

The 2022 Conservative leadership campaign and post-racial gatekeeping

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Abstract

The Conservative party leadership contest that took place in the summer of 2022 was unprecedented for, amongst other things, its level of ethnic diversity. This paper argues that this doesn't indicate a sharp, contemporary liberal turn within the party. It argues the opposite, in fact, that recent senior ethnic minority cabinet members and leadership contenders represent some of the party's most right-wing ideologues in years. Through critical discourse analysis of narrative related to race, borders, immigration and the 'nation' in selected media appearances made by ethnic minority leadership contenders Rishi Sunak, Sajid Javid, Nadhim Zahawi, Suella Braverman and Kemi Badenoch as part of their campaigns, this paper positions these individuals – in distinct yet interrelated ways – as ethnic minority post-racial gatekeepers, continuing yet intensifying a long trend within the Conservative party of the reproduction of the racial status quo legitimised through nominal ethnic minority representation.

Keywords

Post-racialism

Whiteness

Conservative

Britishness

Introduction

In the summer of 2022, the UK witnessed a Conservative party leadership contest consisting of predominantly ethnic minority candidates. This was the precursor to the eventual induction of the first British-born Conservative party leader and prime minister of South Asian heritage, Rishi Sunak, in October 2022. Much was made of the (surprising) ethnic diversity of the candidates in the mainstream media. However, the supposed political progressiveness indicated by the diversity of the leadership contest was not necessarily matched by the politics of the candidates themselves. We argue that this cohort can be considered the most right-wing of the senior party leadership at the time, particularly with

regard to their stances on race, immigration and border control.¹ We do not argue that this is a case of 'false consciousness' or suggest that these candidates are not, or indeed should be, standing in alignment with what might be construed as their racial self-interest. Indeed, 'there is no logic or reason that says someone with darker skin should prefer open immigration, soft crime policies, or higher taxes'.² This paper argues that the phenomena of ethnic diversity within a party which has been consistently and openly critical of multiculturalism, anti-migrant, and historically overtly racist, is worthy of socio-political analysis. It will do so through critical discourse analysis of leadership campaign interviews and debates of five non-White Conservative party leadership candidates that took place in the summer of 2022: Rishi Sunak, Sajid Javid, Nadhim Zahawi, Suella Braverman and Kemi Badenoch.

Ethnic minority representation in the Conservative party has grown significantly in recent years.³ As of the 2010 General Election, there were 27 ethnic minority MPs, rising to 42 in 2015, 53 in 2017 and 66 in 2019, of which 62 per cent were Labour and 35 per cent Conservative. Fielding ethnic minority candidates in Conservative 'safe' seats, the party have steadily increased its number of ethnic minority MPs and seen the rapid rise of some ethnic minority politicians to senior leadership.⁴ These include Rishi Sunak, who was only elected as an MP in 2015 and five years later appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Home Secretary Suella Braverman and International Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch who were elected to the House of Commons in 2015 and 2017 respectively. Although the Labour party still surpasses the Conservative party in numbers of ethnic minority MPs and local councillors, and the vast majority of ethnic minority voters continue to vote Labour, there is evidence of growing electoral support for the Conservatives among ethnic minorities, largely amongst those of British Indian heritage.⁵ Additionally, a third of ethnic minorities voted to leave the European Union in 2016. We might wonder why some would support a campaign and/or a party perceived to be strongly anti-immigrant, nostalgic for the British empire and historically racist, or indeed choose to on the basis of these reasons. The rise of ethnic minority candidates and the tentative rise in ethnic minority voting for the Conservative party has, to date, received little scholarly attention, and the recent, markedly diverse Conservative leadership contest indicates an important research gap.

Whereas literature has explored the contested role of the 'White working class' in political conservatism and rising populist movements in the US, UK and Western Europe⁶, there has been

comparatively little contemporary reflection on how ethnic minorities – particularly those in position of power - reproduce or challenge the racialisation inherent in discussions of British sovereignty, and navigate state-sanctioned hostility towards certain ‘undesirable’ - Muslim, Black, Eastern European and/or working-class – minority and immigrant groups. This is an important and historically well-documented phenomenon, however, in the sociology of race. Sivanandan noted the role that senior Black and brown administrators in governmental organisations such as the Commission for Racial Equality played in ‘managing’ racism and stifling grassroots Black protests at the end of the last century, as a means to negate racial discontent and facilitate mass ethnic minority integration.⁷

This paper will analyse the political discourse of the ethnic minority conservative elite, specifically the British Black, Asian and ethnic minority candidates in the summer 2022 Conservative party leadership contest. It will draw attention to the ways in which race, immigration, borders and the ‘nation’ are discussed – implicitly and explicitly – and/or constructed, relationally to the candidates’ own histories and value systems as well as ideologically, in order to appeal to a fundamentally White, but increasingly ethnically diverse, Tory party membership and electorate.

Accounting for the heterogeneity of political positions taken by racial and ethnic minorities, we argue that some ethnic minority groups are not only co-opted by but can co-opt mainstream nationalisms through discursive mechanisms such as the ‘model minority’ narrative. We see this unfold among British Indians, who are positioned as ‘good immigrants’ in a classed and racialised social hierarchy that ‘rewards’ social conservatism and adherence to the White, protestant work ethic, as per the conceptual framework of hegemonic Whiteness.⁸ Endorsing pervasive British anti-immigrant and post-racial discourses becomes a way of integrating into the Conservative elite, and claiming political power whilst (and through) shedding negative connotations of immigrant-hood that risks becoming ‘othered’. The larger implications of this are that the British nation-state is remade and writ large to the ‘Commonwealth’, appearing to not only embrace but centre the contributions of Commonwealth citizens while remaining fundamentally White supremacist in character.

The next section will briefly outline the Conservative party’s history in incorporating ethnic minorities, and the recent post-racial turn within the party whereby increasing party diversity has coincided with an increasing turn to the right. It will then outline the theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools that will

be wielded in the analysis of a selection of campaign speeches of the ethnic minority candidates in the summer 2022 UK Conservative leadership contest.

Context

Ethnic minorities in Parliament

The representation of ethnic minorities in the UK House of Commons has been historically low. When it comes to ethnic minority representation, the Labour Party has had the most success among the major political parties in Britain – the first four ethnic minority Members of Parliament during the post-war period in the 1987 General Election were all Labour MPs. Following this election, the Labour Party had an almost exclusive hold on the representation of ethnic minorities in the House of Commons – from 1987 to 2005 the Conservative party only had 3 ethnic minority politicians appointed at general elections.⁹

The Conservative Party under David Cameron actively courted Black and particularly British Indian voters. The 2010 General Election is considered the first time all three major political parties in Britain - the Conservative Party as well as the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrat Party - acknowledged the importance of ethnic diversity in Parliament. For the Conservative Party, diversifying its MPs was an important goal to both soften the image of the party and attract ethnic minority voters. This led to a number of ethnic minority MPs being elected, even in constituencies where the population is not diverse. This is a significant shift as prior to this, it was typically believed that ethnic minority candidates could only succeed in constituencies with diverse populations - which was a major reason why the Labour Party had a greater representation of ethnic minority politicians before the 2010 General Election. There has since been a marked increase in non-White and particularly South Asian senior Conservative MPs, particularly under Boris Johnson's tenure as Conservative leader after 2019.

Wider party support from non-White British communities has been mainly British Indian. However, other ethnic minority groups are notably following the trend of shifting political Conservatism.¹⁰ The reasons

for this are complex and under-researched, and largely beyond the scope of this paper. They can and have been attributed to the rapid upward social mobility of some diasporic communities in the UK, and the formation of a significant ethnic minority middle class whose pro-business and low-tax economic interests are increasing right-leaning.¹¹ However, anti-immigration sentiment amongst ethnic minority groups exists, and on this the Conservatives have done well. For example, some ethnic minority Brexiteers unfavourably contrast new, what are seen as 'easy', pathways to immigration from Eastern Europe with their parents or grandparents' experiences.¹² Whether the ideology of the party has meaningfully shifted to further incorporate other non-traditional members of the electorate is doubtful (their recent popularity amongst traditional Northern, working class communities has tentatively suggested such a shift may be unnecessary), as is the extent to which these ethnic minority supporters are actually Conservative ideologues.

Representation in the 'nasty party'

Descriptive ethnic minority representation in politics and legislative bodies is important as it can lead to the substantive representation of historically marginalised groups like women and ethnic minorities. Analysis of parliamentary questions has found that ethnic minority MPs were more likely to ask parliamentary questions about ethnic minority rights than their White counterparts.¹³ Conversely, some scholars have claimed that the link between descriptive and substantive representation is tentative, and that representatives from left-wing and liberal parties are more ideologically motivated to represent minorities than their conservative counterparts.¹⁴ The increased ethnic diversity of the Conservative Party does not necessarily mean that they are more likely to represent ethnoracial minority interests, therefore. This is reflected within the long-standing prioritisation of the interests of their majority White and middle-class voter base, and the intractability of 'traditional' racialised and classed Tory values over time.

In relation to values, the Conservative party have been described as the party of capitalism, privilege, and the British establishment. The term 'nasty party' has long been used to describe the party and its members with anti-welfare, anti-equality and pro-business ideologies as selfish and intolerant.¹⁵ This image has also been attributed to the Conservatives' hard-line stance on immigration which has been

seen to directly target ethnic minorities. While Labour is credited with ratifying anti-discrimination legislation, the Conservative party has a poor history of supporting post-war Commonwealth immigrants and impoverished ethnic minority communities, and this remains in the memory of many ethnic minorities in the UK even today. It was the Labour Party who were responsible for the passing of the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, 1976 and 2000, all of which aimed to address racism and discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities. Labour's dominance in attracting ethnic minority voters prompted a reaction from the Conservative Party in the 1970s and 1980s, and during the 1983 general election it made its first attempt to capture the ethnic vote with a poster campaign featuring images of Black and South Asian men in suits with the claim that 'Labour Says He's Black - Tories Say He's British'. This is an early example of the party's stance on issues relating to racial inclusion: an anti-identity and colour-blind approach to negotiating and responding to ethnic diversity, and the assimilation of the 'model' ethnic minority congruent with the party's middle-class and socially conservative profile.¹⁶ This cultural integrationist approach has been a mainstay of much Tory thinking – the idea that ethnic minorities must adopt, in patriotic fashion, dominant British values and thinking, even with their underlying racialist connotations.

Party diversity and the shift to the right

The party's modernisation in the 2000s was designed to make them seem more socially representative, compassionate and progressive (involving downplaying issues related to Europe and immigration and instead focusing on poverty, social justice, the NHS and the environment). Following the recession in 2008, the rise of UKIP and the anti-EU agenda, and a purging of the more left-leaning party members under Boris Johnson, the party has arguably reverted back to type. This has been evident through hardline shifts in policy including the pushing through of Brexit, and the relocation of 'illegal' migrants to Rwanda implemented by former Home Secretary Priti Patel (one of few previous prime minister Boris Johnson's cabinet members who voted to leave the EU referendum).¹⁷ The increased ethno-racial diversity in the upper echelons of Tory party leadership has coincided with an unprecedented 'narrowing of the British Conservative mind', namely a feeding through of the ideas of the increasingly prominent populist hard right to the British conservative movement.¹⁸ This further suggests that greater nominal ethnic diversity in the party may be only weakly aligned with more socially liberal attitudes, and – as per

the argument of this paper – that ethnic diversity can, not only coexist with, but can also facilitate the reproduction of the racialised - and classed - status quo.

Reverting to type?

Although the current cabinet under Rishi Sunak might be ethnically diverse, it is not necessarily diverse in terms of class, with many of the candidates private-school and/or Oxbridge educated (indeed, all apart from Sajid Javid and Kemi Badenoch).

A number of the leadership contest candidates of South Asian heritage, as well as other prominent Tory politicians such as Priti Patel, are from families who were, in effect, ‘twice migrants’, coming to the UK via East Africa out of a business or professional class. Between 1955 and 1965 many (but not all) immigrants from the Indian sub-continent to Britain largely came from rural areas and filled unskilled or semi-skilled laborer roles. The vast majority of migrants from the South Asian sub-continent comprised Hindu Gujaratis and Sikh Punjabis from India, Punjabi and Mirpuri Muslims from Pakistan, and Sylheti Muslims from Bangladesh. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, came political upheaval in East Africa, particularly Uganda, which resulted in another wave of Indian and Pakistani migrants to the UK of predominantly Gujarati heritage. These groups have, on the whole, done socio-economically well in the UK, as have their descendants.

Rishi Sunak’s parents are of East African Indian heritage as are Priti Patel’s. Rishi’s father was a GP and Priti’s a UKIP candidate for Hertfordshire in 2013. Suella Braverman’s parents, of Goan and Tamil ethnicity, emigrated from Mauritius and Kenya. She is the niece of a former Mauritian High Commissioner to London, and her mother was a former Conservative councillor and parliamentary candidate. This, as aforementioned, is consistent with the middle-class composition and outlook of the Conservative party, and necessary context to any claims made about fundamental changes in party ethos as result of the ethnic diversification of the party leadership.

Sajid Javid and Kemi Badenoch are, by contrast, the only two candidates from a less privileged background. Javid has been open about his past - the Pakistani Muslim son of a bus driver. Although Kemi Badenoch had an international upbringing in the US, Nigeria and the UK where her parents – both professionals of Yoruba heritage – worked, she described supporting herself during college with a job

in McDonald's. Nadhim Zahawi's family were refugees from Iraq, although his father and grandfather (former governor of the Central Bank of Iraq) held senior positions in politics and business. The common thread, however, is their early careers in finance and their longstanding commitment to neo-liberal Conservative ideology which venerates individual responsibility, hard work, and wealth creation.

Contemporary Conservative party ideology is embodied in the policy priorities and value systems of the current ethnic minority political leadership who seek to court the socially mobile in their own community without alienating the socially and politically conservative White middle-class. In this paper, we argue that they negotiate their ethnoracial 'otherness' and hard right Conservative ideology by engaging in a unique mode of post-racial political gatekeeping. A gatekeeper in this context has the power to reproduce and to set the racial status quo, to redefine race post-racially, and – in this case, partly through drawing on their own positionalities and histories - legitimise hard right views on race, immigration and border politics.¹⁹ This is exemplified not only in their politics, but in their discourse. The theoretical mechanisms of this are outlined below, in a brief discussion of post-racial theory and the model minority myth, followed by an outline of the methods used in the paper.

Theory

Post racialism

Post-racialism and colour-blindness operate against a background of neo-liberal racism, whereby systemic racism and racialisation – seen through increasingly stringent immigration policies, the heightening of everyday bordering and the widening of the racial inequality gap – are minimised and negated. Post-racialism refers, broadly, to the denial of the significance and, in some cases, the existence of structural racism as a defining feature of inequality in the UK.²⁰ Attempts for anti-racist mobilisation are then seen as at best redundant and at worst anti-democratic and marginalising (albeit majority) White experiences and perspectives.²¹ This can be facilitated through neoliberal, 'colour-blind' discourses which pay little more than lip service to equality and imply that racism is best managed through the silencing of issues relating to race.

This has been seen, recently, in the Conservative party's critical discourse on race and racism. A case in point is the current government's take on the teaching of critical race theory in schools, with former Conservative leadership candidate Kemi Badenoch deeming it ideological, unbalanced and dangerous and former Home Secretary Priti Patel condemning sportsmen taking the knee in support of Black Lives Matter.²² Whilst serving as exemplars of the colour-blind credentials of the Conservative party, they are held up as 'model minorities'.²³ In other words, successful emblems of upward social mobility and the end point of the so-called ethnic work ethic, as well as pillars of conservative ideology as the embodiment of neo-liberal meritocracy. They signal the supposed non-racist credentials of the Conservative party, superficially challenging the long-standing stigma the party has had about being unrepresentative of modern Britain but fundamentally aligning largely with traditional Tory values.

Rose-tinted colonial legacies are also important to consider where nationalism and allegiance to the British state is prized. Indeed, Brexit was presented as an opportunity to re-establish trade links with the Commonwealth, but this relies on a sanitised version of colonialism and nostalgia for an imagined past. The violent history of colonialism and its imposition of global racial hierarchy was supplanted in the public imaginary with notions of collectivity and transnational cooperation, and allowed (some) non-White groups to position themselves, seemingly unproblematically, with historically 'superior' White groups within a shared community of value. This is exemplified by the increasingly hostile anti-immigration policies implemented by former Home Secretary Priti Patel and their continuation under Suella Braverman, both descendants of immigrants yet earnest defenders of British borders (as well as in Braverman's case, the British Empire)²⁴. These figures serve, in part, to reframe the idea of ethnoracial minority interests away from inter-racial solidarity, espousing and legitimising neo-liberal individualism for upwardly mobile second or third-generation ethnic minorities and serving as model minorities lauded by the White conservative political elite. This laudation can feed a gratitude politics and, in turn, increase post-racial fervour.²⁵

The model minority myth

Racism, xenophobia and islamophobia become 'ordinary' in multicultural societies such as the UK. Liberal principles of equality, freedom and rights are invoked in abstract and decontextualised ways to

avoid direct scrutiny of underlying systemic inequalities.²⁶ Issues which reflect these, such as anti-immigrant sentiment, are, for example, deflected onto concerns about employment or economic prosperity. And evaluations of economic and cultural contribution divide immigrants into camps: 'good' or 'bad', 'us' and 'them', deserving and non-deserving of British citizenship. Migrants (perhaps all ethnic minorities) are judged primarily on the 'positive contribution' they make to society, economically and culturally, and their propensity to integrate into the British way of life. In other words which groups can, through the embodiment of certain norms and values, position themselves in closest proximity to Whiteness (although the Windrush scandal has been a stark reminder of the perpetual ethnoracial otherness of Britain's most longstanding diasporic communities). The colonial co-constitution of Britishness and Whiteness is important to understanding how Conservative discourse and policy around borders and immigration reproduce a racialised notion of what it means to be British, and who deserves to be British.²⁷ This notion of Britishness now not only incorporates but is reproduced and represented at the highest echelons by ethnic minorities who redefine, but only within certain limits, who belongs in this community of value.

Having discussed the bases of the incongruity between ethnic diversity and hard-right political ideology in relation to the Conservative party past and present, and the theoretical concepts we can use to understand this, the paper will now outline data and method.

Data and Method

Data

We focus our analysis on the summer 2022 Conservative Leadership contest which saw a number of ethnic minority candidates running to lead the Conservative party and serve as prime minister, showcasing their ideological and political vision for the party and the UK. The materials under analysis consist of automatically generated transcripts of YouTube videos of leadership campaign material. These cover the most prominent and widely shared one-to-one television and radio media interviews, campaign speeches and campaign videos created by the candidates. For Nadhim Zahawi, this consists of a Sky News interview, for Rishi Sunak a speech for the launch of the #Ready4Rishi leadership

campaign published by Sky News, for Suella Braverman an on-the-spot Sky News interview in the Houses of Parliament, for Sajid Javid a previously recorded campaign video published by Guardian News in 2019 and reused during the 2022 leadership campaign, and for Kemi Badenoch an LBC interview. In addition to this are automatic transcripts of hustings in the later stages of the contest, firstly between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak in Cardiff, published by the Guardian News, a televised Sky debate between all candidates published by the Independent, and a live debate hosted by ITV News.²⁸ The analysis section will not focus on all aspects of their policy and political ideology, or the minutiae and dynamics of each specific interview or debate. It will draw on ideas around and constructions of the 'nation', race, immigration and borders, and how these come to bear on the heritages, ideologies and value frameworks of the individuals in question, illustrated by select quotes.

Method

We applied a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reveal the ways in which hegemonic political discourse constructs identity, ideology, and cultural difference. CDA 'primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context'.²⁹ It can be thought of as more so a movement than a method, one which is concerned with resisting hegemony wrought through discourse and communication. It maintains that language use is structured within particular situations, institutions and social set up, and that it is a two-way phenomenon. So, even though the leadership candidates in question may be speaking to the 'British nation', for example, this is imagined and constructed in various ways that can be teased out by bearing in mind the wider social context, which includes their own positionalities and their intended audience.

Through discourse people construct beliefs, institutions and social relations. CDA is a unique approach in that it focuses on power relations as discursive, constitutive of society and culture, and historically informed.³⁰ CDA is thus well positioned for uncovering hegemonic political discourse, particularly in relation to far right and racist discourse: 'with its focus on ideology and power relations, the research agenda of critical discourse analysts is often focused on political research [...] researching racism and prejudiced utterances which are frequently associated with, but not limited to, the far-right'.³¹

The discursive frames used to analyse the data are drawn from those of Reisigl and Wodak and key proponent of CDA van Dijk.³² Throughout the following analysis section we refer to van Dijk's argumentation strategies of positive self-representation and negative self-representation, to understand the ways in which the candidates present themselves and others in the contest, as well as social groups including immigrants and the 'nation'. Reisigl and Wodak posit five frames of analysis (nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation and intensification) to understand how racialising discourses refer to people in relation to their imagined qualities and characteristics. These align with van Dijk's strategies but focus more specifically on mechanisms such as hyperbole which further shape the audience's perspectives of the actors and issues under discussion, or indeed discursive construction.

Analysis

Having chosen speeches and interviews from the ethnic minority candidates that fell within the remit of campaign speeches and for which transcripts could be obtained, we read and re-read the scripts and isolated sub-sections focusing on constructions and allusions to race, the 'nation', immigrants and borders. We used the aforementioned CDA lenses to identify three discursive phenomena or 'frames' specific to the post-racial gatekeeper within these sub-sections. These are: the post racial minimisation of race, the racialised construction of the British people, and the reproduction of racialised and classed Conservative values.

The first concerns the post-racial minimisation of race. In this, candidates subscribe to the notion that racism is not part of the defining story of their extraordinary lives nor (is or should be) one of the 'nation' as a whole.³³ They deny or invisibilise the salience of race and racial inequality to social immobility, group identity and/or socio-political interest and appeal instead to a united, collective British imaginary. The second concerns the racialised construction of the 'British' people, a normative entity which the candidates construct – often vaguely - and place themselves in close proximity to.³⁴ The third is an unwavering personal commitment to, and the earnest reproduction of, 'traditional' Conservative values, namely individual responsibility, hard work, traditionalism and sovereignty. These are often framed

reductively, with an equivalence drawn between the candidates' own personal upward social mobility narratives and Conservative values which, as per the previous frame, are often constructed in relation to 'British' values. Through these frames, the candidates seek to position themselves as 'model minorities' by reproducing existing notions of (White) British cultural exceptionalism.³⁵ These align with normatively bound, racialised and classed 'British values' and strongly underpin conservative political ideologies. All are characteristic of post-racial gatekeeping, as will now be elucidated through close analysis of the aforementioned transcripts.

The post-racial minimisation of race

Ethnic minority upward social mobility is framed as both a British and Tory phenomenon by candidates in their promotional material, and used anecdotally as implicit evidence for both the non-racist character of the party and the country as a whole. The 'nation' is framed as tolerant and facilitating of upward social mobility regardless of background, and the candidates positioned themselves as model minorities, grateful and successful benefactors of British immigration. Nadhim Zahawi, as a case in point, described his upward social mobility in an almost fantastical way, stating: '*an immigrant boy from Baghdad who couldn't speak a word of English is now chancellor of the exchequer*'. This is part of a discursive strategy of intensification to over-emphasise both the credentials of the candidate and Britain itself as the land of opportunity, and de-emphasise the struggles and hardships of those who have faced discrimination and social closure. Zahawi's discourse across his promotional material spoke also to a hierarchical, immigrant obligation to 'serve' the country that has served him - '*I have tried um to serve my country, the country that's given me everything*'. This is also echoed by Sajid Javid, one of the few candidates from a working-class background: '*I wanted to give back to a country that's given me so many opportunities*'.

The idea of gratitude is a double-edged sword: It has implications, first of all, of indebtedness to the benevolence of the host country. Second of all, it can lead to the beneficiary feeling that they must conform to the expectations of behaviour of the host population, and invisibilises the experiences of those who have not been able to overcome barriers to mobility including structural discrimination and material impoverishment.³⁶ The racialised basis of this mutual relationship, embedded within the

historical, and exploitative colonial relations Britain held with the countries of origins of many of these candidates, must be considered.

Rishi Sunak – not only in the leadership contest but in his acceptance speeches of Conservative party leadership in October 2022 – reiterated a sentiment of gratitude that might not be unexpected for a British-born white politician or a child of white immigrants: *'I'm standing here in front of you tonight for one very simple reason and that's because our country, our United Kingdom did something extraordinary for my family when it welcomed them here as immigrants 60 years ago and allowed them to build a better life'*. This also evokes the idea of an imagined alternative life 'over there' characterised by lack of opportunity, further positioning Britain at the top of a global hierarchy of value. This requires not only a post-racial outlook but historical amnesia around British colonial violence and its role in resource extraction from the Global South particularly the Commonwealth, and the subsequent drivers of post-War migration. Mentioning racial inequality or colonial history, in what is constructed as a meritocratic, post-race society, can become self-victimising and racially divisive in itself. This is exemplified by Kemi Badenoch's comments that *'I don't see skin colour, I see individuals. I think looking at skin colour all the time is divisive and 'there are some people who see skin colour, there are some people who don't notice it and we should be able to accept that'*.

Badenoch explicitly linked the positive fortunes of ethnic minorities in wider society to their positive treatment within the party itself, stating: *'I think given the level of diversity that we have in the party it is crazy to say [...] that [...] Conservatives don't treat people of colour well, that's absolutely not true'*. The composition of the last two Conservative cabinets might indicate an unprecedented level of ethnic minority inclusion but does not suggest the party itself is anti-racist (particularly given continued internal allegations of racism).³⁷ Badenoch, unlike the other candidates, also directly addressed the 'culture wars' - centred on the dogged allegiance to liberal principles of free speech - whilst also aligning herself with the Black community, specifically through her comments on the government's 'race report' which argued that the UK's issues with inequality are larger due to class rather than race.³⁸ She states: *'if you are a Black person who challenges this orthodoxy you get shut down [...] Tony Sewell had an honorary degree removed from Nottingham university, withdrawn rather because he said the issues in this country are less to do with race but more to do with deprivation and that drove people mad'*. Badenoch's comments reflect – or construct - a growing consistency between Black interests and Conservative

ideology, not just in the UK but also in the US, and disrupt the idea that minority racial interest is couched in anti-racism³⁹. She goes further than the other candidates who merely imply the insignificance of structural racism to social mobility, by framing anti-racism as 'orthodoxy' and thus herself as a legitimate (by virtue in part of her own ethnic heritage) purveyor of radical truth. When it suits, candidates can construct their own form of identity politics, highlighting the particular aspects of their own personal story or success, usually absent of meaningful discussion of classism or racism, that serve as 'evidence' against the idea of institutional inequality.⁴⁰

Construction of, and proximity to, the 'British people'

The valorisation of Britishness and British values might be construed as an effort on the part of the ethnic minority candidates to court the 'traditional' White Tory membership and electorate, particularly those interested in supporting a party leadership with continued interest in British sovereignty (linked strongly as we know to views on Brexit and border control). 'Nationhood' is central to Conservative identity and discourse - 'effective use of a patriotic discourse, which portrayed the Conservatives as a national rather than sectional party, popularised its vision of 'nationhood'⁴¹ – and is one which relies on a racially bounded notion of Britishness.⁴² Given the colonial foundations of notions of British cultural, and by extension racial, superiority we might construe the over-emphasis on Britishness as mitigating any unfavourable assumptions made about the candidates on account of their ethnoracial otherness⁴³. Strategic as well as ideological appeals to the 'nation' are borne out in the evidence from the US which has found that those who show high levels of patriotism disfavour ethnic minority over White leaders.

All the candidates thus employed strategies of positive self-representation to paint themselves and the British 'nation' in the same, positive light. Zahawi stated that he '*dreams in the British language*', underscoring his unequivocal Britishness, absolving any risk of seeming as an ethnic outsider seeking to co-opt the highest level of political office in the country. The candidates' continual use of '*our*' to describe the British people frames them as a unified community – as opposed to, in actuality, hierarchised community - brought together by a certain set of culturally superior liberal values.⁴⁴ It also positions the candidates within that same community, as part of the in-group: '*We must never let those who seek to undermine and destroy our way of life to succeed*' (Sunak).

Within the campaign discourse, the 'British people' were framed as potential inheritors of a 'strong nation', often vaguely so - *'the decisions we make in the coming days and weeks will set a course that will determine whether the next generation of British people inherit a stronger and more confident nation'* (Sunak). The construction of the 'British people' occurred in some more specific contexts, for example in relation to why Brexit – as a move towards greater British sovereignty - should be celebrated: *'I voted leave and my maiden speech as an MP was to celebrate Brexit as a vote of confidence in the United Kingdom and also in the British people'* (Badenoch). The 'UK', by contrast, was referred to in relation to more tangible and practical attributes such as its investment potential, speaking less so to the imagined British 'nation' at large but to pro-business interests: *'I have done really well by investing in the United Kingdom [...] I think a good thing and it should be celebrated'* (Zahawi). The Conservative party are well known for their protection of high-level business interests, but issues of financial investment and economic growth also speak to the socio-economically aspirational and socially mobile working class and/or ethnic minority party voter or member. Speeches aside, the candidates' themselves are exemplars of the economic potential of the UK, with both having been educated and amassed their wealth largely here, and Rishi being the richest man to ever hold senior Parliamentary office. The use of 'I' might seem at odds with earlier appeals to the 'British people', but is, indeed, very much in line with the hyper-individualism and neo-liberalism of Conservative party ideology.⁴⁵

Commitment to Conservative values

The reproduction of the model minority myth was most evident in the narratives of Sajid Javid and Rishi Sunak, both children of South Asian immigrants although from differing class backgrounds. Javid stated that my *'mum and dad were workaholics and they taught me the value of hard work, I always wanted to make my family proud'* and Sunak drew on values that speak to the traditional Tory membership and electorate, notably family values and patriotism - *'my values, traditional conservative values are clear: hard work, patriotism, fairness, a love of family, pragmatism'* – that also resonate with ethnic minority communities. 'Hard work' is ideologically aligned with *'responsibility'* which Sunak also mentioned as a *'traditional conservative economic value'*, again underscoring that the fundamental differences between him and the typical, lifelong white and middle-class Conservative voter only run skin deep. Drawing on

common Conservative scripts around morality and discipline - as a means to implicitly scapegoat and 'other' certain groups including the underclass and immigrants - have foundations in Thatcherism and have been echoed by Conservative prime ministers since.⁴⁶ The narrative that hard work can overcome structural barriers including poverty and racism, rationalised by the candidates' own personal histories, feeds into post-racial, neo-liberal ideas around upwards mobility.⁴⁷

The neoliberal multicultural character of the candidates' discourse was inherent in their construction of 'acceptable' ethnic difference (centred on hard work, economic success and gratitude), that which can readily be incorporated within the rubric of Conservative and British values without fundamentally destabilising their ideological bases. The incorporation of certain types of migrants to serve particular political aims around economic growth and social cohesion marketises ethnic diversity, and is very much aligned with both traditional and contemporary conservative ideology and policy. This might seem socially liberal, but there is both (i) a limit to this tolerance of ethnic diversity, the limit being the incorporation of those cultures that represent a *'threat to the British way of life'* (Sunak) and (ii) an ongoing superficiality to the management of ethnic disadvantage centred on non-radical and neo-liberal approaches to diversity and inclusion: *'we have a program called Inclusive Britain, it's our strategy for inclusivity and reducing ethnic and racial disparities'* (Badenoch). Although acknowledging the government's role in dismantling barriers to ethnic minority success, the Inclusive Britain report Badenoch referred to – a response to the 'race report' - states quite clearly that 'we must not lose sight of the fact that it is the agency, resilience and mutual support of and among individuals, families and communities that ultimately drives success and achievement', emphasising core Tory thinking around individual responsibility and the laudation of 'model minority' cultures.⁴⁸

Suella Braverman openly engages in the negative representation of other candidates as 'soft' on Brexit, to position herself as someone who can deliver on the promises made during the 2016 European Union referendum: *'I believe I'm the only authentic Brexiteer to continue the Brexit promises contained in our 2019 manifesto to deliver on our pledges'*. She is particularly clear about her stance on illegal immigration and border control, creating a sense of urgency around the need to tackle 'illegal' (a deliberate choice of words rather than the more accurate 'undocumented') immigration: *'I'm the only candidate standing today who is honest about the solution to fixing illegal migration, namely small boats*

crossing the channel [...] if you want to be honest with the British people on delivering on Brexit or taking back control over our borders is that we do now need to leave the European convention’. Braverman, who campaigned to leave the European Union and chaired the pro-Leave European Research Group before her time in ministerial office, is characteristic of the symbolic border guard. Her status as the child of immigrants might suggest she is sympathetic to immigration in the public imagination, but positioning herself at the forefront of an aggressive anti-immigrant politics underscores her commitment – like the other candidates - to a heavily racialised idea of a British nation where acceptance of cultural ‘difference’ is limited to the Tory interpretation of a respectable and law-abiding migrant or child of migrants (like herself). Sunak echoes this, to a less aggressive extent, in his comments that *‘we need to build a new consensus on people coming to our country - yes to hard working talented innovators, but crucially control of our borders*’. His neo-liberal requirements of the new generation of migrants to fill in deficits in the domestic labour market - not just hard working but ‘innovators’ - ironically surpass even those of his parents’ generation, but again reproduce the bounded, racialised notion of what it means, in the Tory imaginary, to be British.

Discussion

This paper has analysed the media discourse of ethnic minority leadership candidates in the UK Conservative party contest during the summer of 2022. The analysis finds that each candidate structured their messaging around a particular understanding of the British nation and their personal relationship and history to this imagined community and ‘British values’, drawing an equivalence and an ideological consistency between this and (largely still traditional) Conservative values. It identified three modes of post-racial gatekeeping inherent in these speech acts which indicate the ways in which ‘model’ ethnic minority Conservative politicians frame issues of race, immigration, and the ‘nation’, implicitly or explicitly in relation to their own positionalities. We found that through the post-racial minimisation of the significance of race and issues of inequality, the racialised construction of the British nation, and the alignment of Conservative and ‘good minority’ values, these leaders draw on discourse which operates within a framework of hegemonic Whiteness. This paper does not argue that these individuals’ discursive movements during the leadership campaign suggest a transgression of, or a failure to, represent the ethnic minority population of the UK and their interest. Their mere presence in

senior political leadership positions indicates the extent of socio-economic and political heterogeneity across ethnic minority diaspora in the UK. Nor does it suggest that these well-rehearsed campaign narratives fully represent each candidates' politics. It does draw attention, however, to the role elite ethnic minority political gatekeepers play in reproducing the hegemony of Whiteness through post-racial means, and that ethnic diversity is not akin to racial justice. Although the evidence base for the analysis was snapshots of strategically worded and delivered campaign material, the implications of the harmful policies these individuals legitimise and drive through, particularly in relation to immigration, render their words materially as well as symbolically significant.

¹ M. Bankole. 'Rishi Sunak as PM is not the UK's Obama moment', *The Independent*, 30 October 2022, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/rishi-sunak-barack-obama-racism-rwanda-b2213692.html>

² G. Baker, 'Britain's Conservatives Rise Above Identity Politics', *WSJ*, 11 July 2022, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/britain-conservatives-rise-above-identity-politics-rishi-sunak-penny-mordaunt-prime-minister-11657552012>

³ 'Ethnic minority' in the context of this paper refers to individuals and groups with non-White ethnoracial heritage. Most of the MPs in the contest have roots in former British imperial, now Commonwealth, nations across the African and South Asian subcontinent, including Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman (of Indian heritage), Kemi Badenoch (of Nigerian heritage), and Sajid Javid (of Pakistani heritage). The histories of the candidates in question are discussed further in the body of the paper. The authors note the generalised and reductive nature of the umbrella term 'ethnic minority' but yield it for the purposes of drawing a distinction between the candidates in question and their White counterparts, party members and the wider electorate.

⁴ On recent trends in ethnic minority parliamentary representation and voting estimates, see Uberoi, E. and Burton, M. 'Ethnic diversity in politics and public life', *House of Commons Library*, 30 September 2022, available at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01156/SN01156.pdf>; Sobolewska, M. and Begum, N. 'Ethnic Minority Representation in UK Local Government', July 2020, available at <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=49921> and Ipsos, 'How Britain voted in the 2019 election', *Ipsos*, 20 December 2019, available at <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

⁵ British Indian political conservatism and populism has been discussed by: N. S. Martin. 'Ethnic minority voters in the UK 2015 general election: a breakthrough for the conservative party?', *Electoral Studies* 57 (2019): pp.174–185; N. Martin, M. Sobolewska and N. Begum, 'Left Out of the Left Behind? Ethnic Minority Support for Brexit', *SSRN*, 25 January 2019, available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3320418>; C. Duckworth, D. Kapur and M. Vaishnav. 'Britain's New Swing Voters? a survey of british indian attitudes', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 November 2021, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/18/britain-s-new-swing-voters-survey-of-british-indian-attitudes-pub-85784>. However, it is important to note that 'British Indian' is a category highly differentiated by migrant status (generation), class, region, language and religion. Although research has shown how discrimination and cultural similarities have forged the salience of broad Diasporic identities like 'British Indian' and even 'British Asian' over time, sub-types of Diasporic identity define belonging for migrants and their children in the UK in often radically different ways, and these have socio-economic and political consequences. For example, the stigmatisation of Muslim identity and transnational anti-Muslim sentiment within Indian Sikh and Hindu communities, as well as its institutionalisation within British society, shapes the ways in which Indian Muslims relate to their 'Indianness', as well as their educational and occupational outcomes in relation to other British Indian groups. For more on this, see Open Society Institute, 'Aspirations and Reality: british muslims and the labour market', 2004, available at https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/7a81de84-e10e-492f-a5b5-1b012da82fef/british_muslims.pdf.

⁶ A. Mondon and A. Winter, 'Whiteness, populism and the racialisation of the working class in the United Kingdom and the United States', *Identities* 26, no. 5 (2018): pp. 510-528; J. C. Williams, *White Working Class: overcoming class cluelessness in america* (Harvard: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017)

⁷ K. Owusu, 'The struggle for a radical Black political culture: an interview with A. Sivanandan', *Race & Class* 58, no. 1 (2016): pp. 6–16

⁸ 'Hegemonic Whiteness' refers to dominant ideology that is not encompassed in the attitudes and behaviours of White individuals, but the embedded meanings and practices that reproduce racial hierarchy through the wielding of material and symbolic power (see: A. Nayak, 'Critical Whiteness Studies', *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (2007): pp. 737-755 and M. Hughey, 'The (dis)similarities of white racial identities: the conceptual framework of 'hegemonic whiteness'', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 8 (2009): pp. 1289-1309 and P. K. Miller in 'Hegemonic whiteness: expanding and operationalising the

conceptual framework', *Sociology Compass*, 16, no. 1 (2022) DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12973). Hegemonic Whiteness is an unacknowledged, homogenising force that, in many cases, serves neither those racialised as White nor non-White - an example of this, discussed in the body of the paper, is the defining of dominant ideals and beliefs that construct a community of worth around those racialised as White British, such as those which framed much of the anti-immigration narrative that surrounded the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

⁹ For analysis of ethnic minority parliamentary representation see: M. Sobolewska, 'The Conservatives' BME MPs may be game changers in the way we think about ethnic minority representation', *Democratic Audit*, 7 April 2015, available at <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2015/04/07/the-conservatives-bme-mps-may-be-game-changers-in-the-way-we-think-about-ethnic-minority-representation/>; M. Sobolewska, 'Party Strategies and the Descriptive Representation of Ethnic Minorities: the 2010 British general election', *West European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2013): pp.615-633; A. F. Heath, S. D. Fisher, G. Rosenblatt, D. Sanders and M. Sobolewska, *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

¹⁰ V. Motune, 'EXCL: Black Tories to launch group to appeal to African Caribbean voters', *The Voice*, 21 August 2022, available at <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/uk-news/2022/08/21/exclusive-leading-black-tories-to-launch-group-aimed-at-widening-partys-appeal-to-african-caribbean-voters/>

¹¹ For analysis of British South Asian middle-class identity formation, see R. Saini, 'The racialised 'second existence' of class: class identification and (de- / re-) construction across the British South Asian middle classes', *Cultural Sociology* (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755221076388>

¹² N. Begum, 'Commentary: Minority ethnic attitudes and the 2016 EU referendum', *UK in a Changing Europe*, 6 February 2018, available at <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/minority-ethnic-attitudes-and-the-2016-eu-referendum/>

¹³ On descriptive versus substantive representation, see A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence: the political representation of gender, ethnicity and race* (Oxford, UK Clarendon Press, 1995) and T. Saalfeld and D. Bischof, 'Minority-Ethnic MPs and the Substantive Representation of Minority Interests in the House of Commons, 2005-2011' *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, no. 2 (2013): pp. 305–328

¹⁴ M. Sobolewska, R. McKee and R. Campbell, 'Explaining motivation to represent: how does descriptive representation lead to substantive representation of racial and ethnic minorities?' *West European Politics* 41, no. 6 (2018): pp. 1237-1261

¹⁵ T. Bale and P. Webb discuss Tory image and ideology over time in 'The Conservative Party', in *Britain at the Polls 2010: The 25th Report*, J. Barlet and N. Allen. (eds) (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2010)

¹⁶ In other words, the Black Conservative, having absorbed Thatcherite values, was a fine candidate for Conservative party membership as long as his Britishness superseded his Blackness. See: T. Peace and N. Meer, 'Ethnic diversity' in *The Routledge Handbook of British Politics and Society*, Series: Routledge international handbooks, M. Garnett (ed.) (London: Routledge, 2020) and P. Ward, *Britishness Since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 130.

¹⁷ For an overview of Boris Johnson's radical cabinet reshuffle in July 2019, see H. Stewart and R. Mason, 'Boris Johnson: new PM takes his revenge and sacks over half the cabinet', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/24/boris-johnson-takes-his-revenge-and-sacks-over-half-the-cabinet>

¹⁸ On the Conservative shift further to the right, see C. A. Ellis, 'Narrowing of the British Conservative Mind?' *Society* 59 (2022): pp. 682-690 and F. Webber, 'Britain's authoritarian turn', *Race & Class* 62, no. 4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396821989181>

¹⁹ M. Okwonga, 'The Dangers of Priti Patels' Racial Gatekeeping', *Byline Times*, 11 January 2023, available at: [The Dangers of Priti Patel's Racial Gatekeeping – Byline Times](#)

²⁰ E. Bonilla-Silva. *Racism Without Racists: color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the united states* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010)

²¹ S. Valluvan, 'What is 'post-race' and what does it reveal about contemporary racisms?' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 13 (2016): pp. 2241-2251 and R. Joseph-Salisbury 'Does anybody really care what a racist says?' anti-racism in 'post-racial' times. *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 1 (2018): pp. 63-78

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<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/12/priti-patel-hits-out-at-dreadful-black-lives-matters-protests>

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²⁴ In Context, “‘I’m Proud of the British Empire’ – Suella Braverman, UK Home Secretary”, *YouTube*, 6 October 2022, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_6NbSuevX8

²⁵ On gratitude politics and migrants, see R. L. Healey ‘Gratitude and hospitality: tamil refugee employment in london and the conditional nature of integration’. *Environment and Planning* 46 (2014): pp. 614-628

²⁶ A. Mondon and A. Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London: Verso Books, 2018)

²⁷ On the racialised boundaries of Britishness, see: Anderson, *Us and Them?*; A. Kundnani, ‘Integrationism: the politics of anti-muslim racism’, *Race & Class* 48. No. 4 (2016); Garner, ‘A moral economy of Whiteness: behaviours, belonging and britishness’, *Ethnicities* 12, no.4 (2012): pp. 445–464; R. Saini, ‘The racialisation of class and the racialisation of the nation: ethnic minority identity formation across the british south asian middle classes’, *South Asian Diaspora* (2022): doi:10.1080/19438192.2022.2055518

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³⁵ Anderson, 'Us and them?'

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