Model Minority Authoritarianism

Social Mobility and the New Anti-equality Agenda

Jo Littler

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Abstract: This article puts forward a cultural-political formation it terms "model minority authoritarianism". The idea of the model minority has both been venerated as the virtuous face of immigration and/or nonwhite achievement in the global North and roundly contested and critiqued as a patronizing, divisive, and implicitly racist trope. Yet it is currently embraced by right-wing figures as a route through which the ideology of the opportunity for "upward social mobility" and neoliberal, marketized meritocracy can be promoted; is linked to displays of nationalism, military-style discipline, and centralized control; and presents an image of multicultural progressiveness that is used to give credence to increasingly reactionary policies. This configuration comprises model minority authoritarianism. The article outlines its theorization and analyses its manifestations by considering recent developments in the UK Conservative Party and its wider cultural networks. In particular, it examines the actions of Katharine Birbalsingh, former head of the Social Mobility Commission and "Britain's Strictest Teacher," alongside policy sources including the "Levelling Up" white paper and the Sewell Report. It argues that model minority authoritarianism needs to be understood as part of a broader right-wing anti-equality agenda that vehemently attacks accounts of structural social inequality and practices seeking to redress it.

Keywords authoritarianism, Conservative Party, meritocracy, model minority, social mobility

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Introduction

In May 2022 in a prime Sunday evening slot a documentary was broadcast on ITV, one of the UK's main TV channels, profiling "Britain's Strictest Headmistress." This title was bestowed on Katharine Birbalsingh, head of Michaela Community School in London. At this time Birbalsingh was well known in the UK media as an educational reform advocate, outspoken public figure, controversial disciplinarian, Conservative Party darling, and head of the Social Mobility Commission, the government public advisory body promoting social mobility in the

UK.[1] This overwhelmingly flattering documentary served to further amplify her notoriety. Almost functioning at times like an advertisement for the school, the program features teachers dispensing terse instructions on correct behavior, children filing down silent corridors, desperate parents anxious for places to put their children "on the straight and narrow," their euphoria after getting in, and Birbalsingh's well-groomed maxims on achievement delivered direct to camera.

Birbalsingh's persona and actions are indicative of many of the tendencies of contemporary right-wing politics in the UK, which is pursuing an anti-equality agenda concerned with unraveling socialized infrastructures designed to deal with inequality. It is doing so via vectors of expression that both draw on much older conservative tropes and invent new forms of cultural articulation. This article focuses on one specific element of this formation. It examines how the image of the "model minority" is currently being embraced by the Right—by key politicians and actors, politics and culture—as a route through which the idea of opportunity for "upward social mobility" and neoliberal meritocracy can be promoted, and is increasingly linked to displays of nationalism, military-style discipline, and centralized forms of control. Conspicuously high-profile roles for select so-called model minorities have become a significant conduit to inflate authoritarianism in politics and to attempt to make neo-imperialism more palatable: a configuration I term model minority authoritarianism. While this trope is very noticeable in the UK, it is not confined to it. In the United States, for instance, it relates to former Republican presidential hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy, who argues that victim mentalities are the main barrier to meritocracy and wants to further secure the US border, raise the voting age to twenty-five, and end birthright citizenship (Gupta 2023a).

[1] Birbalsingh rose to right-wing prominence after speaking at the 2010 Conservative Party conference and wider media prominence after the 2011 publication of her account of teaching, *To Miss with Love*, published by Penguin and broadcast on Radio 4.

This article brings into conversation literature on right-wing cultural racialization and contemporary politics with that on meritocracy and the social mobility industry. It illuminates the contours and key characteristics of model minority authoritarianism through a series of steps. To begin with, it discusses the history and contestation of the concept of the model minority. Then it outlines the racialized politics of the UK Conservative Party and recent increase in the numbers of "minority ethnic" members of parliament (MPs) in tandem with its lurch further right. Next, it analyzes the heightened role of authoritarianism in UK cultural and political discourse, focusing on the key battleground of education. It shows how these themes connect to a social mobility policy discourse in which blame for "social failure" is reassigned on a contrarian basis to bypass structural societal analysis. Finally, drawing again on the telling example of Birbalsingh, it considers how these politics connect to feminism, nationalism, and the "culture wars." Together, these examples show how model minority authoritarianism borrows a gloss of "multicultural" progressiveness to lend respectability to, and animate, highly reactionary, anti-equality, right-wing politics. In terms of the wider concerns of this journal issue, model minority authoritarianism can also be understood as one of the "morbid symptoms" of our interregnum (Clarke 2023: 184–87), in that it helps generate ostensible "solutions" to crises that make inequality worse.

The Idea of the Model Minority

First used by US journalist William Peterson in 1966, the idea of a model minority has since been popularized to refer to a conception of "good immigrants" who show conventional markers of high achievement, particularly in terms of education and careers (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2011: 173–76). In the process it is part of a mechanism dividing multiple generations of those characterized as immigrants into camps of good and bad, deserving and undeserving (Kasinitz 2008: 253–69). It is a term used globally, with local differences favoring particular groups: in the United States, Asian-Americans; in Germany, Vietnamese-

Germans; in France, French-Laotians. It has diasporic specificities, carrying the lingering and refracted legacies of geographic imperialisms. *Model minority* is a phrase awarded to "the good," to those who assimilate, who do not make trouble or challenge social structures: who "achieve," within limits.

The term therefore marks those who, "through the embodiment of certain norms and values, position themselves in closest proximity to Whiteness" (Saini, Bankole, and Begum 2023). In part it continues a racialized discourse of submissiveness and infantilization—the good immigrant as obedient Victorian child. The model minority's "straight" conventionality is important: as Diana Yeh (2014: 1199) points out, the image is sustained through emphasis on "insularity and a lack in creativity. Model minorities are thought of as smart and achieving a degree of wealth and respectability: they are, in other words, *conservative*.

While the model minority myth, then, "sounds like an accolade" (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2011: 173), it has pernicious effects: dividing minority ethnic groups between each other; reinforcing difficult stereotypes; failing to acknowledge structural racisms; encouraging docility; and rendering achievement a wholly individualized, family-based matter. There is a vast literature in education and ethnic studies on its pernicious effects. Takeo Rivera's (2022) study of Asian American masculinity suggests that, for those growing up interpellated by it, it feels like a masochistic template in relation to which subjectivity must be fashioned. The model minority trope also often draws on an image of lovingly tyrannical parents exhorting their children to achieve through fierce discipline (Chang 2011). Both are in effect positioned as ideal subjects of neoliberal meritocracy, as having to work extra hard to make it up the ladder of social success, proving that the system can work (Littler 2018; Sun-Hee Park 2008). This chimes with Paul Gilroy's (2013: 26) powerful account of how an aspirational neoliberal aesthetic has become adopted by some Black and migrant communities. As Nicholas J. Hartlep (2021: xx) writes in his excavation of the stereotypical

role of Asian Americans in the United States, “Given that the model minority is completely compatible with the idea of a meritocracy, it is very difficult to dispel.”

While the motif of hard work *extracts* from social experience, in terms of registering just how hard so many racialized citizens have had to work to stay afloat in societies that make it harder for them to achieve even a basic standard of living, it simultaneously valorizes that focused labor as the sole necessary ingredient and imbues it with moral virtue. In the process, it ignores the fundamental problem of differential access to social and economic resources (Kasinitz 2008), the racist and racialized barriers that make it so hard for so many, and the unnecessary suffering of all those who didn’t “make it” up the social ladder of success.

The model minority is also sometimes a trope drawn on by minoritized groups who are nonetheless born into considerable (and in some cases vast) privilege and/or capital. For instance, as Prachi Gupta writes, people from the highest castes in India, such as Brahmins, are structurally advantaged when entering education and jobs. Overlooking these hidden social privileges “contributes to false notions that America is a nation where anyone can rise simply through hard work, and that people of color do not face barriers to success” (Gupta 2023a). “It’s a strategy” she astutely notes, “that dismantles opportunity under the guise of creating more.” (Gupta 2023b).

In these multiple ways, the idea of the model minority is problematic and divisive. It is, however, a trope implicitly embraced and refashioned by the Right into what I term model minority authoritarianism. The next section examines how such racialized images of progressiveness are being mobilized in practice, around the Conservative Party, the primary governing power in the UK since 2010.

Conservative Racial Politics

Traditionally, the Conservative Party has been perceived as a political party aimed at and overwhelmingly popular with white people, and it certainly is in terms of membership (96.4 percent, in relation to an 82 percent national average; Bale 2022). However, in recent years, high-profile cabinet ministers have been appointed from so-called minority ethnic backgrounds. This process gathered steam during Boris Johnson's tenure as prime minister (2019–22) and escalated during the breathtakingly brief Liz Truss government of forty-nine days in summer 2022, when seven cabinet ministers from minority ethnic groups were appointed—the highest number ever (Uberoi and Carthew 2023). The following month the UK also acquired its first ever nonwhite prime minister, Rishi Sunak, voted for by Conservative Party members after Liz Truss's premiership crashed and burned along with the UK economy.

These significant and high-profile appointments are not representative of the demographics of Conservative Party MPs or the wider government. The number of so-called minority ethnic MPs remains far lower than in the UK population, and the main opposition party, Labour, still has approaching double that of the Conservatives (forty-one to twenty-three).[2] What politics does this shift manifest? As Nirmal Puwar points out, this is a very different moment from when she analyzed the lived experience of BAME (Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority) employees in the House of Commons some twenty years ago for her book *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies out of Place* (2004), which focused on the recurrent marginalization and condescension they experienced. While we can of course in no sense assume that behavioral condescension has evaporated, in terms of status and rank, these high-profile appointments are the opposite of marginalization (Puwar 2004, 2022).

[2] There were sixty-six minority ethnic / global majority MPs in 2022: 10 percent in the House of Commons and 7.3 percent in the Lords, as opposed to a national population average of 18 percent. At the time this article goes to press, in October 2024, the hard right Black MP Kemi Badenoch is one of two final contenders for the leadership of the Conservative Party.

These high-profile appointments emerged not alongside anti-racist policies, increased social liberalism, or, as Nancy Fraser (2022) puts it, "progressive neoliberalism," but on the contrary, with increased social illiberalism and right-wing ideologies. The 2022 Conservative Party leadership campaign saw an unprecedented ethnic diversity of candidates with an increasingly hard line on immigration and border politics. As Rima Saini, Michael Bankole, and Neema Begum (2023: 61) argue in their incisive account of the campaign, the minority ethnic MPs in the race for party leadership acted as model minorities who

> negotiate their ethno-racial "otherness" and hard-right Conservative ideology by engaging in a unique mode of post-racial political gatekeeping. A gatekeeper in this context has the power to reproduce and to set the racial status quo, to redefine race post-racially, and—in this case, partly through drawing on their own positionalities and histories—legitimise hard-right views on race, immigration and border politics.

"Post-racial gatekeeping" involves shutting the gate to keep racialized others out, beyond the boundary of the nation, emphasizing and solidifying both. This relates to the wider turn over the past decade toward what Sivamohan Valluvan (2019) terms "the clamour of nationalism": the increase in flag waving, nationalism, and xenophobia, which in the UK has found both expression and escalation through the Brexit campaign to leave the European Union.

Hard-line immigration policies have become voiced by, and to some extent synonymous with, ethnic minority government ministers like Priti Patel, who as home secretary (2019–22) introduced a points-based immigration system and signed a deal to process immigrants claiming asylum in Rwanda. Deemed unlawful in 2023 by the Court of Appeal, the policy was championed by her successor, Suella Braverman, a hardline right-winger who routinely defends the legacy of the British Empire and was the first chair of governors at Michaela School where Birbalsingh is headmistress. Braverman ramped up her right-wing discourse at the 2023 Conservative Party conference, warning that "a hurricane of

migrants is coming" and that "foreign offenders would be 'booted out'" (Wilcock 2023). In other words, ethnic minority ministers have become a significant vector for increasingly xenophobic policies, as well as for right-wing policies further impoverishing the poor—a demographic that is disproportionately BAME.

These MPs therefore find pushing the political envelope or "Overton window" further to the right a means of achieving for themselves and obtaining positions of governmental power. Their image is used to provide the appearance of being unprejudiced while their policies further damage the already disenfranchised. As Taj Ali (2021) wrote for a leading UK race equality think tank, the Runnymede Trust, "The government is using its 'diverse' cabinet to deflect from racial inequality": "Ethnic minority cabinet ministers continue to uphold institutional racism today, using their identities to give us the illusion of progress when in reality they maintain and uphold systems of oppression. Such tokenism is deeply insidious and allows the government off the hook." In these terms, a gloss of progressive multicultural modernity is used to extend and deepen inequalities.

Such a cultural-political formation is clearly not solely reducible to economics, manifesting what Gilroy (2006) so saliently identified as "postcolonial melancholia" on a grand scale alongside internalized imperial racisms (Fanon 1952; Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). Political economy is also an integral and malleable part of this neoliberal nationalism. As Valluvan (2019: 130) suggests, these renewed borderings, in which "the outsider is rendered undesirable, ominous and a problem" are located in an older history of imperial capitalism. Their self-narratives—as in the Conservative free-market policy document *Britannia Unchained*—reach back to a time beyond the vestiges of social democracy and before the formation of Europe, when the nation-as-corporation, then in the form of the British East India Company, was crucial "to the initial charting of European colonialism" (134–35). The clamor for points-based merit systems simultaneously mobilize nationalistic and social

mobility discourses. They fuse together racialized narratives of neoliberal meritocracy and bordering nationalisms (Littler 2018; Valluvan 2019: 134), facilitating the narrative that only those who are truly "worth it" can get into the nation.

Authoritarian Education

The model minority myth is, then, what these neoconservatives are drawing on and rebooting, ramping up its authoritarian side in the process. This can take explicit form. One of Katharine Birbalsingh's book series positioning her school as educational paragon is titled *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers* (2016), echoing *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mothers*, Amy Chua's 2011 book on intensely disciplinary, quasi-militaristic Chinese American parenting, which popularized the phrase *tiger mother* and spawned a media discussion frenzy on contemporary parenting styles (Chang 2011). In Birbalsingh's book, authoritarian classroom discipline is rendered more "caring" through an analogy to "tough love" parenting. The Michaela classroom celebrates authoritarian discipline and silent corridors. Students bark answers loudly, shouting "Sir!" or "Miss!" at the end of sentences; teachers shout "Slant!" and students cross arms and sit bolt upright facing them. Its pedagogy—shared with many US charter schools—emphasizes docility, rote learning, and teachers delivering facts (Reay 2023). Minor infractions like forgetting a pencil sharpener or looking out of a window are punished with demerits; notoriously, one girl received a detention for accidentally dropping her pencil case (Duobyls 2017).

The appeal lies in its promise of producing "good," focused behavior by children, which helps them secure grades and thus increased potential for upward social mobility. This has an understandable appeal, particularly in an area of London, Brent, with significant levels of deprivation during a time of increasing societal precarity. There are many people who understand, only too well, the profound economic and social costs to *not* achieving upward mobility or stability: the poverty, the risks of unemployment, of homelessness, of illness, of

incarceration. Economic and societal inequality under the coalition and Conservative governments has rocketed to the extent that Britain now has more food banks than McDonalds; as the Equality Trust (2022) puts it, this is "Billionaire Britain." As Thomas Piketty (2014) points out, such economic inequality is endemic across neoliberal countries, producing extremes of wealth not seen since the early twentieth century. Such precarity, such risk, raises the stakes and the anxiety levels of parents, particularly parents of minority ethnic students who have the living legacies of racist imperialism to contend with.

Michaela's solution for such precarity not only fails to even *discuss* changing inequalities in the political or societal fabric but also reapportions blame for it to families and subjects students to what are at the least highly questionable and for so many profoundly problematic experiences. There are elements of Michaela's stated pedagogic approach that are clearly positive (everyone eating together, inclusion, gratitude statements, encouraging "digital detoxes," teaching kindness). These aspects are highlighted within the documentary and the Michaela books. Yet these elements also coexist alongside profound unkindness and educational and social costs. Silent corridors reduce opportunities for socialization alongside bullying. The disciplinary emphasis on the teacher always being right and on rote learning vastly reduces potential for the development of analytical and critical thinking skills, while being aimed particularly at the working class and people of color. As Diane Reay (2023: 132) puts it, "We should all be concerned if the educational system is producing socially mobile adults who believe 'silence is their natural state.'" The emphasis on school exclusion as a behavioral tool to modify overall results has led to a doubling in the national rate of so-called problem children being excluded (UK Government 2024). In an educational system run according to market-based logic and norms, when high grades are used to attract parent "consumers," and school public relations are being increasingly prioritized, "problem students" become a fly in the ointment to be abandoned. Birbalsingh not only participates in

this logic but also vehemently encourages it in her school; Michaela's exclusion rate is way higher than the national average (*Economist* 2023).

It is important to note what happens to the children pushed out of the picture, who do not appear n the TV documentary. Excluded children usually end up in "pupil referral units," which have exploded in numbers (Fazackerley 2023); and in 2023 there was a 30 percent increase in school suspensions, rising 75 percent for children living in poverty and four times more likely for children with special educational needs (IPPR 2023). Even the best-selling, right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail* points out that Michaela has far below the average number of students with special educational needs (0.5 as opposed to the national average of 1.7). On social media Birbalsingh has posted videos of young people having "meltdowns," blaming the parents; despite the now widely accepted need for educators to have a basic understanding of neurodiversity, and the exponential growth of popular literacy on the topic over the past few years, she appears astonishingly oblivious to the obvious fact they bear hallmarks of autism (i.e., flapping or stimming), instead arguing stridently that they need to learn how to be "better behaved."[3]

Such rhetoric of obedient behavior both appeals directly to a strand of the Conservative base that is ignorant of special educational needs and is indicative of Birbalsingh's wider engagement with the culture wars via social media. For while Birbalsingh repeatedly describes herself as "conservative with a small 'c,'" her social media pronouncements are more extreme. She regularly retweets the far-right media platform GB News, a wide range of American conservatives, and all those who critique the "idea of social justice." Such deliberately contrarian and inflammatory practice is part of a wider pattern.

[3] See her August 6, 2023, post of a teenage girl having a meltdown at an airport. Birbalsingh captions, "When 2 year olds do this, it is normal. If they do this when older, you did something wrong with parenting. Take responsibility. Be aware that your child later represents your parenting skills Raise them so at 18 they don't embarrass you" (Birbalsingh 2023). Numerous comments underneath point out neurodiversity and special needs, but she leaves the post up.

Since 2019 there has been an efflorescence of commitment to stoking the culture wars by Tory parliamentary groups. As John Clarke (2023: 146) puts it,

> Culture wars might be best understood as a shift in strategy within the dominant bloc, moving from incorporation to contestation, and from acceptance to refusal. Where the New Labour period, and even some aspects of Cameron's conservatism, emphasised the "tolerance" of difference within a framework of liberal "diversity," the recent period has seen efforts to stake out differences as contestable.

Enacting such contestability through contrarianism and by developing straw categories like "progressive education" (very bad, according to Birbalsingh) becomes a means to push common sense away from socially liberal capitalism—right at a moment when the capitalist part of this equation had been thrown more widely into question after the 2008 financial crash (Gilbert and Williams 2022; Klein 2023). Instead, it popularizes authoritarian, nationalistic capitalism. Attacks on structural inequality, racial justice movements, and anti-capitalist education are also a mark of their impact (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021); the ideological discourse of the model minority authoritarian can, in these terms, be understood as a defensive political reaction against the Black Lives Matter movement, resurgent left feminisms, and popular awareness of economic inequality.

It is important to emphasize that extending capitalism's reach is core to the project. Michaela is a "free school," which is similar to a charter school in the United States: publicly funded, but free from local authority control and run by private interests, or trusts, which in theory could be a bunch of parents but in practice tends to be extremely wealthy individuals and private corporations from outside the area (Mansell 2019; Reay 2023: 130). Free schools are equivalent to academy schools but must be new (an academy can be and indeed often is a converted community state school), and while both must set national exams, they do not have to follow the UK national curriculum. This multilayered process of privatization of school

education, introduced by Margaret Thatcher and exacerbated under the "New Labour" Blair years, has expanded rapidly since 2010 to the extent that "education-trained professionals [are now] doing the bidding of corporate executives" (Gunther and Courtney 2023; Benn 2012). Such ownership often takes the form of business leaders running academy trusts, such as Carpetright furnishings dealer Lord Harris, who runs forty-eight academies, and Carphone Warehouse cofounder David Ross who runs thirty-four schools. Consequently two hundred schools in England are now under the control of a relatively small number of corporate tycoons, the vast majority of which (eight out of ten trusts) have donated to the Conservative Party (Mansell 2019; Gunther and Courtney 2023). The increase in corporate power in the public sector is key to the anti-equality agenda: a "morbid symptom" boosted by model minority authoritarianism.

Contrarian Populism: Shifting the Blame for Social Mobility

To fully understand the appeal of model minority authoritarianism, we need to understand its relationship with meritocracy. Social mobility—meaning upward social mobility—is today taken as the key marker of success in a meritocratic society, where everyone ostensibly has a chance to make it. Meritocracy is a shape-shifting ideology that takes different forms, but has invariably been used, in varying degrees and shapes, to promote inequality for the many under the guise of opportunity for the few. The movement from mid-century social democratic meritocracy to neoliberal meritocracy is characterized by the social ladder to "success" becoming longer and longer, with societal safety nets being cut and a wider demographic group being incited to make it—and shamed if they don't (Littler 2018). Indeed, there has been increasing stigmatization of underprivileged groups who have "failed" to become socially mobile and thus are virulently coded as failures (Tyler 2020).

The conversation on meritocracy and social mobility has rapidly expanded in recent years, as anxieties have been raised across the United States and UK about lack of progress in

education (Markovitz 2019; Elliot Major and Machin 2018), on the effects of "meritocratic hubris" on those left behind and in aiding the rise of the Far Right (Sandel 2020), on its use in re-channeling global imperialisms (Varriale 2023) and in neoliberal place making (Born 2023). There has also been a renewed, vigorous defense of meritocracy by the Right as offering capitalist freedom (Wooldridge 2021), an approach that dovetails with the Conservatives' use of the concept of social mobility.

In recent years the social mobility agenda under the Conservatives has become reinvigorated yet again. Under Boris Johnson, increasing public awareness of inequality was gestured toward through the vocabulary of "levelling up," a trope that was also used as the title of both a policy paper and a ministerial post. "Levelling up" said that something needed to be done about inequality while being strategically imprecise about exactly what. The phrase variously indicates regional inequalities, a postal code lottery of access to public services, and full-on economic inequality (Newman 2021). While the rhetoric of levelling up marked public *awareness* of inequality, it was also mobilized to *extend* it, for example, via the Towns Fund, which gave even more money to Conservative constituencies to keep voters sweet for future elections, a process known as "pork barrel politics" (Jennings, McKay, Stoker 2021; Davies 2024).

The Conservatives' refashioning of the Social Mobility Commission (SMC)—the public advisory body funded by the government to advocate for a country in which "the circumstances of birth do not determine outcomes in life"—involved appointing Katharine Birbalsingh as leader and developing several new initiatives. These included highly questionable modes of measurement that have drawn ire from the most senior of establishment sociologists measuring social mobility, who argue it uses misleading statistics to create an "upbeat narrative" (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2022). The SMC's initiatives encouraging large corporations to increase their diversity have also been critiqued by

educational sociologists for offering a gloss of respectability to organizations well known to increase inequality in society at large:

> Praising KPMG, PWC, or other accountancy firms for their thin commitment to narrowing inequality of opportunity while these companies actively foster and profit from the destruction of secure employment for thousands of working-class people presents a problem with which sociologists wishing to engage critically with the social mobility agenda must grapple. (Gamsu and Ingram 2022: 201)**{Au: Please cite page number.JL: done}**

The 2023 SMC Annual Report *State of the Nation* reflected the expanded conversation around social mobility by taking some complexities into account while pursuing a corporate-oriented agenda that decreased equality and "read[ing]–and look[ing]—like a promotional brochure" for the Conservative Party (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2022: 582). Its structure of (a) sounding or appearing "egalitarian" in highly selective ways and (b) promoting a program of vastly increasing corporate power and economic inequality while (c) shifting the blame from structural inequality, individualizing it, and passing it around is part of a wider pattern repeated across Conservative policy and discourse.

A further example of this logic of blame shifting is the 2021 Commission on Race and Ethic Disparities Report (CRED), commonly known as the Sewell Report after lead commissioner Tony Sewell. Notoriously, this concluded that Britain was not a racist country but a beacon of progressiveness, took issue with the idea of institutional racisms, and argued that "decolonising the curriculum" was destructive (CRED 2021). It enlisted Black people to work on the report who denied the existence of racism, argued for abolishing the term *BAME* in favor of opportunity for all, and listed people as stakeholders who were not involved (Mohdin 2021). The report consequently received a storm of publicity and castigation from the majority of those involved in UK anti-racist education and politics, plus the British

Medical Association and the United Nations, but was welcomed by the Conservatives. As David Gillborn, Ian McGimpsey, and Paul Warmington (2022: 9) put it, the report exemplifies the "anti-anti-racism" tendency around the hard right fringe that had become central to British politics through the Conservative Party and echoes attacks on critical race theory in the United States.

One notable characteristic of the Sewell Report is that it in effect plays "pass the parcel" with inequalities: constantly shifting the blame to another issue, then another, and another, and back again. It argues that race is often blamed when class is the problem, which means that it does not need, according to its logic at that moment, to address the problem of systemic racialized inequality or its historical roots in imperialism (CRED 2021; IRR 2021). It creates a deliberately muddled discourse, operating through semantic confusion: saying one thing while doing another. The report reactivates an older conservative narrative suggesting family breakdown is the primary fundamental social problem rather than inequality—a vocabulary reminiscent of conservative politics in the 1980s, just as cracking down on protest and maintaining borders echoes the wider "law and order" Thatcherite agenda that Stuart Hall (1988) called "authoritarian populism" (Hall 1988, Moran and Littler 2020). The report creates an overall impression of a fair, equal country, with the few remaining problems being mostly the fault of failing families, which can be helped by individualized striving. Another way of putting it is that the report offers a contrarian, model-minority version of meritocracy.

The Rainbow of Right-Wing Feminism

All these examples are part of a wider concerted attack on structural social inequalities that can be witnessed across UK government and throughout the wider conservative sphere of influence. For instance, in 2020 the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission appointed anti-feminists as new commissioners, including digital entrepreneur Jessica Butcher who spoke out against the MeToo movement on the grounds that it was destroying men's

reputations, arguing against "the victim position" of modern feminism (Jayenetti 2020). This is not simply a form of neoliberal feminism that does not recognize structural inequalities; rather, it is one that specifically attacks both accounts of structural social inequality and the infrastructure set up in the years of social democracy, and movements since, that attempt to deal with them. That is what characterizes the wider anti-equality agenda.

It is not an accident that many, though by no means all, model minority authoritarians are women. They pick up this mantle from Margaret Thatcher, the 1980s "authoritarian populist" Conservative and first ever female prime minister who so vigorously pushed through neoliberal marketization in the UK, rejected the feminist movement, and was notorious for promoting herself rather than the rights of women (Nunn 2003). In this they share commonalties with a wider number of female right-wing politicians internationally, most prominently Giorgia Meloni, the white far-right prime minister of Italy. Such figures "reap the fruits" of a feminism that they are not part of, but which benefit them (Farris 2023).

In many ways Katharine Birbalsingh embodies this new confluence, blending neoliberal feminism with reactionary authoritarian populism. She presents a confident female voice and inhabits a powerful position as both headmistress and conservative public figure, regularly appearing on talk shows and news features as an articulate talking head. The image of an independent female success story is also dramatized in her 2009 "chicklit" novel *Singleholic*. Published under the pen name Katharine Bing, it features an anxious thirty-something desperate to find Prince Charming and self-consciously dating and comparing men of many colors. As the book jacket blurb announces:

> White men, Black men, brown men . . .
>
> Who's better to marry?
>
> And who's better in bed?
>
> Have you ever wondered who has the bigger packet? . . .

Join Singleholic Sarah on a sassy Sex and the City multicultural dating spree across London.

The novel is a multicultural take on the 1990s hit "single-girl" novel *Bridget Jones' Diary*. The protagonist, a brown upper-middle-class, inner-city teacher, is desperate to get a man but realizes by the end—à la *Sex and the City*—that independence and girlfriends are most important. The protagonist, a teacher in a tough school in inner-city London, comes, like Birbalsingh, from an affluent background. She is open to mixing with all social types but notably venerates men with money (Birbalsingh 2009).

Angela McRobbie termed a neoliberal feminist tendency of the 1990s the "top girls" phenomenon: girls had to show they were up for it both sexually and in terms of thrusting to the top of the career ladder. By 2023 McRobbie noted that this formation had undergone several mutations. It ranged from neoliberal success no longer looking so easy or glossy in the wake of austerity, to leftist feminist strikes; through an upsurge in feminist media commissioning; and on to gender wars and the rise of "an embedded hard right in the UK which has crafted a so-called feminism compatible with their ideals" (McRobbie 2023; see also Littler 2023).

Birbalsingh is exemplary of this latter tendency. Her persona combines confident leadership and expressions of female achievement with authoritarianism, imperialist nationalism, and pro-capitalism. Her right-wing brand of feminism oscillates between pro- and anti-feminist positions. Her short-lived fifteen-month appointment from 2021 as head of the Social Mobility Commission was marked by gendered controversy. Rather than seeing the lack of women in science as the result of gendered stereotypes and historical employment patterns, and ignoring seismic progress over the past decade enabling more women to overcome prejudice and pursue STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), she argued that girls didn't like physics because it was hard, and that this was

"a natural thing" (BBC 2022). The response from female scientists and bodies promoting female participation in science was damning. Birbalsingh quit the following January, stating that it required her to "row back" on her outspoken views (Butler 2023). What is notable about this incident is that it shows a commitment to being outspoken, to saying controversial things over and above any commitment to breaking down societal barriers—the precise role of the Social Mobility Commission.

Conclusion: New Old Imperialisms

Model minority authoritarianism is a powerful vector for the new Right, one that attacks anything smelling of collectivism or social democracy on a contrarian basis and combines strict discipline with social mobility narratives. In the latter respect it connects to the questions Gilroy so saliently raised in 2013 about "the relationship between black and migrant communities and the neoliberal thematics of uplift, self-responsibility and self-improvement," where he also noted that "the history of being denied recognition as an individual has actually enhanced the appeal of particular varieties of extreme individualism" (23, 35). While what I have termed the "model minority authoritarianism" formation now takes a particular form in the UK, it unsurprisingly also has a strong family resemblance to reactionary, racialized political tendencies outside the country. In the vein of a US Republican agenda (Frank 2008; Grossberg 2018), it invents new narratives through which to take a wrecking ball to the vestiges of any social democratic institutions dealing with inequality.

Behavior that seeks to disrupt commonsense morality and dismantle "sacred cows in the name of a new capitalism is, of course, not by any means confined to people deemed to be "of color." As I have written about before, corporate libertarianism has a conspicuous recent history in the UK, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson and public conservative pundit Toby Young being energetic examples (Littler 2018). Many participants in such political discourse

have been involved with the right-wing contrarian publication *Spiked* and its sister organizations the Institute of Ideas and the Academy of Ideas, which have been funded by the Koch Foundation (Monbiot 2018). Through such networks, and their connections throughout political and institutional Conservative life, a right-wing fringe has become the mainstream (Gillborn, McGimpsey, and Warmington 2022).

In *Doppleganger* Naomi Klein (2023: xx) notes that the power of the Far Right is significantly boosted by "exiles from progressive movements": people who identify as "having been" socially liberal before they were drawn to the Right, like Naomi Wolf lending credence to Steve Bannon. A similar logic is at play in model minority authoritarianism. Birbalsingh demonstrates fluency in a language of social liberalism to try to persuade us that it's gone too far, that it needs to rein itself in, sensibly, to be more conservative. She makes repeated attacks on "progressive education." A continual refrain is that she used to be left-liberal before she realized she needed to speak out against the "excuses-culture" orthodoxy and embrace "no-excuses discipline" (Birbalsingh 2020: 17).

What makes the model minority authoritarian a potent political force is that it revitalizes highly reactionary narratives and actions that perpetuate and extend inequality in ostensibly multicultural clothes that give them credence. As this special issue highlights, newness often intensifies and reshapes older politically regressive forms. Paul Warmington (2015) points out how, in the UK, "the new black social conservatism, while representing itself as a shift beyond the old wars, too often resembles old forms of pathologization." Model minority authoritarianism and the wider right-wing anti-equality agenda operate by reviving nationalism and neo-imperialism. Birbalsingh insists on regular singing of "God Save the King," the national anthem (rare in UK state schools), and is well-known for castigating music of Black origin like rap, grime, and drill. Michaela offers what educational sociologist David Buckingham (2020) describes as "the curriculum of Brexit": while its

pupils come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, their lives "are presented as a wasteland," with the job of teachers "to inculcate them in a culture defined in terms of a stultifying, authoritarian nationalism." This use of flag and monarchy as the signifying "dome of Britishness" reroutes pluralism into a stringently narrow version of heritage validating British imperialism (Hall 2005).

This article has sought to bring into conversation literature on right-wing cultural racialization and contemporary politics with that on meritocracy and the social mobility industry. It has attempted to show that model minority authoritarianism is a powerful vector for the new Right. It is not by any means the only model of authoritarian capitalism, but it is one that has significant power and reach. It is a formation that yokes together the ideologies of upward social mobility, the expansion of capitalism, and the reduction of socialized resources with authoritarianism and nationalism, all as expressed by people of color. Part of a wider, aggressive anti-equality agenda, it seeks to further dismantle social bonds and protection, and it marks a potent new iteration of right-wing neoliberal meritocracy.

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Jo Littler is professor of culture, media, and social analysis at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her most recent books are *Left Feminisms* (2023); with The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto* (2020); and *Against Meritocracy* (2018).