Knowledge, Policy and Practice in Education and the Struggle for Social Justice

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Chapter 7

The White Bones of Policy: Structure, Agency and a Vulture’s-Eye View with Critical Race Theory

David Gillborn

Introduction

This chapter explores the role of race and racism in policy from inside the political heart of the process. There is a large and growing literature that examines how the effects of policy (in numerous fields) tend to reflect, reinforce and extend White racist interests: but there is remarkably little work examining the racialized nature of policymaking in terms of the individual biographies, perceptions and actions of the politicians themselves. Drawing on interviews, designed and conducted with Nicola Rollock and Paul Warmington,1 in this chapter I respond directly to Geoff Whitty’s encouragement to simultaneously keep in view both the macro and the micro (Whitty 1997). In so doing, I identify and explore the inherent Whiteness of the policy process.

It should be remembered that Whiteness and White people are not the same thing: “Whiteness” is a racial discourse, whereas the category “white people” represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color’ (Leonardo 2002: 31). ‘Whiteness’ refers to a system of beliefs, practices and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites. People who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as ‘White’ may act in the interests of Whiteness, but it is not automatic or inevitable. White-identified people can challenge Whiteness, just as people of colour can sometimes become vocal advocates for Whiteness (Gillborn 2016; Bell 1992).
The chapter begins by setting out Whitty’s notion of a ‘vulture’s-eye view’ of policy, followed by details of the interviewees and their cumulative experience of policymaking inside the machinery of government. Subsequent sections examine the politicians’ tendency to contextualize the discussions within a progress narrative, and the vital role of Whiteness as a dimension in policymakers’ biographies. The latter includes fear and uncertainty about ‘race’ as a topic, a tendency to slip into deficit analyses (shifting responsibility for inequity away from structural and institutional factors onto minoritized people and communities) and the crucial presence/absence of a personal commitment to race equality on the part of the individuals holding offices of state.

A vulture’s eye view: The structure/agency problem

In his 1997 Karl Mannheim Memorial Lecture, Geoff Whitty used a striking metaphor (illustrated with a graphic drawn by one of his children) to explore the structure/agency problem facing sociology. Rather than fall into the trap of emphasizing one side of the equation at the expense of the other, Geoff argued for: ‘a “vulture’s-eye view” of the world. Apparently, a vulture is always able to keep the background landscape in view while enlarging its object of immediate interest’ (Whitty 1997: 157). Drawing on numerous key sociologists for inspiration (including Bernstein, Bourdieu, Floud, Giddens and, of course, Mannheim) he called for an approach to: ‘understanding the intersection between biography and history, between identity and structure and between personal troubles and public issues’ (Whitty 1997: 157).

Conceiving the sociological imagination as a ‘vulture’s-eye view’ struck me as an interesting challenge and has continued to gnaw away at me in the years since. Although my career began as an ethnographer, under Geoff’s guidance I moved into critical policy analysis. My focus on racism in education remained unaltered and, in the 2000s, I became an advocate for critical race theory (CRT). Unlike the British tradition of antiracist critique, which resisted attempts to draw up an overarching theory of racism, CRT has set out an increasingly detailed and varied understanding of the operation of racism in societies, like the USA and UK, that are shaped by the interests and assumptions of White people (see Dixson et al. 2018; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Lawrence III et al. 1993). One of the most well-known concepts in CRT is the ‘interest-convergence principle’ (Bell 1980), which states that apparent advances in race equity – including the most celebrated landmark legal decisions
and policy shifts – are accommodated only when they converge with the interests of White elites.

This does not mean that Whites can be convinced of their shared humanity (and/or joint economic interests) alongside minoritized groups through a rational process of discussion and negotiation; rather, the concept highlights that significant change only occurs where political and practical resistance to racism becomes so significant that to deny some measure of change might risk even greater White loss in the future. Although counter-intuitive to many White scholars, the interest-convergence principle has proven remarkably perceptive in understanding the wider political and economic forces at work in periods of racial upheaval: at these moments significant changes can happen but they are often short-lived and their influence uncertain. Once the clamour for change dies down, there is usually a period of retrenchment when the reforms are cut back or even abandoned (see Thompson-Dorsey and Venzant Chambers 2014; Donnor 2005; Bell 1980). Responding to Geoff’s entreaty to adopt a vulture’s-eye view of policy, this chapter asks what we can learn about the dynamics of policymaking and race equity by adding an awareness of individual agency into the picture already created through the structural analysis of interest-convergence.

Talking to policymakers about race and racism

The interviews were conducted as part of a research project, funded by the Society for Educational Studies, that examined how much/little had changed in education in the 20 years following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 (Macpherson 1999). The project combined quantitative analyses of changes in attainment and exclusion data (Gillborn et al. 2017) alongside qualitative insights into the processes that helped to shape policy, including the experiences and perspectives of community activists, engaged academics and other ‘stakeholders’ (Warmington et al. 2018). We also hoped to include first-hand accounts from politicians who had been intimately involved with policy during the period. In addition to approaching several politicians who had been prominent in public debates about race and/or education, we contacted the nine people who, during the 20-year span in question, had been secretary of state for education; that is, the principal political post-holder nationally with responsibility for schooling. Our letters to politicians went mostly unanswered but, often utilizing personal contacts (arising from our involvement in advocacy and academic networks), we
eventually secured interviews with five politicians (conducted between 2014 and 2015 – see Table 7.1).

**Table 7.1: The politicians interviewed and their principal public roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Offices Held</th>
</tr>
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| David Blunkett, 
| David Lammy, 
                                          |                 | Member of Parliament (Jun 2000–)     |
| Estelle Morris, 
  Joined House of Lords in June 2005.     |
| Gillian Shephard, 
  (interviewed by Gillborn)               |                 | At the time of interview was the Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.  
                                          |                 | Member of Parliament (Jun 1987–May 2005).  
                                          |                 | Joined House of Lords in June 2005.     |
Five politicians is a small sample but we were fortunate that the people who agreed to meet us had played key roles at some of the most important points in the story of the Lawrence case. Gillian Shephard was education secretary in the Conservative government (led by Prime Minister John Major) that resisted all calls for a public inquiry into the circumstances of Stephen Lawrence’s murder and the police’s failed investigations. Her successor, David Blunkett, was in charge of education when the Lawrence inquiry reported and then became home secretary, responsible for policing and continuing the post-inquiry reform process. Jack Straw (the first home secretary of Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ government) was pivotal in winning official approval for the inquiry and then steering its recommendations through parliament. Estelle Morris succeeded Blunkett as education secretary and was in post as the initial euphoria and promise of Blair’s election began to wane and policy priorities changed. David Lammy, the youngest of the interviewees, is notable as one of the few current members of parliament (MPs) who consistently champions race equity in education. He stands out from our sample as the only minoritized respondent.

Collectively, these politicians offer insights into the policy process based on a formidable range of experiences, including over 100 years of shared experience as MPs and more than 27 years in cabinet at the very heart of government policymaking.

The interviews are all the more significant because there is a dearth of research that directly quizzes politicians about race inequity. For example, John Bangs and colleagues (2011) produced a fascinating book about the links between policymaking and changes to education practice; seven elected politicians were included in their sample (three with cabinet experience) but racism and ethnic diversity are absent from the analysis. In contrast to the deafening silence on race and racism in
most policy texts, Taylor-Gooby and Waite (2014) explicitly focus on ‘multiculturalism’ and questions of community cohesion. Their interviewees include six MPs but none had cabinet experience and their paper makes no mention of the Lawrence inquiry or related events. In contrast, our interviews explicitly focused on the politicians’ views about race and racism in education and, more broadly, their views of the Lawrence inquiry and its consequences.

Our interviews were designed to follow a semi-structured approach, including some common questions about interviewees’ recollection of the Lawrence inquiry, their view of subsequent policy developments and the state of contemporary race relations in education. We also included specific questions tailored to each of the interviewees’ political biography and certain key incidents or decisions in which they had been involved. Of course, particular caution should be exercised when considering qualitative data generated with powerful interviewees well versed in deflection, obfuscation and other techniques intended to hide problems and cast themselves in a favourable light (Ball 1994). We were by no means the first sociologists of education to interview prominent policymakers and there is an established literature on the potential pitfalls (Ozga 2011; Morris 2009; Puwar 1997; Walford 1994). Walford (2012: 115) notes that, although politicians present additional difficulties (e.g. gaining access, time restraints and styles of evasion) ‘throughout the literature, on researching the powerful in education, there are indications that the differences between it and many other forms of research are not substantial’. As with the other interviewees in the project, the politician interviews ‘were used as means to access the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of changes in race and education policy over time. Interviews were not viewed in idealized terms, as offering “authentic” perspectives on policy history and contexts but as “situated elements in social worlds” (Silverman, 2004: 4)’ (Warmington et al. 2018: 412).

**Accentuate the positive: The progress narrative**

I think that there was a wall built that other people in the future will continue to build on. (David Blunkett)

Each of our interviews with politicians contains a moment where they comment on how much progress has been made in the field of race equality. At first this might appear unremarkable, but it is in stark
contrast to our interviews with community advocates and other stakeholders, who frequently emphasize that progress has been piecemeal or even illusory (Warmington *et al.* 2018). There is considerable variation between the politicians – some are more optimistic than others and none are rash enough to proclaim that all the issues have been fixed – but there is a strong sense that genuine and lasting improvement has been achieved. Typically, they describe progress as a long-term project, with successive generations building on past successes. Hence, Gillian Shephard describes tensions around race as ‘a bit of a generational thing (...) our young people are living in a much more multi-racial world and you – you think about pop music. You think about the Olympics. You know. There is no way that young people can … really can be racist now.’

Estelle Morris strikes a similarly positive note, seeing the improvement in girls’ achievement as a basis for another ‘phase’ that addressed race inequity:

I think the first wave of successful practices with girls and the second wave was ethnic minorities, what they’ve now got to do is do a similar wave of disenfranchised White working class (...) I think we’ve done a lot better at saying to kids ‘you can get on’, I think the [government improvement] targets helped, I think the data helps, at least we know, I think we do face up to under-performing groups, I do think we do face up to them and I don’t think we were 30, 40 years ago. (Estelle Morris)

It is striking that Morris credits government intervention as a part of the process that marks an improvement on ‘30, 40 years ago’ and that she sees ‘disenfranchised White working class’ children as the new priority. The latter focus echoes the dominant political and media trope that currently portrays disadvantaged White students as an underachieving group outstripped by their minoritized peers (cf. Crawford 2019; House of Commons Education Committee 2014; Gillborn 2010).

David Lammy emphasizes that there is more to be done on race equality but also stresses that real progress has been made:

20 years ago we would have been having a passionate debate about diversity in the teaching sector, I think that is a far less strong debate today, I think that—I do see headteachers and senior teachers who are of ethnic minority background in all of our—right across the sector and that obviously brings tremendous strengths (...) There
are issues of advancement and retention, but that picture has got better and is a less forceful debate than it’s been previously.

Similarly, Jack Straw is careful to acknowledge the continuing problems around race and ethnic diversity but also wishes to stress how far society has come:

I’m less optimistic than I was about this, partly because the way immigration has become—immigration in quotes—has become such a major issue in politics (...) immigration’s become in part a code for—a sort of safe code for talking about the fact that people don’t like the way our society’s changed. But there is this difference compared with, say 50 years ago. And I’m old enough to remember seeing those terrible [signs in windows] about no black, no Irish, no dogs, and stuff, and I remember the ‘64 election as well; with ‘if you want a dot, dot, dot for a neighbour vote Liberal or Labour’.

It would be wrong to overstate the degree of progress that the politicians describe; none of them think racism is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, it is important that they each stress how much change has occurred. They do not dismiss the continuing importance of race equality as an issue but, by stressing that substantial progress has been made, they effectively downplay the urgency of the problem in the present. It is as if one were to complain to a doctor about a broken arm and be met with a response along the lines of ‘Oh dear, but at least the limb hasn’t been detached!’ It’s true, it could be worse, but the more pressing question is what can be done about the current problem. The contrast with our stakeholder interviewees is vital and, remembering that these politicians are the exceptional ones who did accept our invitation to be part of research on the Lawrence legacy, it seems to confirm the scepticism that our non-politician interviewees frequently express about the status of race equality as a policy concern (Warmington et al. 2018).

**White lives: The personal dimension to policy**

[M]any of the people or the decision makers, the leaders, still remember a Britain that was very, very different. We didn’t have a black kid at my primary school (...) I don’t think we had a non-white family on our estate. I don’t think we did. And I’m now
60 and I still could be a minister age-wise, and that's not helpful…
(Estelle Morris)

Ninety-two per cent of parliamentarians are White. The 2017 general election saw 52 MPs elected of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Despite being celebrated as the ‘most diverse parliament yet’ (Wilson 2017), the figure is a long way short of mirroring the diversity of the wider population. Because the majority of policymakers, their advisors, professional contacts and family members are White they tend to view policy questions from a standpoint that not only fails to recognize the significance of certain problems for minoritized communities, but also actively embodies Whiteness in their assumptions, experiences and actions.

Race as ‘taboo’

Important consequences flow from the mismatch between the composition of the policy elite and the population they ostensibly represent. First, it means that race-specific issues are unlikely to enter policymakers’ everyday concerns unless they are part of a wider political problem or have become such a high-profile case that the government needs to be seen to act; that is, exactly the point at which interest-convergence begins to kick in. Indeed, White policymakers are aware of – some may share – a wider reluctance among White people to address race-specific issues at all: ‘[T]here’s been such a terrible taboo on discussing race. You know, all kinds of tiptoeing around the issue. And people are terrified. You use the wrong word, you give the wrong impression…. We have made ourselves afraid of confronting this’ (Gillian Shephard).

Gillian Shephard is the only Conservative politician among our sample; perhaps predictably, she is the most vocal in support of a position that views social problems in terms of individual responsibility rather than policies designed to meet the needs of different groups. In relation to race inequity, this is sometimes called a ‘colour-blind’ approach, where race is not singled out for explicit attention in policy:

[T]o have very determined onslaughts onto literacy and numeracy, regardless and across the board, can only be a good thing, I believe. You know, because it’s impartial. It’s measurable. And … in no way—it is grouping-blind, really. I mean, you know, I can’t think of anything better. I also can’t think of anything better, if you can maintain it and sustain it—is a great onslaught on the importance
of standards and rigour in school. Again, across the board and blind of different groupings.

So-called colour-blindness has been widely debunked in the critical literature. From this perspective, whatever the expressed motivation for the position, arguing that race-specific issues should not be an explicit focus for attention has become a powerful discourse that acts to silence debate on racism while masquerading as an innocent (or even morally superior) neutrality (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Leonardo 2002). Annamma and her colleagues argue that ‘color-evasiveness’ (Annamma et al. 2017) is a more accurate term because it makes clear the agency involved when power-holders refuse to engage with race-specific issues. Our other policymaker interviewees (all Labour Party members) are not so explicitly wedded to colour-blind strategies as necessarily the best approach but they do perceive risks in breaking the usual silence on race:

[T]he backdrop of Britain circa 2014 is that we have a national government that is not committed overtly to a race strategy, does not like to define things in relation to race (…) So the national story on a kind of race-specific agenda at this point in Britain is not present. There’s no leadership from government (…) it’s patchy and it means that the consensus language, that takes most people with it, is not quite there on this agenda. (David Lammy)

I still think, especially in times of austerity, that some of the White people who are coming off worse still find a scapegoat in the ethnic minorities who are doing slightly better. So although I intellectually know where I’d like our country to be, I still think we’re struggling a bit to get to it. (Estelle Morris)

Deficit analyses

In public, politicians usually describe policymaking as a rational process in which evidence is used to identify problems and weigh potential solutions; in contrast, interviewing policymakers highlights the crucial role that is frequently played by personal experience and networks (see Ball and Junemann 2012). On occasion, biography can provide a powerful corrective to negative stereotypes that might seem common sense to others in authority:
[T]here are certain well-worn theories about this, as you know, including ... um ... the likelier absence of fathers or father-figures in some of the Afro-Caribbean communities. But no, I mean, my view is that none of these quite add up to tell the full story, and anyway there are plenty of people brought up in single parent families without a dad who do okay. I'm one of them, you know, I was brought up on a council estate by a mother who brought five of us up. (Jack Straw)

Jack Straw's biography, therefore, is a powerful counterbalance to widespread deficit theories about absent fathers and Black educational failure (for a critical discussion see Reynolds 2009). His willingness to question the role of schools and teachers contrasts with the more usual explanations favoured in the press and by much of the educational establishment, where debates about race inequity in education frequently slide into deficit analyses that assume the fault for any lack of attainment must lay with the minoritized group themselves (for more detailed critique see Rollock et al. 2015). For example, David Blunkett repeatedly emphasizes parental influence as a major factor in shaping academic achievement, while Gillian Shephard views students’ own aspirations as the critical factor:

[T]he outstanding question, of course, is if the parents, for all sorts of reasons, don't engage—some, if we're honest, because they don't give a damn, some 'cause they're frightened of education 'cause their own experience was appalling, some because they're so beleaguered—'We're just surviving'. (David Blunkett)

I think I would say that there still appear to be problems with aspiration for young people from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. But that does not, on the face of it, appear to be replicated in other ethnic groupings—all other ethnic groupings, especially not in Asian backgrounds and, you know, Indian. Indian backgrounds. (Gillian Shephard)

I want to be clear that neither Blunkett nor Shephard engage in crude victim-blaming of the sort seen in some press and ‘expert’ coverage (e.g. Sewell 2018). Nevertheless, by identifying the principal causes of attainment inequity in the perspectives and actions of Black students and their families, rather than systemic injustices in the system and how
The absence of personal/biographical insight into the processes of institutional racism is important, therefore, because it leaves policymakers isolated from the racialized realities of life in White-dominated institutions and susceptible to the kind of ‘common-sense’ racist explanations promoted by numerous interest groups determined to protect the racist status quo. The importance of personal commitment to race equality becomes especially clear in the next section, as part of the inside story of the Lawrence inquiry within the Home Office.

The vital presence (and absence) of personal commitment to race equality

[We] did what ministers do; we made it a requirement, we inspected against it and we asked for a plan. (Estelle Morris)

There are numerous strategies by which governments can appear to be taking action while actually ensuring that an issue is pushed to the sidelines in the hope that public and press interest will fade with time. The Blair governments became synonymous with target-setting and reporting systems, an approach that their architect, Michael Barber, subsequently dubbed deliverology (Barber et al. 2011). The quote from Estelle Morris, above, neatly captures the essence of the administration’s approach when it had decided that an issue was to be addressed in reality, and not merely rhetorically. It provides a litmus test for the seriousness with which policymakers address any issue. Our interviews with policymakers show that the personal dimension to policy was crucial in determining whether the Lawrence case would result in meaningful action rather than ‘racial gesture politics’ (Rollock 2018). That same personal dimension – and the Whiteness that makes explicit attention to racism an exception rather than the rule – was crucial in creating, and then dissipating, the impetus behind the policy consequences of the Lawrence inquiry’s findings of institutional racism.

Both Jack Straw and Stephen Lawrence’s mother, Doreen, have published autobiographical accounts of the events leading up to, during and after the Lawrence inquiry (Straw 2012; Lawrence 2006). As incoming home secretary, Straw had the option (and the freedom) to sideline the issue. Doreen Lawrence believes that the process was heading towards a bland report on ‘general police relations with the Black community’ until she personally insisted to Straw that such a reaction would be meaningless (Lawrence 2006: 177–8). The significance of
Doreen Lawrence’s personal interventions is confirmed in our interviews with both Blunkett and Straw. The latter specifically confirms Lawrence’s fear of a gestural report on ‘race relations’ as the police’s preferred option:

[T]he Met (...) were very resistant to the idea of a forensic inquiry into what had happened, or not happened, in the murder investigation. And officials were suggesting that, you know, we could have an inquiry into race relations (...) there was quite a lot of effort being made to kick the thing into touch. (Jack Straw)

Straw’s commitment did not end with establishing the public inquiry. As the inquiry drew to a close, he personally engineered an internal strategy to avoid premature press leaks; following publication, he ensured that ministerial colleagues were on-board before publicly announcing a detailed action plan. Straw’s action plan was unlike anything previously seen in UK race equality policy; the plan took each of the inquiry’s 70 recommendations (Macpherson 1999: 327–35) and designated at least one body responsible for enacting it and reporting back annually. Responsible bodies included the Home Office, the Crown Prosecution Service, Metropolitan Police, the police inspectorate, the education department and Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (the independent education inspectorate).

[The inquiry report] was published on a Wednesday and that week I then wrote round to colleagues to get agreement to say—these 70 recommendations. I’d not wanted to do it before because I didn’t want it to leak, and also you have to be very careful not to ambush your colleagues, but balancing them can sometimes work [laughs] (...) I would have phoned colleagues and said ‘now I need you to agree to this’ because it, you know, an individual colleague could have said ‘I don’t agree with the ones on education’, in which case it would stick out like a sore thumb. (Jack Straw)

This behind-the-scenes work is not described in Straw’s autobiography and reveals the crucial role of a motivated and experienced politician in steering through reforms that challenge the silence, inertia and outright opposition that usually surrounds race equality policy. By ‘balancing’ ministerial colleagues, Straw personally engineered sign-up from all the relevant government departments. He also ensured that Stephen Lawrence’s parents (Doreen and Neville) were part of an official steering group, based in the Home Office, that would oversee the implementation
of the inquiry’s recommendations. David Blunkett, Straw’s successor as home secretary, maintained the steering group and is credited by Straw with achieving one of the inquiry’s most important outcomes, a change to the law of ‘double jeopardy’, which paved the way – 18 years after the murder – for two of Stephen’s killers to be convicted (Dodd and Laville 2012):

I also knew from my experience and from observing what hadn’t happened over Scarman, which was the inquiry into the Brixton riots [in 1981], that unless you—the person in the hot seat, the home secretary—set up a machine for pushing things and for checking progress, the whole thing would just disappear (…) that’s why I set up this steering group and made sure that Doreen and Neville were on it. (Jack Straw)

A working group that I did continue to chair in the Home Office, which engaged key players with Doreen (…) I kept it on, and that meant that there was a focus inside the system and not just the campaign outside. So civil servants, the Met Police, others had to come along and talk about what was happening, what—stop-and-search, recording methodologies—things of that sort that did make a difference to the way the system worked. (David Blunkett)

It is difficult to overstate the importance of personal commitment from the politician ‘in the hot seat’. Straw’s and Blunkett’s willingness to require action and reporting on the inquiry’s recommendations won meaningful victories, including changes to race equality legislation. However, the commitment disappeared when Blunkett left the Home Office. His successor, Charles Clarke, did not share Blunkett’s view of the importance of the Lawrence steering group and simply cancelled it, a move that signalled the end of serious attention to race inequity in policy across government.8

Charles Clarke did away with it [the steering group] (…) I just got the impression at the time that he was just irritated by the continuing return to what he considered to be minutiae. Charles got quite irritated with things. (David Blunkett)

In his autobiography Straw (2012: 3510–12) describes Clarke as ‘a quixotic contrarian’ who:
suddenly announced that he was winding up the Working Party, saying that he was making other arrangements that would suffice … [a] decision, which was both unnecessary and had no administrative or political merit to it that I could divine.

This is hugely significant. On an apparent whim, an incoming home secretary ended the key steering group (featuring influential Black figures) that, according to his two immediate predecessors, had scrutinized progress reports and kept race equality on the political agenda. Normal service had resumed. Race equality in general, and the Lawrence case in particular, no longer featured as headline news and so there was no external force to ensure that race equality featured as a policy priority. In the absence of the external pressure (that would have sustained the conditions for interest-convergence) the lack of support from the key politician dealt the reforms a fatal blow. In November 2005 (less than a year after becoming home secretary) Clarke (2005: 3) wrote:

I am pleased to introduce the 6th Annual Report of the implementation of the Action Plan for the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report. It is the first report since I became Home Secretary and I am personally committed to the continuing delivery of this Action Plan and outlining how the Government intends to take forward the race agenda.

No further progress reports were ever published. The abolition of the Home Office’s steering group was symptomatic of the changing political tide and added further impetus to the retreat from serious antiracist intent. The following year, for example, the education department withheld publication of a special investigation into the disproportionate exclusion of Black students and the Department of Health was reported to have decided that the term ‘institutional racism’ was ‘unhelpful’ (Gillborn 2008: 144–5).

Conclusions

[W]e should never underestimate that we are human beings, and therefore systems, processes, policy changes have to be seen in the light of us being human beings … (David Blunkett)
In this chapter I have used one-to-one interviews with leading politicians to explore the personal dimension to the racialization of policy. Our sample was small, just five politicians, four of them White and nearing/post-retirement from front-line politics. Despite its size, the sample is unique in the sociology of race and policymaking; cumulatively the interviewees have amassed more than 100 years as MPs and a quarter of a century as cabinet members, at the very heart of government. The interviews focused explicitly on race equity and they included detailed questions about the rise and fall of antiracist measures in relation to the Lawrence inquiry and its aftermath.

The interviews offer an important insight into the microprocesses that underlie major policy decisions in relation to race equity – which are rarely glimpsed in measured public statements or later (edited and carefully curated) autobiographies. The data complement and extend our understanding of racialized politics: CRT’s interest-convergence principle highlights the vital importance of wider political pressures in forcing race equity onto the political agenda; the interviews demonstrate the Whiteness at the heart of policy, which limits the possibility for race-related issues to break into policy through any other – more personal – means and subsequently limits and reshapes the possibilities for radical action.

Readers should remember that these politicians are exceptional in having agreed to be interviewed about such a politically sensitive issue; they are generally well disposed to arguments for greater race equity; but they share a concern that race is a taboo subject for many of their colleagues and some, despite the best of intentions, slip into familiar deficit tropes that seek explanations in the behaviour and inadequacies of the people who suffer the injustices. Even where the interviewees have personally bucked the trend – by arguing explicitly and passionately for greater attention to race-specific/antiracist measures – their experiences further highlight the ways in which the overwhelmingly White nature of the polity encodes a deep racial conservatism: the personal and the biographical intertwine with wider structural issues. Racist power structures and Whiteness mean that there are not only fewer politicians with a commitment to antiracism; there are more who are (in Shephard’s words) ‘terrified’ of it, both personally and politically.

Earlier, I asked what we might learn from the application of a vulture’s-eye view of policy, where we add an awareness of individual agency into the picture already created through the structural analysis of interest-convergence. Perhaps the most important lesson is that greater diversity among policymakers is not merely welcome, in terms of more
equitably representing the composition of the electorate, it is probably imperative if public policy is to seriously address changing the racist status quo. Wider political movements and protests can force the structural conditions whereby policymakers perceive the need to be seen to act (i.e. interest-convergence) but the short-lived nature of these changes – and the reversion to the racist norm – is explicable and predictable in terms of the personal biographies, interests and perceptions of the policymakers themselves. Whiteness does not exist merely as an element in the system – it is not some ghost in the machine. Rather, Whiteness exists in the very actions and assumptions of the people making policy at the highest levels. In this sense, a vulture’s-eye view reveals the White bones of policy.

Notes

1 This chapter arises from the ‘Race, Racism and Education’ research project, funded by the Society for Educational Studies National Award 2013. The project was conceived and executed by myself, Sean Demack (Sheffield Hallam University), Nicola Rollock (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Paul Warmington (Warwick University). I take sole responsibility for analysis and arguments in this chapter.

2 Stephen Lawrence, a Black teenager, was murdered by a White gang in London in April 1993. The case became a rallying point for a national antiracist campaign seeking the reasons for the police’s mishandling of the case and the issues that it raised. A public inquiry led to widespread political and popular debate about ‘institutional racism’ as a pernicious force in British public services. Equality laws were changed but, within a decade, official policy pronounced that institutional racism was no longer a pressing concern (see Gillborn 2008).


4 She recalls that the Lawrence case was seen as a Home Office matter and does not remember it ever being discussed at cabinet.

5 We have used the following transcription notation in the interview extracts: 

- **...** pause
- (...) material has been edited out
- *italics* emphasis in original

6 In the 2011 census almost 20 per cent of the UK population identified their ethnicity as something other than ‘White British’ (ONS 2018).

7 Renaming colour-blindness as *race evasion* also avoids the insulting associations between visual impairment and a lack of awareness or sophistication.

8 Charles Clarke was approached for interview as part of this research but did not reply.

References


