

Thoughts on Representation and the Envy of Wealth



by Theodore Dalrymple

The new British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, is the son of Punjabi immigrants from East Africa. You might have thought that this would satisfy, or at least please, the anti-racism lobby, by demonstrating that British society is an open one, not completely sclerosed by racist prejudice: but you would be wrong.

An opposition member of parliament called Nadia Whittome, herself of Indian origin, [tweeted](#) that Sunak's appointment to the highest political position was not a victory for Asian representation.

This follows the [assertion not long ago](#) by Rupa Huq, another

Member of Parliament of Indian subcontinental origin, that Kwasi Kwarteng, former Prime Minister Liz Truss's short-lived Chancellor of the Exchequer, was only "superficially black" because he spoke what in England is called the King's English. She said that, listening to him on the radio, one would not even know that he was black. Instead, he spoke like the highly educated person he was, which in Huq's opinion was incompatible with being black. Whites are not the only racists.

The remarks by these two female politicians, all the more significant because they were spontaneous rather than deeply considered, reveal something about the nature of modern [identity politics](#): that the function of minorities (whether racial, sexual, or other) is to act as vote-fodder for political entrepreneurs of a certain stripe. It's therefore the duty of minorities to remain the victims of prejudice against them and not to rise in the social scale by their own efforts: To do so is to betray the cause and above all their supposed leaders.

The reason that Whittome considers that Sunak's appointment isn't a victory for Asian representation is that, although of Asian origin, his parents (his father was a doctor) had him expensively educated and Sunak is now a multimillionaire, unlike most people of Asian origin—to say nothing of most whites.

There are, of course, other ways in which he isn't representative of the Asian, or any other, population, the most important of which is that he's of far above-average intelligence. (I must here point out also that while a certain level of intelligence is a necessary condition for a successful political career, it's far from being a sufficient one.)

Representative government doesn't mean that the representatives in the legislature or government must reflect

the population demographically, such that—for example—5 percent of them must have IQ's of less than 70, though increasingly it may appear that they do. Nor are a person's political or social views straightforwardly a reflection of his or her own economic position: If they were, Engels (who was a factory owner and rode to hounds) would never have been Marx's collaborator, and Marx himself would not have written "Capital," for he was no more proletarian than is King Charles.

The envy of wealth is thought by those who express it to be noble, as if to hate the rich were to love the poor: But envy and hatred are much stronger and more durable emotions than love, particularly in political matters. Hatred of the rich is perfectly compatible with contempt for the poor.

As to rich men or women in politics, the reproach that they are rich is often used against them, as if wealth by itself deprived them of sympathy for those less fortunately placed than themselves. In some cases it may well do, but in others it doesn't: The rich are no more uniform in their opinions and attitudes than are Asians.

The candidate of an opposition political party once came to my door just before an election to canvass my vote. This was just after a scandal in which it had been revealed by a newspaper that many, even most, of our current parliamentary representatives had been claiming expenses to which they were not entitled under the rules: in short, that they were stealing from the taxpayers. The candidate for the opposition party said that this showed that we needed a new broom to sweep clean.

However, as I pointed out to her, our current representative had not claimed any expenses, and therefore (in this respect at least) was an honest man.

"Yes," she replied, "but he is a very rich man."

“That,” I said, “is an argument for having rich men in parliament, rather than men who go into parliament in order to become rich.”

She did not waste further time on canvassing my vote, which she considered lost, or in pointing out that my own argument was defective. In order for it to be correct, I should have been able to demonstrate that there was a strong correlation between honesty among politicians and their personal wealth, which I could not do. It was certainly true that there were many rich men in parliament who did not disdain to become a fraction richer by claiming that to which they were not entitled: for, as the Nigerians say, you can't stop a goat from eating yams. Human nature is like manure: You can throw it out with a pitchfork, but it's sure to return.

Ideally when I choose between candidates, I don't choose the person who most resembles me, but the one who will best serve my interests and those of the country (which may not coincide perfectly). I do not choose the one who most resembles me physically—the one who is of the same height as I, for example, or the one with the same color eyes—or in any other respect. We should not vote by looking in the mirror but with our minds. Being human, our motives are always mixed, but we have been endowed with consciousness partly that we are able to make rational choices.

Identity politics is the confluence of mass narcissism with political entrepreneurialism. Sunak is the Member of Parliament for Richmond in Yorkshire, a quintessentially English market town, 95.3 percent of whose population is white. This, surely, is the triumph of non-identity politics, and will remain a triumph irrespective of whether or not Sunak is a success as prime minister.

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