

CHUKA UMUNNA's BAME LABOUR UPDATE

Dear all

Below is my consolidated report of the activities of BAME Labour (formerly known as the Black Socialist Society "BSS") since I last reported in mid April 2007. This is my personal report as a member of the Executive Committee of BAME Labour (the "Executive"), which I promised to produce and circulate to members if elected. Apologies it has taken so long for me to produce this latest report but the last six months has been unusually busy for me, both politically and professionally.

BAME Labour is a Labour Party affiliate with over 4000 members and is the biggest representative organisation for ethnic minorities in British politics today. You are on this email distribution list because you have signed up to it via TMP, you have asked me to send it to you or I thought you would be interested to receive my reports. If you know of anyone who would like to be added to this distribution list, they can sign up to my BAME Labour reports at TMP (<http://www.tmponline.org/>, the online political magazine for multicultural progressives which I edit and would invite you to visit). If you do not wish to receive these regular reports, please reply to this email with "unsubscribe" in the subject header.

This report contains details of:

1. the recent meeting between the Executive and Harriet Harman MP, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party;
2. the BAME Labour Special Conference last month – including Keith Vaz MP's NEC report and contributions from the Prime Minister Gordon Brown and others; and,
3. the BAME Labour fringe event at the Labour Party Conference in September – including details of speeches by OBV's Simon Woolley and Viendra Sharma MP.

~

1. MEETING WITH HARRIET HARMAN MP, LABOUR PARTY CHAIR AND DEPUTY LEADER – 4 DECEMBER 2007

This month members of the Executive and a few other representatives of ethnic minority groups within the Labour Party held its first formal meeting with Labour Party Chair and Deputy Leader, Harriet Harman MP, to discuss how we can increase the representation of ethnic minority peoples throughout the Labour Party and amongst those the party puts forward for public office.

Harriet, who is also Secretary of State for Equalities, Leader of the Commons and Minister for Women, apologised for being unable to attend the special conference (see below) but promised to attend BAME Labour's 2008 conference.

During the Labour Party Conference Harriet announced that she had asked Simon Woolley, founder and director of Operation Black Vote, to look into the feasibility of all ethnic minority shortlists for Westminster parliamentary selections and Simon is due to report to her soon. We discussed some of the issues likely to come up in the report and further discussions with Harriet will take place once she receives the final report in early 2008.

From hereon Harriet will be meeting several times a year with the Executive to discuss our progress and the representation and participation of BAME Labour members in the Labour Party. Please let me know if there are any issues you would like us to raise with her at these meetings.

2. BAME LABOUR SPECIAL CONFERENCE – 24 NOVEMBER 2007

Our special conference was held at the Manchester College of Arts and Technology in November to give members the opportunity to take part in Labour's policy making process, receive training, hear

from government ministers and to hear the result of the organisation's name change ballot. Here I have set out the key highlights from the event.

Video message from Prime Minister Gordon Brown

In his video message to the conference, the Prime Minister said that the genuine engagement of Britain's ethnic minority communities was vital to the success of the Labour Party, if it is to represent all our communities effectively. He talked of Labour's delivery for our communities, in particular pointing - for example - to the reduction of child poverty since 1997. However he said we had more to do and wanted to see more ethnic minority MPs in Parliament.

Name change from the "Black Socialist Society" to "BAME Labour"

The Executive decided earlier in the year to ballot members on whether to retain the then name of the organisation – the "Black Socialist Society".

The rationale behind the proposal to review our name came from the feeling that, unlike a decade ago when the organisation was founded, "black" is no longer used as a political term as widely as it once was, with individuals increasingly choosing to define themselves by their family's country of origin (Nigerian, Pakistani, Indian etc.) for non political *and* political purposes. Also, different people have different understandings of the nature and meaning of "socialism": some associate the word with notions of wholesale nationalization, a centrally controlled economy etc.; others more loosely associate the word with general notions of social justice and generally "what a Labour government does".

I personally take a strict view of socialism and prefer to describe myself as a "social democrat" (or perhaps a "democratic socialist") rather than a "socialist" in its purest form, and I am happy to describe myself as "black" for political purposes as well as non political purposes but would also describe myself as "mixed race" - so I was open to a reconsideration of our name. However, finding a better alternative was altogether more tricky. The (by no means perfect) options presented to members to vote on were as follows:

- i. Black and Asian Society
- ii. Black and Asian Socialist Society
- iii. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Society
- iv. Black, Asian, Arabs and Chinese Society
- v. BAME Labour Society
- vi. BAME Labour

I voted for option ii. despite my views on the use of the word "socialist". Though members voted overwhelmingly for a name change to option vi. - "BAME Labour" (BAME is shorthand for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) on a 45% turnout (approx.), I am content with the result. More important than the name is what BAME Labour does, so I look forward to working with colleagues to continue to grow the organisation so it becomes an even more influential positive force for change in the Labour Party and on the centre-left of British politics.

Ahmad Shahzad – Chair's Annual Report

Activities this year

Ahmad gave an overview of the activities of BAME Labour since the new Executive was elected on 10 March this year. To date the full Executive has met three times and the officers (the Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer and Secretary) have met several times in between.

A very successful and widely reported leadership and deputy leadership hustings was held on 21 May 2007 in Parliament, which was addressed by Gordon Brown and all the then deputy leadership

contenders. A parliamentary selection training session was held on 8 September 2007 and a fringe event at the Labour Party Conference (for more see below) on 26 September 2007 took place.

Ahmad extended his thanks to the Executive for all their hard work and special thanks to the Labour Party officers who have assisted with its development since March 2007. Thanks should also go to Ahmad himself who has led from the front and put in a lot of time and effort in to getting the organisation off its feet since its relaunch.

Communications issues

Ahmad acknowledged that more needs to be done to improve communications with members – an issue, several members have raised with me too. To this end a BAME Labour website will be activated in the next couple of months which will provide members with up to date information on the activities of the organisation. It was not possible to switch on the site not knowing what the result of the name change ballot would be which would determine the address of the website – now we have a new name, we can proceed to switch on the site.

Ahmad has produced a second BAME Labour Progress Report detailing the most recent activities of the organisation. Please drop me a line if you would like a copy and I shall pass the request to him.

Keith Vaz MP – National Executive Committee Report

Keith is BAME Labour's representative on the Labour Party's National Executive Committee ("NEC"). He is also Chair of the party's Ethnic Minority Taskforce and in July of this year he was appointed Chair of the House of Commons' influential Home Affairs Select Committee.

Keith gave an overview of his activities on the NEC since he took up his NEC seat in March 2007. By way of reminder, Keith is a member of the organisation, and women's race and equalities, sub committees of the NEC.

Progress

He echoed the thanks of Ahmad to the party staff and recent Labour Party Chairs, noting that more progress had been made towards greater ethnic minority representation and participation in the party in the last year, than at any other time during the last decade. He pointed to the fact that there are more black and Asian members of government than ever before.

At the time of writing there are 6 ethnic minority ministers in government – more than ever before - including the first Muslim minister (Shahid Malik) and the first ethnic minority Attorney General (Baroness Scotland). Skills Minister David Lammy MP is presently the most senior elected ethnic minority politician in the country.

Parliamentary Selections

With reference to Gordon Brown and Harriet Harman's stated desire to increase ethnic minority and women's representation in the Commons, Keith said that his primary focus for the next twelve months was to argue for ethnic minority representation in constituencies, as and when parliamentary selections come up. Wherever an MP announces their retirement and the constituency concerned has an ethnic minority population of 15% or more, Keith said he will argue for the selection to be an "open" as opposed to an "all women" contest. The reason he cited for this was that every all women selection so far has failed to select ethnic minority candidate. Though Keith said he was not opposed to all women selections *per se*, until an all women selection produces an ethnic minority candidate, he cannot be convinced that it is the right course for increasing ethnic minority representation.

Keith said that he will have failed in his mission if he returns to speak to the BAME Labour conference after the next general election and there still remain big cities in the UK without ethnic minority

representation in Parliament. In this regard he referred to the recent New Statesman article (<http://www.newstatesman.com/200711150031>) on Black Britain's relationship with the Tories. You can read my Guardian article in response to that New Statesman piece here - http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/chuka_umunna/2007/11/labours_lost_love.html.

Keith is going to be tabling a Private Members Bill in Parliament in January which will seek to amend the race relations legislation to allow political parties to choose to adopt all ethnic minority shortlists in parliamentary and other selections, if they so wish.

Policy

Keith urged members to input into the policy making processes of the Labour Party citing the recent events in Pakistan as an issue which members should be raising in their local Labour Parties. In this regard he also referred to the immigration debate and the forthcoming shake up of the rules and regulations which will affect the ability of our communities to bring family abroad to the UK. He told us that Immigration Minister Liam Byrne MP will be taking a delegation of South Asian community leaders with him when he visits India and Pakistan shortly – a first!

Other highlights

Neena Gill MEP – Plenary address

Neena has represented the West Midlands in the European Parliament since 1999. She gave a plenary address describing how she got into politics and got selected to become a Labour MEP. She said BAME Labour needed to have regional strategies for increasing representation and reminded delegates that the MEP reselection processes would be starting in this month. She also talked about the cultural perceptions within our own communities which women have to overcome, which we need to change.

Policy workshops

Various policy workshops were held from which reports will be drawn up for submission to the Labour Party's National Policy forum. I attended the workshop on "Britain in the World" where we had a very informative discussion involving delegates with a wealth of expertise – one participant had headed up the UN's delegation to Liberia during that country's last general election! This brought home to me just how underused BAME Labour's members talents are in the policy making processes of the Labour Party, something we need to work on.

Raj Jethwa – Campaigning with ethnic minority communities

Raj is the ethnic minorities officer of the London Labour Party. Like other speakers, Raj talked about the need to increase representation in London in particular, where 1 in 3 people belong to an ethnic minority but only 1 in 10 councillors come from an ethnic minority background. But Raj emphasized the need to take on the BNP in London and reminded delegates that at the last GLA elections, the BNP came within just 0.2% of gaining a London Assembly seat (they need just 5% of the vote to get a seat under London's proportional representation voting system).

Gloria Mills - National Policy Forum Report

Gloria became the first black woman to become President of the TUC in 2005 and is UNISON's director of equalities. She is also one of BAME Labour's four representatives on Labour's National Policy Forum, which oversees policy development within the party. Gloria gave an overview of the present round of consultation documents being circulated for discussion within the party. Comments on the documents must be submitted in/by February 2008, so any contributions you wish to make should be directed to BAME Labour's four NPF representatives by that time – Gloria, Ahmad, Sen Kandiah and Esther Emanuel.

Engaging with ethnic minority communities

The heads of various ethnic minority groups within the Labour Party gave an overview of their organisations' activities. The Executive is keen to work closely with all such groups so that BAME Labour can act as a useful umbrella network for all concerned. For your information, here are details of the heads of each of the organizations: Tamils for Labour – Sen Kandiah; Africans for Labour – Julius Nkafu; and Arabs for Labour – Fadel Takrouri.

The closing address was given by Treasury Minister, Angela Eagle MP, who is also a member of Labour's NEC. Another conference is planned for 2008.

3. LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE FRINGE EVENT – 26 SEPTEMBER 2007

BAME Labour held a fringe event at the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth on the Wednesday of Conference week which was addressed by UNISON President, Norma Stephenson, director and founder of Operation Black Vote, Simon Woolley, the newly elected Labour MP for Ealing Southall, Viendra Sharma MP and Murad Qureshi AM from the London Assembly.

Simon talked about the work he had been commissioned to do by Harriet in to looking at the feasibility of all ethnic minority shortlists for Westminster parliamentary selections. He described how he had seen talent ignored time and time again, and said that the introduction of such measures was not a matter of special favours for our communities but a "leveling the playing field". He said the challenge for us all is to inspire our communities to engage with civil society.

Viendra expressed thanks to all who descended on his constituency during his by-election campaign in July. He described how things had moved on from the overt racism our communities had experienced in the 1970s and 1980s and things had improved greatly, though there are still challenges for us to overcome.

~

I hope you have found this report to be useful and informative. I will be producing another in the first quarter of next year and will circulate details of the new BAME Labour website address in due course. Until then, have a great festive break.

Kind regards,
Chuka

Chuka Umunna
BAME Labour Executive Member
chuka@tmponline.org

TMP is an online magazine and forum for the multicultural progressive – left leaning British Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. TMP aims to provide a vehicle through which multicultural progressives can come together and explore how we can build a more fair, free, equal and democratic world. TMP is intended to be of use not only to multicultural progressives, but also to those seeking to canvass their views or who are interested in the multicultural progressive perspective. If you would like to write for TMP, please email info@tmponline.org.