

# SPEAK!

An opinion piece on topical issues relevant to BME communities

## 'So, how does it feel to be British?'

The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, has called for a national day to celebrate Britishness. His remarks, which have been well received, have also prompted a wider debate and discussion, as to what exactly it means to be British.

Britishness is a major issue for black and minority ethnic communities. Entrenched inequities mean that many are still struggling for any sense of identity in this country. Yet this is something of a contradiction, because ethnic minority communities have been well established in Britain, for several generations.

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As for a national day, this is all well and good. But a national celebration of Britishness is a bit like having a national celebration of volunteering. If you enjoy volunteering and have good experiences of it, then a national day of celebration enables you to share your enjoyment and experience with others. However, if you have never had such experiences, it is hard to see what purpose a national day of celebration will serve. Clearly, it is important that we are realistic in the way we address this issue. We cannot expect that

showpiece events, by themselves, will provide the answer to the tricky and challenging questions posed here.

If Britishness is about fairness, equality of access and valuing diversity, then, with all due respect, we need to address the institutionalised barriers to Britishness. Namely, the prevalent inequity, discrimination and underlying notion that to be of a certain colour or ethnicity is incompatible with being British. Approaching this issue, in this way, is evidence of a mature nation, at ease with itself, that is awake to the realities it faces and alive to the responsibilities it has.

As a nation, if we are bold enough to have this debate, then we will be able to soberly re-examine and re-define what it really means to be British in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If this achieves nothing else, then at least, British black and minority ethnic communities will, at last, be able to recognise themselves in the British national flag.