

# Armed Forces Day

Every year, I spend this day thinking about my dad who fought in Burma during the Second World War.

**Each and every one of us has a connection to the Armed Forces** – even if you don't have a family member who served in the past, or who serves now, I can safely say that you will have benefited from the Forces' commitment to our safety.

Just an example from my own constituency during the pandemic: it was the Armed Forces who facilitated effective mobile testing units across the Highlands. I will always be grateful to them for taking care of my local community and the people I represent during these frightful times.

If Coronavirus had not happened I would have spent this week preparing for the second reading of my bill to ringfence NHS spending for veteran mental health services.

**As my party's Defence spokesperson, I have tried to ensure that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) do their utmost to support the wellbeing of serving personnel and veterans.**

If Coronavirus had not interrupted the parliamentary schedule this year, I would have spent this week preparing for the second reading of my bill to ringfence NHS spending for veteran mental health services.

Between April 2017 and January 2019, the Care Quality Commission rated two out of four MoD mental health centres as inadequate or needing improvement between. There were at least 50% shortfalls in both uniformed and civilian psychiatrist posts in 2017-18. For anyone that is interested about the scale of the funding issue, I would point them towards [this Defence Committee report](#).

Given everything that our Armed Forces have done to support us during the pandemic, I think we are more united than ever as a country in recognising their value. Making sure the MoD is providing the best support possible for serving personnel, veterans, and their families is a big part of saying thank you. It is not enough to salute them today. We must act.

**But sometimes, identifying the best course of action can be difficult. This brings me to Black Lives Matter.**

The movement continues to teach me a lot – and sometimes what it has to teach me is uncomfortable! – but I am grateful, nonetheless. One of the most important lessons for me is that listening is everything.

We have no hope in hell of determining what the 'right action' is if we don't listen!

**With this in mind, I asked the MoD for a breakdown on the number of reported complaints of racist incidents in the Armed Forces between 2015 and 2020.**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June they got back to me. They said they couldn't give me that data. Johnny Mercer, the relevant Minister, said in his reply that the Department was "working to improve its data capture of all unacceptable behaviour".

It is blindingly obvious to me that in order to tackle racism in the Armed Forces, and to support BAME personnel, the MoD must be better at actually understanding how racism functions within its ranks. If the MoD does not capture this data, what does that say about how well it is listening to complainants? What does it say about how they are trying to make things better? If they haven't got all the evidence at their fingertips to inform their strategy to tackle racism going forward, then there is clearly an awful long way to go.

We need to understand the impact that Coronavirus has had, and is having, on the Armed Forces

I note that in May 2020, Help for Heroes conducted a study of veterans, service personnel and their families about the impact of Coronavirus on their mental health – they identified a 50% increase in those saying they are not managing their mental health well compared to before the pandemic. A month after Help For Heroes published this data, the Government announced that they would launch a "new study to understand the effect of coronavirus" on the UK's veteran community.

We need these studies. We need to understand the impact that Coronavirus has had, and is having, on the Armed Forces – whether they are currently serving or are veterans. For that reason, I welcome the Government's action on this wholeheartedly.

But it does beg the question: if the MoD are able to set up a study on the impact of COVID-19 as quickly as they have, can they not do the same for incidents of racism?

**The Black Lives Matter movement is a constant reminder that racism remains an emergency to be addressed.** Unless the MoD starts getting this data in order and using it to inform its strategy to tackle racism going forward, then I fear for what that says to our Armed Forces and anyone who wants to join up. I am not saying the MoD has no ears – it has made huge strides in making the Armed Forces a diverse and welcoming vocation opportunity, but it isn't able to tell me how many reported incidents of racism it has had in the last five years.

So, what's my ask on Armed Forces Day? It's that we go above and beyond to support *all* personnel, serving or not, in their ability to access specific and tailored mental health support; it's that we treat racism amongst the ranks as an emergency; and that it's a Force that listens. A Force that

listens and then acts based on the evidence.

A Force that truly values everyone that serves it.

[Go to Source](#)

Author:

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## [Pride Inside!](#)

**Lockdown may mean that we can't march this Pride, but at London Lib Dems we're still determined to celebrate and get together for *#PrideInside*.**

On **27 June** – the day that would have been the day of *London Pride* – please join us for our very own *Pride Inside* – open to Lib Dem members across the country.

We will be hosting a **panel discussion at 2PM** on the topic of **the fight for equality in the '20s**. For this panel, we will be joined by a stellar group of panellists including Baroness Lynne Featherstone, Baroness Liz Barker, Helen Belcher, and Josh Babarinde.

[RSVP for the panel →](#)

In the evening we will be hosting a **London Pride Inside Quiz at 7PM**. We'll be joined by Lib Dems from across the country, with a series of guest-rounds. You can play either as an individual or as a team.

[RSVP for the quiz →](#)

[Go to Source](#)

Author:

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## [“Where are you really from?” & other racial slights](#)

It's been a month since the murder of George Floyd. His death has sparked a global conversation about the discrimination faced by black people every day.

Other times, you struggle to find words to explain the deep hurt, so you stay silent.

**Black women have had to deal with both gender and racial discrimination all their lives.** To us, the current discussion is nothing new; it is our everyday experience, often only discussed when amongst your black friends. These forums are where we talk about the constant policing and judgement of everything from our hair, our clothes, our body and of course, the tone of our voice. Dealing with microaggressions (covert, subtle slights which demean, belittle and ridicule marginalised groups) is normal for us. The list is endless; from being mistaken for another black woman at work and at Party Conference, to being told “you’re pretty... for a dark-skinned woman” or that you should stand for election in a posh area because “you speak quite well”.

These everyday slights are hard to call out, they are more difficult to discuss with the perpetrators who often take offense, immediately becoming dismissive of your hurt. Other times, you struggle to find words to explain the deep hurt, so you stay silent.

While it’s impossible to identify every microaggression, I want to give five examples of the most common I encounter.

## **1. No, where are you *really* from?**

Last year I was racially attacked by two white men on a train who asked where I was from. They clearly disapproved when I replied “London”. The situation very quickly led to them unleashing a torrent of abuse, including insults on my intelligence and taking it in turn to guess which part of Africa I actually belonged to. On this occasion, I fought back only because other, non-black people spoke up in my defence and protected me. This support also gave me the courage to report the crime. The two men were later charged.

**As a black person, questions about your background are common. There are no limits to when or where you could be asked this question; usually by strangers, at work, out partying, walking the streets, on public transport and so on.**

When people interrogate you on your heritage, the implicit message is that you don’t belong, you’re not British, you’ll always be an outsider. Probing my background leaves me and many like me feeling like an “other” in a country we were born and raised in.

## **2. Can I touch your hair?**

Touching someone’s hair, while not as traumatic as being called a racial slur, can be equally unsettling and dehumanising.

Black hair is beautiful, so I can appreciate it when people tell me they love my hair. But what I don’t appreciate is people who seem obsessed with examining my hair or even touching it without permission. Black people have mastered the art of ducking when a hand randomly makes its way towards your

hair. I've had people grab my afro on public transport, I've had my braids pulled in the middle of a date by a stranger walking past our table, I've had people question whether I wash my hair and if so how often. People have even been offended when I didn't allow them to touch my hair.

To say you don't see colour means you don't see the discrimination and oppression faced by marginalised groups.

**The need to touch my hair unsolicited is not only an invasion of my personal space but a deeply patronising act.** It leaves black women feeling like animals in a zoo; there to be gazed upon, analysed, and studied in a way not too dissimilar to the treatment of Sarah Baartman, a black woman who was exhibited at freak show attractions across Europe in the 19th-century.

### **3. You're so sassy/there's no need to get aggressive**

The angry black woman trope is an all too familiar narrative women like me have had to deal with most of our lives. When I speak my mind, often with the same passion and intensity as my white counterparts I'm labelled "sassy", "aggressive" even "threatening".

**Why say sassy instead of passionate? Why aggressive instead of direct? And why threatening over authoritative?**

This narrative tends to only be used to dismiss a black woman's experience of being treated differently to others and to mask the mistreatment of black women, usually in the workplace. This is what I call gaslighting 101. Labelling black women as aggressive can have a major effect on black women's mental health. And how could it not be when you spend every day navigating an environment that mistreats you, whilst trying your best not to come across as angry

### **4. I don't see colour**

This is normally something said with the best of intentions to show that someone isn't racist. However, it can be damaging. **To say you don't see colour means you don't see the discrimination and oppression faced by marginalised groups.** Microinvalidations like this also diminish and belittle the racist experiences faced by black people. If none of us saw race how could we combat racism

### **5. Are you sure that's what happened?**

When someone tells you they experienced something racist, believe them. Don't question them; instead, listen with sincerity and a genuine desire to understand.

So often when a black person describes a racist experience they are met with: "are you sure that's what happened?" and "I'm sure they didn't mean it like

that". These are all ways of invalidating and denying someone's lived experience. **When someone tells you they experienced something racist, believe them.** Don't question them; instead, listen with sincerity and a genuine desire to understand.

Whilst these microaggressions may seem insignificant, having to constantly deal with them is exhausting. Over time, these everyday slights take their toll on your mental wellbeing. Often people are unaware that they have even said anything offensive which is why educating yourself is so important. Before you say something, think about the impact it could have on someone else. If you are called out, don't be defensive, use the opportunity to learn so you can do better in the future. And if you're not black, remember **it's not the job of black people to educate you, you need to do the work yourself.**

*Cllr Julia Ogiehor, Muswell Hill Ward and Opposition Crime, the Community and Equalities Spokesperson; Chair of Haringey Lib Dems*

[Go to Source](#)

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## **One Month Since George Floyd**

**George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis a month ago today.**

Seeing his last few moments and hearing his final words broadcast across the globe has sparked a renewed revulsion at continuing racial injustice and focused attention on the Black Lives Matter movement.

For those of us who do not have to confront racism and discrimination every day in anything we do it has been a **long overdue wake up call that we still have work to do to wipe out inequality in this country.**

It's on all of us to make sure we turn this moment into lasting change – not only raising awareness but taking swift action

**We must make sure we turn this moment into lasting change.** It is time to raise awareness, to pursue swift, effective action to end racial injustice.

The government has announced it will hold a review into race inequality. But that is not enough. We need action. We need a Race Equality Strategy for the whole of the United Kingdom – a strategy that does not avoid injustice, but tackles it head on, and defeats it.

We must build a fairer, more equal society. To do that Liberal Democrats will have to take the fight into every area of our society. As we learn more and

the campaign grows so too will our policies and the list of actions we need – we defeat racial injustice wherever it lurks in modern Britain.

[Go to Source](#)

Author:

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## [How to nominate a candidate for Leader](#)

To stand for leader, candidates have to secure a nomination from an MP, as well as 200 members, from at least 20 local parties.

Any member can nominate a candidate and who you've nominated isn't made public.

If you'd like to nominate a candidate, here's what to do:

[Go to Source](#)

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