

An Asian in No 10?

CHANGING ATTITUDES RESULTED IN BARACK OBAMA BEING ELECTED PRESIDENT, AND BRITAIN MAY ONE DAY HAVE AN ETHNIC MINORITY PRIME MINISTER



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NEW research by the Universities of Harvard and Manchester claims that, despite continuing racial divides in America, a slow tide of tolerance made the election of a black president possible.

The research also suggests that similar conditions exist in Britain.

Perhaps the first and most important of these changes is the willingness of white people to vote for black and minority ethnic (BME) politicians.

Our research shows that in this respect, we are going in the same direction as the US. The generation of Britons who wanted social distance from non-whites is gradually being replaced by its more tolerant offspring.

Whether it is willingness to work for a black boss or to welcome a non-white person into the family, majority British opinion – just like majority American opinion – is gradually getting more tolerant.

However, as Trevor Phillips warned, other conditions that permitted the rise of Obama may prove more difficult in Britain.

For one, there is the sheer size of the BME electorate. In the US, ethnic minorities make up around one third of the population, compared to less than one-in-10 in Britain.

Despite increased tolerance, Obama managed to win only 43 per cent of white votes, while winning over 90 per cent of black votes. To make matters worse, from an electoral point of view, Britain's ethnic minorities are more geographically dispersed than in America, where many black politicians have been elected in areas where minorities are in the majority.

This has been helped by voting rights legislation dating back to the 1960s, which allows for race to be taken into account in the design of electoral districts.

In contrast, the Boundary Committee for England does not and cannot take race into account, and barely one Commons seat in 50 has a non-white majority. It is the absence of a comparable BME political class in Britain that represents the biggest barrier for the prospects of a British Obama.

In the US, the civil rights movement of the 1960s politicised a generation. Today, as many as nine per cent of congressmen and almost as many state legislators are African Americans, and the number of black elected



TOLERANCE: Barack Obama takes the oath of office; and (below) Ed Fieldhouse with Robert Putnam (right)



officials across the US is currently around 10,000. This represents an iceberg of which Obama represents the tip, yet no such iceberg exists in Britain today: BME politicians make up only two per cent of the House of Commons and slightly more than three per cent of those in town halls.

This isn't only the result of demographics but the consequence of a more centralised political system.

The most obvious solution is the creation of all-black shortlists, something that has been considered by Labour. This was the subject of a review commissioned by Harriet Harman last year which concluded that, without a change in the law allowing parties to impose all-black shortlists, it would take more than 75 years for Britain's ethnic make-up to be fairly reflected at Westminster. De-

spite this, and lobbying from BME politicians such as Keith Vaz, it is far from clear that the proposal will be embraced by Labour.

But despite the absence of a comparable BME political class to the US, and the smaller, more evenly distributed population, the tide of tolerance we identify in our research does give cause for optimism.

Pollsters in the US have noticed the disappearance of the so-called Bradley effect – the last-minute decline in support which used to afflict black candidates.

Thus the major parties should have little to fear from selecting non-white candidates, especially Labour, for whom historically black candidates have performed well.

Last week, a gathering of BME candidates was organised by Operation Black Vote, who have campaigned for the past 13 years for greater representation for black and Asian Britons. So far, they say, about 70 candidates have been selected for the elections, of which about 10 will be fighting winnable seats. Perhaps one of them will be Britain's alternative to Obama.

The research conducted by the Universities of Manchester and Harvard is the topic of a forthcoming book by Tom Clark, Robert Putnam, and Ed Fieldhouse. More information is at www.ageofobamabook.com