



## Erin's Political Diary, January 2021

With Erin Stevens

I write this article in December 2020, as a member of the European Union. When you read this, I, and millions of others, will have been stripped of our European citizenship: no longer will we be able to travel freely through Europe, nor enjoy the many benefits of living in a country which is a part of the largest trading bloc in the world.

I am as exhausted by writing that opening paragraph as you are likely to be reading it. The question of 'How did we get here?' is never far from my internal dialogue. With the first traces of hope placed in the rollout of vaccines for our most vulnerable, for the first time in nine months I am seeing tiny breaks in the great fog of Covid-19. As that fog continues to lift, I feel an even deeper fear and despair for the racist, unjust and divided society that we are left with. It seems to me that our divisions and hate are both the fuel for, and the product of, the political direction in which we find ourselves headed.

The year 2020 was a monumental one for anti-racist movements worldwide, particularly Black Lives Matter in the wake of the death of George Floyd. Simultaneously, 2020 saw a 62 per cent rise in hate crimes during lockdown in the UK, significant disparities in death rates for people from black and ethnic minority groups, and, two years after the Windrush report, the continued deportation and inhumane family separation of

people who have only known the UK as their home.<sup>1</sup>

In America, like Brexit, Trump remains both a product and catalyst of division and hate. As I write this, his ongoing refusal to concede the presidential election<sup>2</sup> erodes trust in democracy, and will undoubtedly present significant challenges to the Biden/Harris administration as they seek to win the trust of the American people and move the country forward.

Kamala Harris's election sees not only the first woman, but also the first Black person and the first person of South Asian descent to be elected Vice President of the USA. This is a huge triumph for the fight against inequality, no doubt, yet its setting against the backdrop of an openly racist president tweeting incoherently about the 'China Virus' and still gaining the support of over 70 million Americans, a man who is using his last days in office to sanction the execution of four black men and a white woman<sup>3</sup> (a highly unusual move during the 'lame duck' period of a presidency), is yet another illustration of the weaponisation of white supremacy to perpetuate the same. This phenomenon will not end with the election of Harris, just as it did not end with the election of Obama.

What the UK and the United States have in common is that insidious nationalistic

sentiments, especially those which centre on race and immigration, often fuelled by deprivation and insecurity, have been harnessed, capitalised upon and made explicit by opportunist politicians and failed celebrities, from Johnson, to Trump and, cringingly, Laurence Fox. We now find ourselves engulfed by a wave of populism which serves only to protect the interests of those who have the power to monopolise on structural inequality of all kinds.

Racism is structural and it is personal. It is societal and it is institutional. The attitudes of those in the highest offices are reflected in the experiences of ordinary people trying to live their lives. I firmly believe that it is not a coincidence that hate crimes have increased so exponentially as we approach the cliff edge of Brexit. Nor do I believe it is a coincidence that structural inequalities are reflected in the demographic disparities of Covid-19 death rates, in a year where we have been led by a prime minister who has a history of expressing racist viewpoints,<sup>4</sup> and a chief political advisor who has previously expressed views in favour of eugenics.<sup>5</sup> All of these elements are part of the same matrix of white supremacy and resistance to equality, because equality does not serve those with the power to enact it.

As we enter 2021, it seems imperative that we take stock of the gains that have been made – the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement so far, which shows us that protest still has incredible power, but is inevitably met with powerful resistance, and is only the beginning of real structural change; the end of the Trump administration; and the Joint Committee on Human Rights's impactful report, *Black People, Racism and Human Rights*,<sup>6</sup> as a result of which recommendations are being made across industries to recognise and tackle racism in its many manifestations across society.

We also must acknowledge the work ahead of us. We enter 2021 an exhausted, divided and angry world. Emerging from the despair of 2020 with the energy to build something new and more equitable will be tough. Nevertheless, equity is not optional.

We might start that work globally, institutionally, or individually. My focus in 2021 will undoubtedly centre on the gargantuan task of tackling racism and inequality in my industry: counselling and psychotherapy. With the aforementioned human-rights report as our starting-point, other anti-racist therapists within Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR) and I will work to address the racial inequalities in accessing mental-health provision in the UK. Like all other industries and institutions, structural racism and inequality of access remain a problem in counselling and psychotherapy. We are taking a small chisel to an enormous wall, but we are not alone; and it seems to me that 2020 has given us, if nothing else, a strong foundation upon which to demand the rights, and the future that serves society as a whole.

## Notes and References

- 1 A. Hirsch, The Home Office, mired in racism claims, now plans another mass deportation of black people, the *Guardian*, 27 November 2020. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y4gcqy54> (accessed 14 December 2020).
- 2 H. Enten, AI Gore conceded on this date. Trump still hasn't, CNN, 13 December 2020. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y6qgp7d7> (accessed 14 December 2020).
- 3 H. Honderich, In Trump's final days, a rush of federal executions, BBC, 11 December 2020. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y4ke2n8h> (accessed 14 December 2020).
- 4 A. Bienkov, Boris Johnson called gay men 'tank-topped bumboys' and black people 'piccaninnies' with 'watermelon smiles', Business Insider, 9 June 2020. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y6647r9e> (accessed 14 December 2020).
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- 6 UK Parliament, House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Black People, Racism and Human Rights*, HC 559, HL Paper 165, London, 2020. Available from <https://tinyurl.com/y3rqosa2> (accessed 14 December 2020).

## About the contributor



**Erin Stevens** is a private-practice counsellor/psychotherapist, writer, trainer and campaigner based in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, specialising in clients who have experienced harm in therapy. She also provides training in this area, and is writing

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