

### Dr Deborah Gabriel

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Since 8th June, the news media has been awash with stories celebrating the increased diversity of Parliament, which [now has 51 Black and Asian MPs](#). Meanwhile, the number of women MPs rose to 208, demonstrating progress towards race equality in British politics is considerably slower than gender equality.

However, the tendency to separate 'race' from 'gender' in discussions of equality, masks intersectional experiences and hidden inequalities. Therefore, the reported 'success' of women in British politics, masks the distinct forms of raced and gendered discrimination directed towards Black women.

[Patricia Hill Collins](#) argues that Black women are routinely objectified as 'the other', and a cursory examination of mainstream discourse during the General Election reveal that both remain persistent features of Black women's experiences in public life.

Despite her British identity, stories about Diane Abbott construct her as 'the other' through constant reference to the cultural heritage of her parents. On 28th May writing for the Independent, in a scathing attack, Matthew Norman wrote: "[No Paddington-reared child of Jamaican immigrants gets to study law at Cambridge by being a dummy.](#)" While on 9th June, in a front-page the Sun story by Jon Lockett: [Labour's First Lady](#), under the sub-heading, "Who is Diane Abbott? What's her background?" The first sentence reads: "Born in London to Jamaican immigrants".

As Wetherall and Potter argue in [Mapping the Language of Racism](#); racialised discourse need not be explicitly racist to be discriminatory, marginalising or oppressive. The term 'immigrants' marks a location of difference that has negative connotations due to repeated negative media coverage that constructs migrants as social problems. Therefore, repeated reference to 'Jamaican immigrant' serves as a process of othering and marker of difference — even though this information has no relevance to the stories.

While scrutiny and critique in the news media are endemic to the nature of politics, people of colour are subjected to "intense, disproportionate and unfair surveillance" in the political arena, as John Fiske argues in [White Watch](#). Diane Abbott is constantly singled out and pilloried across the news and social media. On 6th June, she was [forced to pull out of a planned BBC Radio 4 interview on Women's Hour](#) after a serious long-term illness was diagnosed (revealed after the election to be type 2 diabetes). This was [announced by Women's Hour on Twitter at 8.42am](#). Shortly afterwards [a picture of Ms Abbott speaking on her phone in the ticket hall of Oxford Circus was tweeted](#) which read "not seeming very unwell". At 11.42am ex Tory MP and Evening Standard editor [George Osborne tweeted a cartoon of Ms Abbott](#) with the caption "Anti-terror meeting? I'm far too ill to attend that." Tweets from supporters highlighted the double standards at play, as at 12.15pm one tweet read: "[Tories criticising Diane Abbott for doing what Theresa May did: pulling out of Woman's Hour. Isn't that called hypocrisy?](#)"

[Bell hooks](#) argues that Black women are frequently objectified through controlling images. The sexual objectification of Black women is rooted in slavery but persists in contemporary representation of Black women in public life. In January 2015, [The Telegraph serialised an unauthorised biography of Jeremy Corbyn](#), which alleges that he and Ms Abbott had an intimate relationship in the 1970s. The Sun's 8th June headline 'Labour's First Lady', is clearly a reference to the book's claims and plays on historical conceptions of Black women as concubines. Such controlling images serve to maintain and reinforce patriarchal sexual ideologies about Black women.

As [van Dijk](#) argues, elite social actors play a major role in the reproduction of racism in society through racist discourse, not least because of their influential status. However, this is always accompanied by a denial of prejudice, which serves to normalise racial ideologies and present them as rational and justified. It is therefore no surprise, that on 6th June, writing for the Telegraph, Zoe Strimpel's headline read: "[It's not racist to point out that Diane Abbott is a bungling disappointment](#)".

In *White Watch*, John Fiske draws on Foucault's conceptualisation of the 'regime of truth', defined as knowledge and truth, not as a reflection of objective reality but of the discursive power of elites.

On 8th June, Operation Black Vote (OBV) published an "[urgent statement in support of Diane Abbott MP](#)", signed by academic, legal and political figures, including Lord Herman Ousely. Part of the statement read:

"Black leadership in the UK is under constant scrutiny and examination. This... does not generally apply, to white mainstream politicians... afforded the luxury of white privilege, that allows for such mistakes to be considered human...we note the current hysteria of sections of the British media which has a disturbing tendency to apply a wholly different standard of critical news values when reporting on senior black political figures, and in particular, black women."

The statement is an apt critique of White privilege and how it manifests in political news reporting. From a Black feminist standpoint, othering and objectification typify how Ms Abbott has been represented across the mainstream media. Historical associations with hypersexuality serve to dehumanise Black women and undermine their authority and legitimacy as politicians.

So while there is occasion to celebrate the increase in Black and Asian MPs — especially [the landslide victory of Ms Abbott herself](#), we should be mindful that increased diversity does not mean increased equality — we still have a long way to go to achieve both.

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