

Speech: “Together, let’s make a difference”– PM marks Black History Month

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to Downing Street for this special reception.

For 30 years, Black History Month has called on us to look back and recognise the enormous contribution which African and African-Caribbean people have made to life in Britain.

The excellent timeline on display in the State Dining Room has been provided by the Black Cultural Archive. It tells the story of over two thousand years of black history in Britain.

I’m very grateful to the Black Cultural Archives for helping us with this event and I was delighted that I have just been able to meet Dawn Hill, the Archives’ chairwoman, and present her with a Point of Light Award today.

It recognises her activity and voluntary work she has put into the Black Cultural Archives.

The Archives’ collection, and the uplifting and inspiring stories of Black history which they tell stretching from Roman times to the present day are now on display in the UK’s first national Black Heritage Centre.

Housed in a beautifully restored Georgian building on Windrush Square in Brixton, it is a great asset for this city and our country.

It serves to remind us of a very simple truth: that Black history is British history and the history of our country is the history of all our people, of every ethnicity.

Black History Month also provides us with an opportunity each year to celebrate the success of Black British people in every walk of life.

And there is so much to celebrate.

People of African and African-Caribbean heritage make an invaluable contribution to our life in the UK.

From leading figures in the arts and culture, in sport and academia, business and public service black Britons make our country a better place.

But it is not just the most prominent people – the contribution of Black British people in communities right across the UK in our NHS and schools, running or working for a small business, volunteering in their communities help to make twenty-first century Britain the strong and diverse country we are today.

But while there is much to celebrate, there is also even greater potential which is going untapped.

Because despite all the progress which we rightly celebrate, we know we still have a long way to go not just to root out hatred and prejudice from our society, but to tackle the injustices that still hold people back.

The Britain I want us to build is a country where everyone has the chance to succeed and go as far as their hard work will take them.

A country where no one suffers discrimination because of their background or ethnicity.

That is why, within weeks of becoming Prime Minister, I commissioned an unprecedented audit of public services to analyse how a person's ethnicity affects their experience of public services and how that affects their daily lives.

We published the findings last week. They expose some uncomfortable truths about the injustices that still exist in our society today – from health and education to the welfare and criminal justice systems.

As Prime Minister, it is my job, my duty, to shine a light on these injustices and lead the national effort to address them.

That will require work from Government – and it has already started.

So for example we are providing targeted employment support in 'hotspot' areas with big BAME employment gaps, so everyone has the best opportunity to make the most of their talents.

We are taking forward a number of recommendations from the Lammy Review into the experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system.

There will be an external review to improve the practice in our schools on exclusions.

And the team in the Cabinet Office which produced the audit will not be disbanded – it is going to continue its work in the future, alongside other departments and the wider public sector to drive real and meaningful change.

As a number of people have said it is all very well producing this review. But when I say we will work to drive real and meaningful change I mean it.

I hope that each of these steps will make a positive difference.

I am under no illusions about the scale of the challenge but the opportunity is enormous. Just think of the potential which is there, which I say is untapped.

Think of the talent, enthusiasm and ambition of our young people.

I saw it last week, when I visited Dunraven School in Streatham.

And an interesting story encapsulates this. One young man told me that his ambition was to pursue a career in law but he didn't see himself represented in the judiciary, and he wondered if he could make it.

But no-one's ethnicity should stop them from pursuing their dreams and as a country, we cannot afford to squander the talent and ambition of our young people.

We need to do much more to make the public sector more representative of wider society and we are taking action through initiatives like the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, which was launched on Monday.

The contribution that young black people make to Britain is already enormous.

If we remove the barriers that remain, the potential for the future will truly be without limit.

It will take sustained work over time to overcome age old injustices.

My pledge this Black History Month is that we will see it through.

I hope all of you here, and leaders across communities, will work with me to make it a reality.

Black History Month encourages us to look back and learn from the past to look around us and understand the present and to look forward to shape the future.

To inspire the next generation to make our country and our world an even better place.

Thank you all for being here to celebrate it and I hope you enjoy the rest of this reception.

Together, working together in the future, let's make a difference.