

Breaking Britain's glass ceiling

People from an ethnic minority background have a greater access to Higher Education than at any other time in history. **Keith Vaz** considers whether a 'British Obama' is a realistic possibility.



Barack Obama's sensational election victory has transformed world politics and stimulated interest in minority representation in this country. The issue of whether we could have a 'British Obama' has received significant attention.

The different political structure in this country makes this unlikely in the short-term, but there is undoubtedly the potential for a greater minority presence in political life at the highest levels in the future.

The outlook for ethnic minorities in this country is largely positive, but more must be done to ensure that equal opportunities are available to all. I have witnessed huge changes during my 22 years as an MP, and many barriers have been removed.

However, there are still instances of discrimination and people from minority backgrounds do not always have the same opportunities as other groups.

Education is an

area where increasing the representation of minority groups has been a particular concern. Major progress has been made in terms of expanding access to further and higher education for people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

By the summer of 2007, 29.9% of people of working age from minority ethnic

groups had a level four qualification (equivalent to degree level) or higher. The equivalent figure in 1997 was just 18.9%.

The numbers of ethnic minority students at York is showing encouraging signs of improvement. In 2007-08, 7.8% of the UK domiciled undergraduate student population were from minority groups, compared with just 5.3% in 2004-05.

The existence of the Equal Opportunities Committee is important and means that sufficient attention is given to the need to ensure there is a diverse student population.

Despite these positive signs, across the country we must do more to guarantee that people from all minority groups are sufficiently represented in our higher education institutions across the country.

It is at these institutions that the business and political leaders of the future are produced. Keeping minority representation high on the agenda is crucial if we are to have ethnic minority figures in senior

positions in all fields. I think it is unacceptable that despite the progress that has been made in so many areas, "Complacency is one of the greatest dangers faced when discussing the opportunities available to ethnic minorities."

adequate Parliamentary representation of minority groups is still woefully lacking. We have to do

more to address this. We expect the police, the armed forces and the senior civil service to reflect society, and thus better serve its needs; it is time to apply the same rationale to Parliament.

In a Parliament truly representative of Britain there would be 54 Members of Parliament from the ethnic minority community. Instead, today we have 15 BME (Black & Minority Ethnic) MPs, 13 representing Labour, 2 on the Conservative benches and no Liberal Democrat ethnic minority MPs. 15 Members of Parliament equates to 1.8% of all

MPs; entirely unrepresentative of a modern Britain where 7% of the population are from an ethnic minority background.

Electing more ethnic minority MPs is only half the answer; the other half is in those Parliamentary representatives coordinating and working with one another in the interest of all communities to forge a more integrated Britain and celebrate our national diversity as one of our greatest strengths.

We have made huge strides forward on race issues in recent decades. However, as detailed in the manifesto of the now closed Commission for Racial Equality, a child from an ethnic minority background is still more likely to receive poorer quality education, sub-standard housing, earn less, suffer worse health, and experience overt or subtle forms of discrimination on a daily basis.

Complacency is one of the greatest dangers we face when discussing the opportunities available to ethnic minorities. The advances that have taken place in the last few years can lead to the erroneous conclusion that the move towards absolute equality for minority groups is inevitable.

Vaz hopes for a British version of Barack Obama (left) in Parliament

It is only by continued effort from society as a whole and increased political minority representation that we will create a country in which everybody has the same opportunities irrespective of their ethnic background.

Keith Vaz is the Labour MP for Leicester East

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CV

Biography:
1956: Born in Aden, Yemen
1965: Moved to Bradford, England
1979: Graduated with a 2:1 in Law from Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge
1987: Elected to Parliament for the Labour party in Leicester East, which has a significant British Asian population. It remains his constituency.
1989: Led a protest against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Addressing 3,000 Muslims, he said "there is no such thing as absolute freedom of speech."
2002: Suspended from the House of Commons for giving misleading information about his relationship with the Hinduja Group, an oil and media finance organisation.
2007: Appointed Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Areas of interest and concern:
Computer games: A constant voice of concern over violence in video games, he called for the banning of the 2003 game *Manhunt*, saying that it influenced the killers of a schoolboy in his constituency.
Sri Lanka: The ongoing situation in Sri Lanka has been an area of interest for Vaz. He interjected in a Parliamentary debate on the subject last week and wrote to the Prime Minister in January.
Europe: He has been a strong supporter of European expansion, including tabling an Early Day Motion supporting the inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania, which received wide support.
TV racism: Vaz defended Indian film star Shilpa Shetty after an incident of racial bullying during *Celebrity Big Brother 2007*. He played a key role in the resulting debate on TV racism.