

# [***Wales' first Black leader is a testament to Britain's political diversity, but racism persists***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK2-KTG1-DYMD-602K-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

March 17, 2024 Sunday 2:03 PM GMT

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**Section:** INTERNATIONAL NEWS

**Length:** 1070 words

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**Dateline:** LONDON

**Body**

LONDON — [*Vaughan Gething's election*](https://apnews.com/article/wales-labour-leadership-gething-2028fae5c6d14fec4e9e4d0bbdeabae6) as the next leader of Wales marks a milestone: For the first time, none of the U.K.’s four main governments is led by a white man.

It’s a striking moment in a country still grappling with racism and the legacy of empire.

Prime Minister [*Rishi Sunak*](https://apnews.com/hub/rishi-sunak) has Indian heritage and is Britain’s first Hindu leader. Scottish First Minister [*Humza Yousaf*](https://apnews.com/article/humza-yousaf-scotland-muslim-leader-1068ec8342fa7f9e7ab487df7c4a549b) – who, like Gething, heads a semi-autonomous government -- comes from a Pakistani Muslim family. [*Northern Ireland’s regional administration*](https://apnews.com/article/northern-ireland-government-sinn-fein-stormont-brexit-33dae8ed4649c9386366e2dcd73f7391) is jointly led by two women, Michelle O’Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly.

Gething, son of a Welsh father and a Zambian mother, said his election on Saturday as the first Black leader of the governing Welsh Labour Party marked a moment when “we turn the page in the book of our nation’s history, a history that we write together.”

**DIVERSITY AT THE TOP**

There’s no denying British ***politics*** has changed, and quickly.

Before 2002, the country had never had a non-white Cabinet minister. Sunak likes to point out that his Cabinet is one of the most diverse in British history. It includes Home Secretary James Cleverly and Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch, who are Black, and Energy Secretary Claire Coutinho, whose parents immigrated from India.

Sunak told last year’s Conservative Party conference that he is “proud to be the first British Asian prime minister,” but “even prouder that it’s just not a big deal.”

The government’s diversity reflects years of work by the center-right party to shake its “pale, male and stale” image and encourage people of color to run for Parliament.

Sunder Katwala, who heads equality think-tank British Future, wrote in The Guardian that “ethnic diversity right at the top has become the ’new normal.’”

But critics say an increase in diversity in high office hasn't been accompanied by government policies to reduce wider social inequalities.

Some also accuse Sunak’s administration of deliberately politicizing race as a wedge issue during an election year in which the Conservatives trail far behind Labour in opinion polls.

They point to politicians like former Home Secretary [*Suella Braverman*](https://apnews.com/article/fired-braverman-british-sunak-government-8c101f1f08c80e750d2623cc61203feb), who claims multiculturalism has failed and says Britain faces an “invasion” of asylum-seekers. Braverman, whose Indian parents moved to Britain from Kenya and Mauritius, was fired by Sunak in November but remains a powerful and ambitious Conservative lawmaker.

“Some of our most divisive politicians are people like Suella Braverman,” former government adviser Samuel Kasumu told the BBC on Sunday.

“It is not the color of your skin that matters when it comes to tackling racism, discrimination and bringing communities -- it has to be the content of your character and your willingness to lead. And that is not happening now.”

**CONSERVATIVE RACISM CLAIMS**

Claims of racism within the Conservative Party have made headlines in recent weeks.

Last month, Sunak suspended a senior Conservative lawmaker for saying London’s Muslim mayor is controlled by Islamists. [*Lee Anderson*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-london-mayor-sadiq-khan-conservatives-islamophobia-74c5574aa7114f557786966630b1c491), who has since defected to the right-wing party Reform U.K., said Islamists had “got control” of Mayor Sadiq Khan, who had “given our capital city away to his mates.”

[*Sunak said the comments “weren’t acceptable*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-sunak-london-mayor-islamophobia-396a9c80b26f7e0e64975ef241603eb5),” though he denied they showed the Conservatives have an Islamophobia problem.

Sunak also has denounced [*comments by a party donor*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-conservative-party-donor-racism-936fd1bb71e0bc58c3992299cb9deabf) about a Black female politician. Software entrepreneur Frank Hester, who has given the Conservatives at least 10 million pounds ($12.8 million) in the past year, said Labour lawmaker Diane Abbott made him “want to hate all Black women” and that she “should be shot.”

Sunak called the comments racist, but has ignored calls to return Hester’s money.

Sayeeda Warsi, a former chairwoman of the Conservative Party, said she felt there was more overt racism now than in 2010, when she was the only person of color in the then-Prime Minister David Cameron’s Cabinet.

Warsi told Times Radio that while she had celebrated Sunak’s appointment as prime minister, “I think, tragically, his tenure will be remembered as him presiding over a terribly racist period within the party.”

Opponents also accuse the Conservatives of deliberately raising tensions over pro-Palestinian protests that have drawn [*hundreds of thousands of demonstrators*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-israel-palestinian-protest-cenotaph-e57e2ec31af2fab16660161e5ed85ae8) since the Israel-Hamas war began in October.

Sunak claimed last month there has been “a shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality.” In response, his government has drawn up a [*new definition of extremism*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-extremism-definition-free-speech-e94cbd45d5d7bd2bdbe5202f6168eb68). Critics say it could disproportionately target Muslims and limit free speech.

**A CONTESTED HISTORY**

Britain’s diversity, and its divisions, are rooted in the country’s imperial past. About 18% of the population is non-white, and many people have roots in countries the British Empire once ruled, including India, Pakistan and Caribbean nations such as Jamaica.

How to remember and reconcile with that legacy is a hotly contested issue. It erupted into headlines in 2020, when [*Black Lives Matter*](https://apnews.com/article/europe-television-arts-and-entertainment-queen-elizabeth-ii-death-of-george-floyd-abe2adc9e5e3910339ebe8ef0c642867) protesters [*toppled a statue*](https://apnews.com/article/england-american-protests-ap-top-news-international-news-vandalism-6ff36fa834275ca71f0ca0899013ecfd) of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in the city of Bristol.

Since then, several major institutions have begun to address their ties to slavery. The [*Church of England*](https://apnews.com/article/anglican-church-slavery-fund-england-32b48eee7d5c92c5738a8899ac3b48b6) aims to raise 1 billion pounds ($1.27 billion) to address its historic [*complicity in the trans-Atlantic slave trade*](https://apnews.com/article/anglicanism-religion-dd656463d44d6348750d57cc6c91c0c7) by investing in disadvantaged Black communities.

Not everyone thinks that is the right approach. Sunak opposes removing contentious statues, and has said that “trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward.”

Black academic Tony Sewell, who produced [*a contentious 2021 report*](https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-discrimination-london-coronavirus-pandemic-dc09501d52ed40cc0f9f9fa909c940e7) on racism in the U.K., said church leaders were “using the race element as a mechanism to solve their own uncertainty in the world.”

Sewell led the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, set up by then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson after the 2020 protests. It concluded that there is racism in Britain, but it’s not a systematically racist country that is “deliberately rigged” against non-white people.

Critics said the report downplayed racism, noting that Black and other ethnic-minority Britons still have more poverty and worse health than their white compatriots, a gap bleakly exposed by higher death rates in the COVID-19 pandemic.

But Sewell told the Times of London that race is no longer the defining factor in whether people succeed or fail in Britain.

“Class, geography, family structure, how you speak, is more defining here,” he said.

**Load-Date:** March 17, 2024

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