An open letter on race and racism in Scotland

We, the signatories of this letter, represent a broad cross-section of Scotland's society. We are activists, community workers, academics and educators. Between us, we have many decades of experience in researching, teaching, studying and advocating for racial equality. We have differing experiences and, in some ways, differing views on race and racism.

However, following the negative and irresponsible media coverage of the Resisting Whiteness conference held at Edinburgh University on 28th September 2019, we join together to express our shared concern that understandings of race and racism in Scotland are rolling backwards.

This incident is part of a broader trend that seeks to silence the voices of people in Scotland who face colour based racism.

Press articles on the Resisting Whiteness conference included claims that the format of the event was 'blatantly racist'. The basis for this lies in an untrue assertion that white people would 'not be allowed to ask questions'. In fact, the organisers had made provision for white attendees to ask questions following the main question session. White attendees were informed of this in advance and the reasons were explained with balance, tact and sensitivity. This format was necessary to ensure that the discussion could be led by the voices of people affected by colour based racism.

The assertion that this was somehow racist directly undermines those voices, and appears potentially intended to drive division between people with an interest in anti-racism and the wider public.

The current climate of resentment towards frank discussion of race and racism threatens to undo progress on race equality in Scotland. This expands beyond attempts to police legitimate work to challenge racial inequality, into the policy making arena.

Within public sector work on race equality, we see a worrying trend towards limiting understanding of race to its basic legal definition. Everyone in Scotland is protected by law from racial discrimination on the grounds of their colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins, as is fair and just. However, it is blatantly unfair to suggest that the risk of inequality and discrimination on the grounds of race is equally applicable to everyone in Scotland.

Unfortunately, as with the false assertions aimed at the Resisting Whiteness organisers, these views are sometimes put forward by people claiming to have anti-racist agendas. There is nothing anti-racist about minimising the link between colour based racism and racial inequality.

Evidence based policy approaches must take into account the history of racialisation and current experience of discrimination which creates worse outcomes for people from specific ethnic backgrounds in specific areas of life.

The solutions to these issues cannot be reached without open, honest discussion of how racism operates as a social and institutional structure, fuelled by the protections and advantages that people perceived as white have received over time and in the present day.

White people in Scotland have a vital role to play in creating the culture change needed to eradicate racism. However, just as there is a time for speaking out and challenging racism, there must be time for listening, learning and reflecting on the experiences of those who face racism. These discussions may be uncomfortable, but they are necessary.

These discussions need to recognise that whilst discrimination and xenophobia faced by white migrant groups must be tackled, for most of these groups, this will reduce over generations. The perception of whiteness will eventually confer an advantage; at the very least, the advantage of freedom from the impact of skin colour based stereotypes, prejudice and hatred.

Scotland has developed many national strategies, policies and initiatives looking at the disadvantage faced by those who experience racism and racial inequality. However, the lack of progress on race equality in practical terms shows that this is not enough.

Routine attempts to silence voices seeking to discuss race, and particularly to discuss whiteness, are holding us back.

We ask that those with influence – journalists, policy makers, politicians, educators and employers – seek to understand race and racism beyond simplistic legal definitions. We ask that this discussion makes space for listening, learning and reflecting on the realities of race and racism.

Only then can we claim to be a nation dedicated to tackling racial inequality.

Signed,

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