



Wednesday 10th June 2020

This is a response from Portsmouth Green Party representative, Tamara Groen, on the racist social media posts by Councillor Linda Symes, the Conservative councillor for Eastney and Craneswater, as reported in The News, Portsmouth on June 3rd 2020¹.

Though Cllr Symes has been suspended from the national Conservative Party; to date, the councillor has not apologized for her actions, while the local Portsmouth Conservative party and their Leader Cllr Donna Jones have remained silent. After waiting a week for a local acknowledgement, Tamara writes directly to Cllr Symes.

Dear Cllr Symes,

I am sure you feel under attack right now. I'm sure you feel abandoned by your party, as your local conservative peers fall silent, wondering why there is such a furore about a few shared Facebook posts. After all, this was to your private Facebook profile and you did nothing wrong. You are not a racist.

Racists are bad people who bay for the blood of people with darker skin than theirs. That is not you. You care about British soldiers, British children, and British values. After all, that is why you are a councillor. Because you care enough to stand up and represent your community. How is it racist to say, 'All Lives Matter'? Because surely, all lives *do* matter. And anyway, racism is an American problem, it's not even relevant to us in the UK.

When I composed this letter to you in my mind, I was going to school you about institutional and systemic racism. I was going to explain to you that this is a massive issue here in the UK and it permeates all aspects of our society². Protesters are not just demonstrating in solidarity with their American counterparts against the US police force. They are protesting against the racial injustices black people experience every day, right here, in Britain. In the UK, black people are 9.5 times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police³, more likely to receive custodial sentences on conviction and be given longer sentences than their white counterparts for the same offence.⁴

I was going to explain to you that having white privilege does not mean that your life is not hard, but it does mean that the colour of your skin is one less obstacle you experience. I was going to talk about the problematic nature of the phrase 'All Lives Matter' and how it misses

¹ <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/politics/portsmouth-politician-under-fire-undeniably-racist-social-media-posts-2873870#gsc.tab=0>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/racial-inequality-uk-racial-disparity-audit-government-report-theresa-may-bme-black-ethnic-minority-a7992016.html>

³ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report>

the point entirely - how you are missing the point entirely. I was going to share resources that will help you educate yourself on the systemic racism in British society⁵ and hopefully teach you how to be actively anti-racist because it is no longer enough to be just 'not racist', if it ever was.

But Cllr Symes, I am tired. I am so so tired of white people shouting us down, of refusing to see how slavery and colonisation directly impact how society is formed and how we live today. I am so tired of explaining when it is not my job to teach people why they should see value in the lives of others who are different from them.

Oh, and by the way, I am a brown woman (Indo-Caribbean to be precise) - I am not black. Most of the time, I am the only person of colour in the room but the Black Lives Matter story is not my story. I try to be an ally - I am flawed but I try - and even I am tired. I cannot imagine how it feels for black people right now.

I do feel sorry for you Cllr Symes. You must be feeling bewildered and upset and probably angry. It is uncomfortable to come face to face with your privilege and prejudices in such a public way.

You have a lot of unlearning to do. Unfortunately, when corrected about your behaviour, you were defensive and unapologetic. You had an opportunity to stop and really listen. And you chose not to.

Sure, do diversity training or social media training. But that is only useful if you open your mind and heart to experiences that are not your own.

I want you to *listen*.

I want you to *learn*.

I want you to *apologise* for your actions and demonstrate that you understand *why* what you shared was wrong.

I also want you to *stand down* as a councillor because this learning will take time and dedication. It would not be appropriate for you to continue to represent all the people of Portsmouth until you have learned this. Or rather, unlearned the systemic nature of white supremacy that benefits all white people, no matter how not-racist (or even anti-racist) they are. Words become actions.

Show the black people of Portsmouth that you are not just another privileged white person in power throwing untruths into the ether. I hope you are better than you appear.

Yours Sincerely,

Tamara Groen

Portsmouth Green Party

For Enquiries, contact press@portsmouth.greenparty.org.uk

⁵ I particularly recommend Reni Eddo-Lodge's book 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race', which you can order from local independent booksellers Pigeon Books for £8.99 or can borrow from the library in e-book form for free.