterparts since “the far right in this country have not been as adept as they have in, say France and other places, in gaining respectability” (Baroness

8 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7382831.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7382831.stm)
Young, interview). Nevertheless, these developments do mark an increase in British Far Right electoral activity, which begs the question as to why the they should be making these advances now. Some explanation might be garnered from the broader electoral strategies pursued by political parties that would normally draw voters currently selecting the BNP. As Raj Jethwa describes:

In many ways the New Labour strategy of triangulation moving to the centre ground, has almost consciously left behind sections of the white working class who feel they’ve got no voice and some of the issues are bread and butter issues like housing, like the quality of work and so they have been made easy prey for the BNP. […] These were people that would previously have been Labour voters and again local organisations have broken down. [T]here is no obvious voice for these concerns… white low income voters don’t see the point in voting unless they have a really strong protest.

One anomalous piece of research which perhaps points to something else to do with the prevalence of certain social attitudes, can be found in a YouGov poll conducted in April 2006 which reported that a small majority of Britons agreed with many BNP policies, when unaware they were associated with the BNP. Thus 59% supported the halting of all further immigration, and average support for the BNP propositions cited in the poll among those who did not know they were associated with the BNP was 55%. While many of the statements put forward coincided with views also put forward by other political parties, there were also certain BNP propositions including the party’s policy of encouraging the ‘repatriation’ of ethnic minorities which was endorsed by around 50% of those polled. Curiously, other BNP propositions were strongly opposed by those polled, including that non-white citizens were inherently ‘less British’, and overall support fell among those who were told that the policies were those of the BNP. Either way, whether the threat of the BNP is exaggerated or not, organisations concerned with ethnic minority political representation consider the activities of the BNP a key electoral issue, as Ashok Viswanathan of OBV describes:

We did quite a lot of polling in London and we found that for every person that didn’t vote for one of the other mainstream parties there was an increased likelihood of the BNP getting in. It’s surprising that they got just one seat. People did come out and they voted but not enough, especially in a city as diverse as London. If more people would have come out and voted it would have automatically precluded that the BNP wouldn’t have got a seat (Interview)

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9. This is an analysis shared by Baroness Young: “It has enabled them to flourish in a way that was more stifled in the 70’s and 80’s because of the division between left and right, Conservative and Labour which is very murky now. Nothing feels as clear cut anymore so it leaves a bit of a vacuum into which they step. In a way, that’s kind of predictable given the political climate” (Interview). It is worth noting that the Far Right in Britain to best when the Labour party is in government, and the Conservatives move towards the Centre and so vacate some right-wing ground, especially where the Conservatives do not look electable.

Political representation and the role of parties

While it is clear that ethnic minorities share similar concerns to the wider electorate on matters such as education, health care, crime, unemployment and so forth, they also have specific concerns about the operation of racial discrimination in these very areas, as well as the impact of immigration policies, and, of course, transnational and international issues. Such concerns may be specific to different minorities, and these can be in tension with the political outlooks and campaign strategies of political parties or particular groups in a party (Knowles, 1992; Ali and Percival, 1993; Messina, 1998; Purdam, 2001). A number of studies have also highlighted experiences of discrimination and frustration centring on the failure to represent issues of concern or to allow equal access to positions of power, or to promote and support minority candidates (Amin and Richardson, 1992; Fitzgerald, 1987; Solomos and Back, 1995; Geddes, 1993, 1998; Messina, 1998; Jeffers, 1991; Ali and O' Cinneide, 2002). One particular complaint concerns the suspicion that ethnic minority candidates are only given non-safe, non-winnable seats, so that while “the formal procedures in themselves may be largely free of discrimination”, the pool of talent from which elected politicians are drawn “appears to be alarmingly homogeneous” (Saggar, 2000: 206). Consequently, only 15 of 643 Members of Parliament are of ethnic minority background, 29 peers who are members of the House of Lords, and 662 were local councillors before the 2008 local elections (3 per cent of 21,498 councillors in England and Wales).

This is elaborated in our case studies below, but it is worth noting how this situation has prompted the conclusion that political parties want ethnic minority votes but not ethnic minority opinions (Adolino, 1998), and it is plausible that where mainstream political parties do not attempt to take minority interests on board, that this can lead to their distrust of the political process. For example, the OBV survey referred to earlier found that that one of the principal factors that could encourage ethnic minority non-voters to cast a vote included ‘listening to minority concerns’. As such it is has long been argued that the political participation of ethnic minorities in Britain is affected by the policies and initiatives taken by the political parties to do just this.

These policies and initiatives can include special arrangements to attract ethnic minority support, Party manifesto commitments, and most substantively the number of ethnic minority candidates and elected MPs and councillors. For example, the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC) has a race and equality sub-committee which performs a similar function to the Party’s women and local government committees. Its main objectives include the promotion of ethnic minority participation in the party, to ensure equality of opportunity for ethnic minority prospective Parliamentary candidates, and to get and maintain ethnic minority support for the party (additionally an ethnic minority officer is appointed at the Labour Party national headquarters). The activities of Raj Jethwa, Ethnic Minorities Officer for the London region of the Labour Party, himself a candidate for the European Parliament, provide a good illustration of the workings of these committees:

I try and support ethnic minority activists within the Party who want to get more involved, to put issues forward at a regional level… Also to raise the profile of a) potential candidates, and b) the issues that ethnic minorities want to raise within the Party. This is how I see the role. […] We’ve had events on a London wide basis
with one hundred activists which involve cabinet ministers. So at that sort of level, we’ve managed to do that element of it of trying to raise the profile and exposure for the mainstream Party in terms of leaders, ministers and MP’s to the concerns of ethnic minority activists. I think that’s been very successful. We’ve managed to do some training events and draw together a network of ethnic minorities activists and what I don’t think we’ve been successful in doing is going much further forward in promoting potential candidates for public office (interviewed 17 September, 2008).

Indeed, the formerly labour party affiliated Black Socialist Society (BSS) has recently relaunched as the Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Society (BAME) with a membership of 4500 labour party supporters, with the endorsement of the labour leader and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. At a recent meeting of the Labour Party’s National Policy Forum (NPF), delegates, including cabinet ministers, members of the NEC, trade unionists and constituency representatives, passed a resolution proposed by BAME’s chair, Ahmad Shahzad, committing the party to using a new Equalities Bill (see work package 4) to push the issue of minority political representation:

Labour will use the new Equalities Bill to introduce specific provisions to allow for positive action measures to redress under-representation and to seek to ensure increased BAME representation in all areas of politics and public life, and specifically in the Westminster and European Parliaments, other assemblies and public bodies.

The specifics of this are returned to below, but what it means is that as official party policy, it will form part of Labour's manifesto for the next general election, and its sentiments will be incorporated into the Equalities Bill, which Labour will present to parliament in November this year.

The Conservative party too has inaugurated an Ethnic Diversity Council (EDC) which seeks to “actively engage with members of the ethnic community and get them

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11 He continues: “I think the Party, at a leadership level regionally and nationally, the Party places a great deal of diversity and ethnic minority concerns. [...] I think people have all sorts of avenues that they try and explore in order to tap into ethnic minority views. There are a range of organisations within the Party, a range of individuals who are consulted, there is no one systematic way of doing it but there is a lot of, I use the word, lip service but not in a derogatory way.”


13 Moreover its aims and objectives includes the following items: (i) to influence and participate in policy making process at all levels of the Labour Party and through its work BSS will ensure that issues and concerns of BSS members are raised at the highest levels of the Party; (ii) to ensure that Black, Asian and Ethnic minority members are represented throughout the Party bodies and are selected for the Welsh Assembly, Scottish, Westminster and European Parliaments and for public office in local and central government; (iii) to eliminate racism and discrimination in all forms and will support its members in their struggle against racism in the United Kingdom and Worldwide, whilst developing links with other similar organizations to achieve this end, and (iv) BAME Labour shall work to achieve support for the Labour Party. See http://bamelabour.org.uk/bame_labour_executive.
involved in the affairs of the party”. To this end it has announced a series of A-list prospective parliamentary candidates which consists of at least fifty ethnic minority candidates including Priti Patel - a British Asian woman - for the safe Essex seat of Witham. On this matter David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, has promised ‘positive action’ to counter the degree of under-representation of minorities within his party, as described in Text Box 2.

**Text Box 2 David Cameron speech to Ethnic Media Conference, 29 November, 2006.**

We need to address the current under-representation of minorities and lack of diversity that exists in all parties, including my own. […] In the past, the Conservative Party thought it was enough to remove formal barriers to entry and to provide equality of opportunity. We believed that we were operating a meritocracy. But we weren't. The fact is that it's not enough just to open the door to ethnic minorities. If people look in and see an all-white room they are less likely to hang around. An unlocked door is not the same as a genuine invitation to come in. That's why the Conservative Party needs positive action if we are to represent Britain as it is. This isn't just morally right - it's enlightened self-interest. If we don't change we will be at a huge disadvantage. A mono-ethnic party cannot represent a multi-ethnic country. How can we understand the country we aspire to govern if the conversation inside the Conservative Party doesn't reflect the conversation in the broader community? […] Better representation of black and minority communities is vital for all of us. We are all part of the same country, the same political system. In order to feel that, we need to show it. A system that locks out all the talent in ethnic minority communities is failing them - and failing everyone else as well.15

These sentiments mark a radical departure in the position of the Conservative party during the era of Margaret Thatcher who led the party for 15 years without ever making a speech on race equality (Shukra, 1998). It would be fair to conclude, then, that it was the debates about practices and policies within the Labour Party that first established the import of promoting meaningful political representation that is inclusive of ethnic minorities. For example, the labour party’s present race equality committee has its roots in the Labour Party Race and Action Group (LPRAG) which was conceived in the mid-seventies as a pressure group, and to educate and advise party members and leadership on matters of race equality. This was followed by a long campaign to set up Black Sections in the Labour party, a move that was eventually defeated during several party conferences.

14http://www.conservativemuslimforum.com/_lord_sheikh_b_speech.php
15 David Cameron speech to Ethnic Media Conference, 29 November, 2006. Available here: http://www.conservativeparty.org.uk/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=133939&speeeches=1. In the same speech, however, he attacks multiculturalism thus: “As a country, we're comfortable with multiple identities. What is a problem, however, is the weakening of our common culture. […] When I say 'multiculturalism' let's be absolutely clear what I'm talking about. I'm not referring to the reality of our ethnically diverse society that we all celebrate and only embittered reactionaries like the BNP object to. I mean the doctrine that seeks to Balkanise people and communities according to race and background. A way of seeing the world that encourages us to concentrate on what divides us, what makes us different. […] It's been done in the name of multiculturalism. […] Multicultural policies provide a powerful incentive to proclaim one's victim status. This leads to a grievance culture - a zero sum game that views every concession to one group as a slight to others.”
throughout the 1980s. This warrants some elaboration, however, because while the Black Sections remained an unofficial movement, they are illustrative of the British case in that they “not only reflected but also contributed substantially to the growth in thinking in British ethnic minority politics” (Saggar, 2000: 156).

**Labour party black sections**

Within the national Labour party a group or caucus of its ‘black’ members insisted that only by organising and mobilising a black constituency within it could they orient the party toward more substantively addressing matters of ethnic minority Parliamentary representation. ‘Black’ could be taken as a political racial identity in two different senses: a race in the sense that a population has been conceived as a race by white people, which may have nothing more in common than how white people treat them; or, a race in the sense of a similar physical appearance (‘black’), a similar territorial origin, a common history and so on. In short, not just as a subordinated population but as a people. The development of this racial identity drew upon an American experience and became much more than just a political construct but a racial-ethnic-cultural pride movement. It was a movement by and for people of African roots and origins in the enslavement of African peoples in the ‘New World’, as symbolised in the slogan ‘black is beautiful’. The celebration of the positive elements of the black diasporic African heritage of struggle, and of the achievements of the contemporary bearers of that heritage became integral to the meaning of ‘black’ as it was picked up across the world, Britain. But this created a serious incoherence in the meaning of ‘black’ as a positive political identity (Modood, 1994). On the one hand, it was a non-ethnic term referring to a movement of resistance to racial subordination, and therefore, in aspiration, fully including Asians. On the other hand, it referred to a black diasporic African ethnicity and therefore by definition excluded Asians even though they were the numerical majority of non-whites in Britain. That for many years this contradiction was not noticed or not thought problematic by advocates of political blackness - which included the majority of Asians involved in anti-racism as a political movement for most of the 1970s and 1980s – enabling it to become the hegemonic minority discourse of the 1980s and accepted as such by the political classes reflects two things about this period. Indeed, the fundamental problem for political blackness came from the internal ambivalence, namely whether blackness as a political identity was sufficiently distinct from and could mobilise without blackness as an ethnic pride movement. This black identity movement, in a growing climate of opinion favourable to identity politics of various kinds, was successful in shifting the terms of the debate from colour-blind individualistic assimilation to questions about how white British society had to change to accommodate new groups. But its success in imposing or making a singular identity upon or out of a diverse ethnic minority population was temporary (probably at no time did a majority of Asians think of themselves as part of a positive black identity (Modood et al, 1997: 294-297)). What it did was pave the way for a plural ethnic assertiveness, as Asian groups borrowed the logic of ethnic pride and tried to catch up with the success of a newly legitimised black public identity.

Within the Labour Party this constituency (or smaller groups of constituencies) became known as the *Labour Party Black Sections (LPBS)* which sought a constitutional
status within the party on a par with already existing Women and Youth sections (Shukra, 1998). As one of its founding and leading members, Dianne Abbott MP, explains:

[H]aving got on the council I started to meet other Black people who were active in other parts of London. We asked...if you could have women sections and youth sections why didn’t we have a Black section? So a number of us in our local parties set up Black Sections. I forget the year now [1983], but we came together for the first National Black Sections conference and having started off trying to organise people in the Labour party we then formulated a set of demands around representation. Representation was always about trying to form a political agenda on fundamental issues around employment, around race discrimination, against police harassment and so on. As we moved into the issue of representation we felt there should be more Black councillors (some of us were councillors at that point), more Black leaders of councils and more Black MP’s (interviewed 22 July 2008).

Though now defunct, the LPBS initially contained the soon to be all four non-white and ethnic minority Members of Parliament (which increased to 15 in 2005 see fg. 5) and achieved marked success in increasing the number of ethnic minority councillors. While it was criticised for seeking a corporatist style of representation without connecting this to grass-roots support, so that an emphasis on organisational matters made political debate secondary (Shukra, 1998: 73), as Dianne Abbot MP explains the LPBS succeeded in establishing the need for, and potential of, organisational representation within the party:

We created a climate where, and it’s interesting, all the constituencies that in 1987 elected Black MP’s had Black sections because it was the Black sections inside the local parties that made common causes with Black groups outside and said we want a Black MP in Hackney, Tottenham, and Brixton and so on (interview, ibid).

In this sense Abbot and her colleagues graphically elevated the under-representation debate, even if this was frequently conceived as fragmentary, not least within a Labour Party where the LPBS “were met by scorn and derision...because they said it was separatist” (ibid.). On the other hand, there is no mistaking the prominent roles played by several minority political figures during this period which served to give the impression that securing ethnic minority Parliamentary representation would be the same as changing the agenda of political issues as well (specifically concerning race equality and anti-discrimination). For some, including Diane Abbot, the two agenda’s were certainly interdependent. This was also the case with Lady Shreela Flather who was one of the first ethnic minority peers appointed to the House of Lords, and who recalls:

When I arrived I realised that I was the only Asian there so I immediately started looking at the bills which were coming up from the point of view of how they affected the minorities. My first big amendment was Clause 95 in the ’91 Criminal Justice Act. It was to make it a duty for everyone working in the Criminal Justice system not to discriminate. So by adding just one word ‘duty’, it meant that if anybody felt that they had been discriminated against they could actually bring a case or have a judicial review (interviewed 8 September, 2008).
Others, however, remain unconvinced of these relationships. As the former Chair of the now defunct Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), Lord Herman Ouseley formulates it: “if we get a higher proportion of ethnic minority people in Parliament would it make any difference other than look representative?” (Interviewed 11 August 2008). It is to this issue and others, including a more focused discussion on the matter of Parliamentary representation, to which the report will shortly turn. Before this, however, it is worth noting the testimony of David Lammy MP, who replaced Bernie Grant MP in the constituency of Tottenham after the latter’s death caused a by-election. As a young and dynamic politician, with a Harvard degree, Lammy is particularly interesting because of how he understands himself as bridging earlier movements for representation with contemporary issues. He describes:

I found myself constantly being the bridge, the oracle, the means by which various black and ethnic minorities would sort of, come to me as a lawyer and ask my advice, and I was able to be an advocate on their behalf, and the thing is when you're a lawyer you begin to realise that the system needs changing as well, and so I found myself at the right place at the right time, and that was basically, Bernie Grant very sadly died, as the MP for Tottenham, I was there I was young, but clearly I was doing things and in an advocacy position and I put my name forward, and so I'm in that tradition of Labour MPs who recognise that most people from their community, from their background, are nowhere near public life, are nowhere near the potential of power, and I was one of the very very few young people in Tottenham at that point in time who felt connected in that sense, so that's why, my motives were, I knew that I had the gift of the gab, I knew I had the means to communicate, I knew I bridged many worlds, because of my own educational background the ability to move and operate in what is in the end a very white middle class world, as well as deeply rooted and connected in communities, so a certain kind of authenticity, was where I found myself (interviewed 6 Oct 2008).

Case study of ethnic minority political participation:

The 2005 General election witnessed a small increase in the number of ethnic minority MPs to 15\textsuperscript{16}, which is short of the 51 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds that would reflect the 8% national proportion of ethnic minorities.

**Figure 5: Ethnic minority MPs elected according to party at the 2005 General Election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Ethnic minority MPs</th>
<th>Increase/Decrease</th>
<th>Proportion of Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Dems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{16} These were: Adam Afriyie, MP (Con); Ashok Kumar, Dr.; MP (Lab); David Lammy, MP (Lab); Dawn Butler, MP (Lab); Diane Abbott, MP (Lab); Keith Vaz, MP (Lab); Khalid Mahmood, MP (Lab); Mark Hendrick, MP (Lab); Marsha Singh, MP (Lab); Mohammed Sarwar, MP (Lab); Parmjit Dhanda, MP (Lab); Sadiq Khan, MP (Lab); Shahid Malik, MP (Lab); Virendra Sharma, MP (Lab); Shailesh Vara, MP (Con).
During this general election the Conservative Party elected their first black MP (Adam Afriyie in Windsor) and one Asian MP (Shailesh Vara in Cambridgeshire North West). Both were selected as candidates in safe seats where the incumbent was retiring, without using measures of positive action i.e. all ethnic minority short lists mirroring all women shortlists used by the Labour party during the 1997 general election. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats lost their only ethnic minority MP, Parmjit Singh Gill, who won the Leicester South by-election in 2004, seeing the seat pass back to the Labour Party after just ten months in Parliament. In contrast, the Labour Party increased its total number of ethnic minority MPs by one to 13, with three new, including two Muslim, candidates elected (Sadiq Khan, Shahid Malik and Dawn Butler, who replaced retiring MP Paul Boateng). As noted earlier, Oona King, a mixed race female MP, was unsuccessful in her bid to hold her Bethnal Green and Bow seat, but Labour still have the only two black women MPs – Diane Abbot and Dawn Butler. Yasmin Qureshi, meanwhile, was unable to re-take Brent East, lost to the Liberal Democrats in a 2003 by-election. Had she been returned, she would have been Britain’s first Muslim woman MP. Geographically, one third of ethnic minority MPs represent London constituencies, and most others are in large towns and cities, all with minority ethnic populations above the UK average. The two Conservative ethnic minority MPs, and Labour’s Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) and Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough South and Cleveland East) are exceptions (Scotland has only one Asian MP (Mohammed Sarwar) while Wales has none).

Candidature Selection

One of the obvious constraints upon greater representation was touched upon earlier and concerns the party selection techniques that were so intentionally politicised by the Labour Party Black Sections. As Shreela Flather, a cross-bench member of the House of Lords, the first Asian woman to be raised to this position in 1990 (at the time by the Conservatives), describes:

> It’s really not an easy route [to be selected to stand for a constituency]. Everybody has to present themselves forever and everybody has to work extremely hard. There are different ways of getting into parliament between the different parties. With the Labour party you have to start on the local root level and then work your way up. It’s a hard grind. With the Tories it’s slightly different because you can be put on a list, they don’t do it on the basis of groups and roots you see and if you can do it by being there on the list then it’s easier, but still incredibly hard (interviewed on 8 September, 2008).

Another perspective on these selection processes delves deeper and problematises this state of affairs:

> [I]n many safe seats black candidates cancel each other out… for example in West Ham the seat went to a white woman because there were six candidates, one White woman, five black candidates, one man, four women, two African Caribbean, two Asian. They all split the vote and the White candidate ended up getting into the seat. I think that’s the problem with a lot of safe seats. You get a single white
candidate, you maybe get two and you get several Black candidates. The local
party split the vote between their candidates because there’s no sort of strategy
(Viswanathan, Interview).

To ensure a greater ethnic minority movement through these procedures, in February of
this year Keith Vaz MP, one of the first four ethnic minority MPs elected through the
LPBS movement in 1987, introduced a Bill seeking to exclude political parties’ selection
of Parliamentary candidates from the application of Race-Relations Act (1976 as
amended in 2000 and 2003 see work package 2 & 4) which prohibits the selection or
promotion of candidates (in any form of employment) based upon racial or ethnic
grounds. The Bill specifically proposed to allow for the creation of shortlists on the
grounds of ethnicity in the selection of parliamentary candidates (this would be voluntary
and not oblige or compel parties in any way). As he insisted:

Positive action [which is promoted by the legislation but is different from positive
discrimination] is achieved by exempting the selection of candidates from the
provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976. [...] The creation of ethnic minority
shortlists will undoubtedly see more ethnic minorities taking up seats in
Parliament, which will mean a Parliament that mirrors the society it represents, a
Parliament that citizens can identify with and a Parliament that better reflects their
needs. It will encourage many more to engage in civic society and afford them a
greater sense of belonging (Hansard, 6 Feb 2008: Column 974).

It is important to note that such an amendment would operate under a ‘sunset clause’
limiting its use to a particular time-period, and that while this approach may well appear
radical it is not without precedent. For example, to ensure that the Labour party’s ‘all
women’ short lists could not be subject to legal challenge, the government made several
amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act in order to provide all political parties with
brief exemption in which to pursue such measures if they wished (this expires in 2012).
The amendment to the Race Relations Act would permit parties to use ‘twinning’
(combining two constituencies and selecting one ethnic minority and non-ethnic
minority). The equivalent on the grounds of Gender has ensured that the Welsh
Assembly has the best gender balance in an elected democracy in the world. Where
‘twinning’ might be difficult to implement ‘zipping’ (where the names of ethnic minority
and non-ethnic minority candidates alternate equally in the critical top positions of the
Party list of candidates) might be used on a top-up list. The change in the law would also
permit parties to introduce ‘all ethnic minority shortlists’ paralleling all women shorlists.

Text Box 3 - Rushanara Ali, Labour Party Parliamentary Candidate

We will have a great sense of responsibility because when you are among the first you have to
watch yourself even more than everybody else, because you are measured whether you like it or
not. It’s the mixed blessing of being in a minority, in particular fields because you are going to
be measured. The experience of Muslim women and South Asian women will often be viewed
through that lens and it’s a symbolic value isn’t it in addition to your own actions and what you
do and the symbolic values of be it women of Muslim, South Asian origin going into politics so
for me that means I am very aware of the depth of responsibility that that means and entails. I
didn’t enter into this lightly, I thought very hard about that and I came on the side of deciding to do this because I think that it would be good for us as a society […] I felt that, even if it’s in a modest way, if by going into politics I can make a difference, which I believe I can, and then I should. But also I think it’s important for women to see…other young women, but older women as well, I’ve had lots of women particularly of South Asian origin, older women that have come up and said we are treated like this or we are treated like that or we are seen as passive victims and so on, well this will show them!

At the moment the Labour Party use zipping which means that as a minimum each constituency ward has to nominate at least one woman and least one ethnic minority candidate; this could be satisfied by nominating a woman of ethnic minority background (some wards may nominate two women and others might nominate one woman of ethnic minority background and two men). These are rules which are nationally implemented by the Labour Party, so that each ward will have the right to nominate three people for the long list before it goes to the shortlist, but if over 50% of the proportion of the membership votes for one candidate then that candidate automatically joins the shortlist of four to eight prospective candidates. As Rushanara Ali, a Labour Party candidate standing in Bethnal Green at the next general election describes:

It’s broken into two lots and those who don’t get over 50% of the nominations have to then present themselves to the general committee of the Labour Party which is the decision making body of the local party and usually they are about thirty or forty member depending on the size of the constituency and then they would do speeches and then there will be a vote. From that vote the final short list will be decided (interviewed 16 October, 2008).

The important point is that the final short list will have to have 50% women and then whatever’s left is allocated to those who performed the best and can lobby for the votes of the general committee members.

Text Box 4 – Historical ethnic minority figures in Parliament

Due to the historical and colonial links of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans with Britain, they had a legal right to participate fully in the country’s politics even before the post war mass migration. Therefore, such participation is not new. Three MPs from the Indian subcontinent were elected to the House of Commons before World War II, all representing London constituencies. The first, Dadabhai Naoroji, was elected in 1892 as a Liberal in Finsbury Central. The second, Sir Mancherjee Bhownagree, was twice elected as a Conservative for Bethnal Green North East in 1895 and 1900. The third, Shapurji Saklatvala, was twice elected for Battersea North, as a Labour candidate in 1922 and as a Communist in 1924. All three were Parsees. In the House of Lords, there was one member from the Indian subcontinent, Lord Sinha of Raipur (1863-1928). At a local level, in 1934 Chunilal Katial, a medical doctor, was elected as a Labour councillor in Finsbury, and in 1938 he became the first ethnic minority origin mayor in Britain. Krishna Menon, a teacher, was also elected in 1934 as a Labour councillor for St Pancras ward in London. In 1936, another doctor, Jainti Saggar, was elected as a Labour councillor in Dundee and served for 18 years. There are other examples of ethnic minority candidates who were elected by a mainly white electorate.
The House of Lords

The key area of Parliament that has seen an increase in the number of figures from ethnic minorities is the House of Lords. In 2000 a Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords recommended that the ‘upper chamber’ of Parliament, a chamber historically made up of either hereditary or politically appointed Peers, should become broadly representative of the people of Britain. To this end the Commission insisted that: “All people should be able to feel that there is a voice in Parliament for the different aspects of their personalities, whether regional, vocational, ethnic, professional, cultural or religious, expressed by a person or persons with whom they identify” (quoted in CMEB, 2000: 231). It specifically recommended that an Appointments Commission should be set up to “ensure a level of representation for members of minority ethnic groups which is at least proportionate to their presence in the population as a whole” (quoted in CMEB: 232). While it did not introduce anything like a statutory duty, the House of Lords has seen its number of ethnic minority Peer leap from 5 in 1997 to 29 today, which resulted from a combination of both political appointments and open access applications from individuals active in civil society. The impact of these appointments, according to Lord Herman Ousely, amounts to “one big example that exists within Britain today of how you shift the culture of an institution”. He continues:

I think what New Labour have done, together with the Conservatives who brought in a few, in the last year under Cameron, it has actually changed the dynamic of the way in which the Lords functions and how the Lords sees itself […] A lot of the peers who were in their cosy existence in the culture that has existed for decades; it’s their club, with their style and culture and the way they do things, suddenly they were seeing black faces and in particular black women in positions of power, as the leader of the House and leading with a particular political portfolio. […] I think over a period of three to four years they started to be much more responsive and respectful of that diversity as more and more BME people and women were in leadership positions. […] This was actually shifting opinion; they were getting men to actually sit back and listen and respect. What has happened is a real example of how you can change a culture of a bastion of power by the numbers of people you put in (interview, 11 August 2008).

In contrast, the CMEB recommended that an appointments committee go further in introducing a statutory duty to ensure that the chamber would be representative with respect to gender and ethnicity.

Something that is regretted by Baroness Lola Young who raised the concern that “one of the questions for me would be around the appointments commission; what is the ratio of appointments to applications from Black and minority ethnic people, and trying to think through when I come across people that I think should stand a chance or I think ought to be seen” (interview).
This change has been recent and cumulative, however, and Lady Shreela Flather provides an interesting anecdote detailing her first experiences of the Lords (as the first the Asian woman to be appointed) which illustrates the sorts of contrasts Lord Ouseley is referring to:

There hadn’t been any other Asian woman, but there had been one man, but he’d left already, he’d given up the Lords. […] One of the hereditary peers said, you wouldn’t have liked him you know, he was much too English for you! […] It was a very different House of Lords. All the hereditary peers were there and I hadn’t actually met anybody from the aristocracy from my normal life and you do wonder if some kind of different interaction is required but actually I realised that after a few months they were just very shy and they didn’t have any openers. They couldn’t say, ‘where’s your family from? Which school did you go to?’ What would they ask me? (Interview)

It is then, undeniable, that real progress has been made in the House of Lords, but this is now subject to the final settlement of the reform of the upper chamber and in some commentators’ minds, any final settlement opting for a fully elected chamber would radically reduce the numbers of ethnic minorities, for reasons tied to broader issues of Parliamentary representation discussed earlier. But this need not be so, according to Viswanathan, for an example can be found in the American experience:

**Text Box 5: Baroness Lola Young’s Story:**

‘We can be invisible and highly visible at the same time’

When I started [in the Lords] it was fantastic because when I’d introduce people, especially African Americans, and say ‘here’s the leader of the House, a Black woman, here’s the Home Office Minister, Patricia Scotland, a Black woman and then there’s so and so from the Labour benches and she’s African Caribbean’. […] It does feel quite extraordinary and again, it’s when people point it out. You know how it works, as visible minorities so to speak, we can be invisible and highly visible at the same time. There are any number of peers I could point to, mainly on the Tory benches, mainly hereditary, but not exclusively so, who either look at me like, ‘why have I come from the canteen’ kind of a look, or look straight through me, don’t acknowledge me, let the door swing, all of that. There are a handful of those as you might imagine. In its own way it’s still a microcosm of wider society although it might not look like it! […] What I say to myself is that you have one vote, I have one vote; we have equal power in this chamber when it comes to the voting. To be fair most people are really very friendly to the degree that surprised me, I have to say. Now there is an air of exoticism because I’m tall, I dress in a particular way, I’m an artsy person, so there’s a level on which everybody knows who I am, but by the same token I feel there is this thing of, and I haven’t experienced it in quite this way, but other Black members have told me of incidents where in the past they’ve been laughing and somebody’s asked them to keep quiet in a way that they wouldn’t other people or made a comment about clothing or about the fact that there are two Black women and an Asian man sitting together, what’s the conspiracy!

There are different ways you could do it. You could do it on percentages of the national vote or you could do it on a lottery system a bit like the people’s peers
where people put applications in and they are drawn out of a hat […] The reason why the House of Representatives is an institution that looks more like America than the Senate is because they try and use it to address the imbalances of the Senate. […] The way they address that in the U.S. they look at the district, they look at whether they are Black districts or white districts, what sorts of populations they have and they select candidates accordingly so there is no reason they couldn’t redraw the House of Lords with a very similar system (Interview, Viswanathan).

Viswanathan’s analysis re-establishes the importance of examples garnered from the American experiences, specifically with respect to ideas of substantive representation that is indicative of the continuing inspiration garnered from an Atlantocentric race-equality movement.

Conclusions

The political representation of migration related minorities in British occupies an important place in debates around political participation in general, but at present the proportion of minority representatives holding elected office does not sufficiently reflect Britain’s ethnic diversity. As such, less progress appears to have been made on this issue than on, for example, encouraging ethnic minority voter registration and ethnic minority voter participation. Indeed, across several arenas discussed throughout this report, ethnic minority political participation in Britain could be characterised as incrementally improving and expanding. Mainstream Muslim identity politics, by and large, appears to comprise another strand of this engagement and will provide an interesting dimension of the debate in coming years. As such it appears to remain the case that the challenge for political parties is how to appeal to all sections of society including ethnic minorities, but specifically ensure that ethnic minorities participate, and that minority candidates are selected and elected. On this matter there is widespread recognition within political parties and among the wider public of the need to address ethnic under-representation in British politics. Perhaps contrasted with European counterparts this is a positive development. However, the progress has been slow to the extent that, for example, and despite attracting the majority of the ethnic minority voters, the Labour Party still has only 13 ethnic minority MPs. Thus Rushanara Ali insists that “the only one thing that is common to all parties is what they are doing is still not enough. It is not enough to get the large number of ethnic minority MP’s that is genuinely needed to really transform the face of British politics”. Whilst political parties are not covered by the duty to promote equality under Section 71 of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (see work-package one), parties could expand and more aggressively develop strategies that actively promote equality in order to address ethnic minority under-representation. These measures of positive action could be designed to eliminate cultural and procedural obstacles that contribute to ethnic under-representation. Such strategies may well be necessary to off-set the likelihood that “as things stand, probably six, possibly eight [ethnic minority] MP’s could lose their seats at the next general election under Labour” (Interview, Viswanathan). To ensure that ethnic minority candidates are not disproportionately affected in party political electoral losses, the Government could explore the options for introducing legislation to allow certain limited and proportionate
positive action measures to address ethnic under-representation in politics. Such action could be time-limited, objectively justified, and narrowly targeted to achieve clear objectives to satisfy proportionality requirements.

Bibliography


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**Appendix I – Interviewees**

1. Diane Abbot MP
2. Lord Herman Ouseley
3. Baroness Shireela Flather
4. Baroness Lola Young
5. Jonathon Ellis - Refugee Council
6. Ashok Viswanathan – Operation Black Vote
7. Raj Jethwa – Labour Party Ethnic Minority Officer
8. Rushanara Ali – Labour Party Candidate
9. David Lammy MP