

TOM PURSGLOVE MP
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

11th June 2020

Dear Constance,

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of racism in the United Kingdom and in the United States. I have read your comments with interest and reflected carefully on the heartfelt accounts that have been expressed in the correspondence I have received.

I totally understand the anger and grief that is felt not just in America, but here in the UK in response to the killing of George Floyd - nobody should ever be treated in the way that Mr Floyd was and I find his death at the hands of US police officers as distressing as you do and I condemn it in the strongest of terms. I also want to be completely clear at the outset that I fully support the right to protest lawfully - albeit at this time, in accordance with the rules on social distancing, given that we are currently in the midst of an appalling global pandemic and we all have a duty to each other to limit the spread of this virus.

In the wake of this killing, racial divisions in the US are plain to see, and it is incumbent on us all to use this moment to look with renewed vigour at how black people are treated here in the UK. Racism is abhorrent. I deplore it in all its forms - indeed, I have regularly spoken on the issue of antisemitism too. Racism has no place in our communities and we all have a responsibility to tackle it head on. The wealth of diversity across our country is, and should be, something to be celebrated and I think it is wonderfully striking how locally in Corby & East Northamptonshire, people from so many different backgrounds respect and look out for each other, and we celebrate our rich and diverse cultures as one community.

As someone of the generation I am of, I find the race related discrimination of the past virtually impossible to comprehend. We have come so far in recent decades in this country and I personally treat others how I myself would like to be treated. I treat everyone equally, regardless of their ethnicity, their gender, their sexuality, their age, or their background. For me, that is just a matter of common decency, respect and tolerance.

We must also remember the lessons of history - the good, the bad, the downright ugly, however uncomfortable - and not repeat the mistakes that were made by those who have gone before us. Ultimately, we cannot expunge or rewrite what has happened, and nor should we - instead, we should draw upon the lessons it teaches us and as individuals take responsibility to ensure it is not forgotten or repeated; unlike the past, that is something entirely within our gift in the here and now, that we can positively influence and ensure. We eradicate chapters of history at our peril and if people in 2020 wish to see statues or the like taken down, that is achieved through democratic means and proper process, not illegal acts of vandalism.



With all that in mind, I have been heartened by the solidarity shown in the UK, whether that be by colleagues in the parliamentary community, where we marked George Floyd's tragic passing with a minute's silence, in the reasoned, measured, democratic engagement between elected politicians and their constituents, the lighting purple of public buildings, or people from many walks of life choosing to 'take a knee'. I have also been struck by the number of British people wanting to demonstrate their support for the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign. Indeed, the strength of feeling in the wake of George Floyd's killing serves as a stark reminder that work remains to be done here in the UK and across the globe.

It should be noted that there are many good national and local initiatives out there to help tackle this scourge, with great people involved in leading them. There are also well-established mechanisms in place in Whitehall and within the police to address racially motivated discrimination, to improve policing and to stamp out racist bullying in schools, with some of these flowing from the Hate Crime Action Plan, which you can read more about, here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/hate-crime-action-plan-2016. At this time, we must not only draw on these resources, but also examine whether they are sufficient. With this in mind I have ensured that Ministers are aware of the strength of feeling on this issue among my constituents, including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and the Home Secretary.

More specifically, I would like to turn to each of the various issues that have been raised in the correspondence I have received and comment on them.

Events in the US, policing and protests

Like many, and as I have already said, I was incredibly distressed by the footage of what happened to George Floyd in the lead up to his death in police custody. It is impossible not to be. Simply put, it should never have happened and I condemn the actions of those responsible in the United States, who I understand have since been arrested and subsequently charged.

In stark contrast, I am proud of the UK's approach to policing, with trust and legitimacy vital elements of policing by consent. The UK has consistently implemented measures to ensure accountability and transparency across police forces. This includes regular inspections of police engagement with communities, frequent publication of data on police powers and strengthening the police complaints system. I have long argued that policing in the US could learn much from policing here in the UK.

However, more still needs to be done in this area in this country too and I am particularly interested in working to build a more diverse police force. The recruitment of 20,000 extra new officers - something I was at the forefront of campaigning for - provides our country with a unique opportunity to address under-representation in recruitment and support the police to become even more representative of the communities they serve. I know that here in Northamptonshire our policing leaders are extremely conscious of this and are seizing on this ongoing national recruitment process to bring about positive change locally.

The Government is also very clear that disciplinary and criminal proceedings may follow any serious breach of the standards expected of police officers. That is of course entirely right and proper.



I feel, however, if we are going to have an honest debate about this issue, that I must say something about the conduct of certain elements of some of the protests we have seen in recent days. First, I want to again emphasise that the UK has a proud tradition of peaceful democratic protest and it is a right of all citizens. I understand why so many people feel such a clear desire to make their voices heard following the death of George Floyd. However, during the current pandemic it is essential that those who do protest do so while observing social distancing - after all, it is the law. Under the rules, gatherings of more than six people are not allowed. Protesters are putting their lives and the lives of others at risk by breaching those rules, and we should be in no doubt about the threat of this awful virus.

Furthermore, as the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have made very clear, protesters have no right to attack the police both verbally or physically, nor the right to engage in acts of wanton criminal damage. We have all seen chilling scenes of thuggery and violence by some in the crowds over recent days. Let me be clear: those responsible will be found and held to account - and rightly so.

But I fear their actions have much wider consequences. Bluntly, I am afraid that those responsible for this illegality are hijacking a genuine cause for their own cynical ends, and in the process are doing untold damage to the cause they purport to support. I would hope that those genuinely seeking change will want to disassociate themselves from this criminal behaviour and call it out for what it is, because those calling for leadership must demonstrate it through their actions too.

Export licenses

Many people have written to me in respect of the export of rubber bullets and tear gas to the United States and I know the Government takes its export control responsibilities very seriously. Indeed, the UK operates one of the world's most robust and transparent export control regimes. Each export licence application is considered on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. This criteria provides a thorough risk assessment framework, requiring the Government to think very carefully about the possible impact of providing equipment and its capabilities. My understanding is that the Government will not grant an export licence if doing so would be inconsistent with the criteria. I have ensured Ministers are aware of the points that have been made to me about these exports.

Ethnic minorities and the impact of Coronavirus

There has been understandable concern about the disproportionate impact of Coronavirus on ethnic minority communities. The figures suggesting that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 are extremely concerning and trouble me greatly. The disproportionate impact has been recognised by my colleagues in Government and Public Health England (PHE) was commissioned to conduct thorough research into the matter by Ministers. In the wake of the report, PHE has been commissioned to carry out further work to better understand the key drivers of the disparities identified in the initial report and the relationships between the different risk factors, which I would expect will then be subsequently acted upon wherever possible. Having called for this review in the first place, I shall continue to monitor this work closely and I know Ministers are treating this with the utmost seriousness.



Belly Mujinga

The death of Belly Mujinga was enormously tragic and my thoughts are with her family and friends at this most difficult of times. She was simply doing her job at Victoria Station, helping those who needed to travel and the circumstances of her death are appalling. I understand that the British Transport Police have now invited the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to conduct an independent review of the available evidence. I will closely follow any developments and welcome the fact that the CPS will now have the opportunity to review the case. It is of course vital that review is able to proceed without political interference which risks jeopardising its integrity.

It is also essential that we keep our transport system going through this difficult period, but we must at the same time protect transport staff. Comprehensive guidance has been issued to transport operators to help them identify and address risks to their staff as the 'lockdown' eases. For example, the guidance encourages operators to carry out risk assessments, and sets out clear rules on interacting with passengers and the re-deployment of clinically vulnerable staff into roles where the risk is lower. It also encourages the use of screens to create physical barriers at places such as ticket offices.

I have also been reassured that the Government is working closely with transport operators to ensure staff are provided with, and wear, face coverings where appropriate for their role, and you will note that face coverings will be required to be worn on public transport from the 15th June, as increased numbers of passengers begin to again use these services.

Teaching of 'The Black Curriculum'

I believe it is vital for young people in this country to learn about Black history. I am therefore pleased that all schools have the freedom to teach it from primary school age onwards, as part of the history curriculum. I am aware that schools have flexibility over how they teach this subject and which resources to use from a range of organisations and sources, including 'The Black Curriculum' if they choose.

I am also encouraged that the National Curriculum provides a number of opportunities for pupils to be taught about different societies and how different groups have contributed to the development of Britain, and that this can include the voices and experiences of black people, which is rightfully explored in history lessons, but also in subjects such as English and citizenship.



In conclusion, like you, I am appalled by the racism still experienced by many from a BAME background. It has no place in our communities and we all have a part to play in tackling it head on, whoever we are and wherever we find it. Despite the progress that has been made in recent years, we cannot be complacent in that endeavour and we must all play our part. The wealth of diversity across our country is something to be celebrated and be proud of, and I will continue to support efforts made to end racism once and for all, both locally and nationally, including through education.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

With best wishes,
T. Pursglove

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