

Diane Abbott was wrong

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Diane Abbott had this [letter in The Observer](#) yesterday:

Racism is black and white

Tomiwa Owolade claims that Irish, Jewish and Traveller people all suffer from “racism” (“**Racism in Britain is not a black and white issue. It’s far more complicated**”, Comment). They undoubtedly experience prejudice. This is similar to racism and the two words are often used as if they are interchangeable.

It is true that many types of white people with points of difference, such as redheads, can experience this prejudice. But they are not all their lives subject to racism. In pre-civil rights America, Irish people, Jewish people and Travellers were not required to sit at the back of the bus. In apartheid South Africa, these groups were allowed to vote. And at the height of slavery, there were no white-seeming people manacled on the slave ships.

Diane Abbott

House of Commons, London SW1

Abbott has apologised for the letter.

Labour has removed the whip from her. They have reacted, wholly appropriately in my opinion, to the letter.

Of course racism is, for some, a black and white issue. Skin colour drives far too much prejudice in the world. But to suggest that is the limit of racism and no one else can experience it is, in my opinion, wrong.

I will leave the anti-Semitic element of this letter to others to address. There are millions better able to address this than me.

I do, however, have a large extended Irish family. And to deny that the Irish suffered racism is just wrong.

There was no famine in Ireland in the last 1840s. There was a starvation. Food was exported from Ireland as millions died. This was not a natural and unavoidable phenomena. It was genocide. The population, 8 million before the starvation began, has not yet recovered. Contrast that with England, where the population has tripled.

And that was just a part of so much abuse, which was all too familiar in my childhood and beyond.

Throughout his life my father did everything he could to avoid association with his Irish roots. Assimilation was the key to his perception of survival and acceptability. He adopted his own cultural suppression to achieve that. The conflict was part of the insecurity and doubt that persisted throughout his life. His name said something of which he was in perpetual denial for fear of oppression.

His was a common experience. It is easier to be Irish now in England, perhaps the easiest it has ever been. But let's not pretend that the issues do not persist, because there are places where they very clearly do. It's tough being an Irish-origin catholic in Scotland, for example. The prejudice remains.

Yesterday LBC posted this tweet:



The Labour whip has been suspended from Diane Abbott MP pending an investigation into a letter she wrote about racism for The Observer newspaper, the party has confirmed. @TheSpurrShow asks: is it possible for a white person to experience racism?



I think the tweet profoundly insensitive. The question is extraordinary. I rather hope OfCom considers it. The answer is glaringly obviously, yes, they can. That is why Diane Abbott was wrong.

To her credit, Abbott has admitted her mistake. I suspect Labour will be unforgiving. That is another issue.

What matters to me, beyond the offence, is how naively stupid this was. The whole far-right fascist rule book is based on creating division in society so that the advance of fascism is not noticed. Diane Abbott sowed that division, wrongly and wholly

unnecessarily. It wasn't just the views she expressed that were a gift to the Tories - although I think they were that - it was the infighting in the left that they will delight in.

Let there be no infighting. Let's accept, as Diane Abbott has, that she got this wrong. And let's accept that racism is not just a black and white issue, however important that issue is. Instead let's accept that society must be intolerant of prejudice in all its forms. The right want to fuel that prejudice. It is the job of the left to end it, not just pragmatically, but because that is what is ethically demanded, and that is what Diane Abbott got so wrong.

Please note I will be heavy handed with moderation on this post. I will be intolerant of intolerance.