

*The View from Europe*  
*By David Jessop*

## A champion for the Caribbean

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Britain will hold a general election. Under the terms of its Fixed Term Parliament Act, this date, which forms a part of the agreement that established the coalition government, may not be varied other than by new legislation.

One consequence is that the campaign has virtually begun with the UK's political parties seeking to score points well before their manifestoes have even been written or a full slate of candidates named.

So intense has political campaigning already become that the feeling is that once the Scottish referendum and the party conference season is over, the general election campaign will begin and run from November 2014 through to May 2015.

As is now well understood, this may well be the first British general election in which minorities in marginal seats play a role. In 2001, one in 10 voters in the United Kingdom was a member of an ethnic minority; by 2050 the number will have risen to one in five. Put another way, demographic change is set to permanently alter the nature of political power in Britain, as it has already done in the United States.

Until recently the implications of this had not been widely understood, but over the last year a plethora of reports and comments from the British Prime Minister and others have made clear the political importance of minorities.

In 2010 the Conservatives managed to obtain only 16 per cent of the minority community vote compared to the opposition Labour Party's 68 per cent. The likelihood is that the Conservative's share will fall even lower in the next election. The party has therefore recognised that unless it can bridge this gap, between 10 and 15 of its parliamentary seats are at risk as are their hopes of capturing 10 to 15 other marginals held by Labour. They also face a new threat. Upwardly mobile black and Asian voters are moving away from Labour's urban heartlands to the marginal suburban seats that the Conservative Party needs to win to remain in power.

The matter is further complicated by the emergence of a third party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a populist anti-European, restricted-immigration party that is gathering support in equal measure from right wing Conservatives and working class Labour supporters. The effect has been to make both party's traditional support uncertain in some key constituencies causing them to concentrate on shoring up their traditional vote and grass roots support.

So much has all of this changed the UK electoral map that the current working assumption is that when the election takes place no party will achieve a clear majority and once again there will either have to be a coalition or a minority government.

One response to the potentially seismic shifts in voting patterns has been a significant focus on Britain's large Asian community. In an indication of this, Prime Minister Cameron appointed in November 2013 the Member of Parliament, Priti Patel, as Britain's 'UK India Diaspora Champion'.

In this role the MP, who is of Kenyan and Indian Gujaraiti descent, is to work to strengthen the links between the Government and the Indian Diaspora in the UK, and in so doing promote the Conservative Party cause.

In making the announcement in India, Prime Minister Cameron said that her new role “will increase links between the government and the British Indian community, enabling us to draw on their experiences and expertise, strengthening the bond between our two countries.”

What is amazing is that after more than 68 years of migration there is no Caribbean equivalent. It is as though both of the UK’s two main political parties believe that the Caribbean vote can be taken for granted.

Up to now, in response, the Caribbean community and Operation Black Vote have focussed heavily on voter registration and improved tactics in a relatively small number of swing constituencies in which the Caribbean (or African) community exceed the sitting member’s majority.

However, this is beginning to change. For the first time, Britain’s black church leaders have come together to develop a political manifesto which seeks to have the UK’s political parties recognise the concerns of black voters. In a document to be formally launched later this year, ‘Black Church Political Mobilisation: A Manifesto for Action’, will set out positions on a range of policy issues in a manner that implies that Britain’s black churches are becoming a political force and that Britain’s African and Caribbean Christian community have a future role in UK politics.

Speaking recently about the document, Bishop Joe Aldred, who is of Caribbean heritage and is a leading member of the National Church Leaders Forum, the body that produced the manifesto, said: “We hope the political parties will realise that the Black Christian vote has a price on it and is not pledged to any particular politician or party”. “To those who observe keenly what is important to us and can satisfy us that they understand us and our issues (we want them) to be able to produce policies consistent with our values, hopes and aspirations.”

All of which begs the question as to why no British political party or the UK Government has named a Caribbean champion.

Is this because the Caribbean vote is taken for granted; is it because the Caribbean community in the UK are not big contributors to political party funds; or is it because the community is now much less cohesive? That is to say a body increasingly fragmented by generation and achievement, as an upwardly mobile black middle class enter the professions and cease to want to be associated with the assumptions made by the media and almost all politicians about Britain’s Caribbean Diaspora.

In Washington legislators from the Diaspora and community activists have brought positive results for countries like the Dominican Republic and the nations of Latin America, but a concerted approach has so far been conspicuously absent when it comes to the countries of Caricom in the UK.

With up to 1m British people who can claim some sort of familial tie to the Caribbean, there ought to be pressure on government and all the UK’s political parties, from both the community and the Caribbean, to identify individuals who can cross the class and political divide, to organise and champion the interests of the region and its people in Britain.

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