

The Tories Trashed Racism and Sexism as 'woke' concerns. Now Our Public Services are Paying the Price.

By Nesrine Malik, *The Guardian*, December 5th, 2022

A crunch, building for years, is upon us. Everywhere you look, the story is the same: backlogs, unfilled jobs, overfilled beds. Nothing is working. Brexit, the pandemic, a decade of austerity and a broken governing party have crippled Britain's institutions.

5 But the crisis is not just one of resources, it is also one of culture. Our struggling institutions have also succumbed to a steep fall in internal standards that is directly linked to their failure to deliver. Reports, anecdotal and, more recently, official, tell of bullying, corruption and a lack of accountability.

10 The Metropolitan police was placed into special measures earlier this year for "systemic" failings that resulted in tens of thousands of crimes going unrecorded. In the basic business of logging data and other routine areas, the Met seems to have simply ceased to function. Officers appear to decide what they care about based on their personal whims and prejudices. The result is a stomach-turning litany of failures: the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Met officer, the strip-searching of innocent children, and the messages exchanged between officers at Charing Cross police station who joked about rape, murdering women, child molestation, Muslims and disabled people.

15 The story is no less bleak at the London fire brigade. Inspectors in 2019 found that it was among the worst in the country, despite being adequately resourced. The full picture was revealed last week in a report. Anonymous accounts of more than 2,000 staff members told of abuse by co-workers in an environment that can only be described as anarchic. Accounts include those of a black firefighter who had a noose placed above his locker, a Muslim colleague who found bacon and sausages stuffed in his pockets, and female firefighters being beaten, sexually harassed and having their helmets filled with urine.

20 Again, everywhere you look the story is the same. Ethnic minorities forced to quit and women bullied into silent trauma, while unsupervised staff treat these crucial organisations as a sort of personal fiefdom. The response is alarm, followed by a report and then some worried head-scratching. The same broad but vague descriptions keep cropping up, telling of toxic colleagues, systemic issues and "anything goes" cultures.

25 The policing inspectorate even referred to some of the Met's failings as "seemingly incomprehensible". The puzzlement appears to be almost wilful, because these failings are not only comprehensible, but predictable. When institutions are allowed to drift into racism, sexism and bullying, breakdown follows. That breakdown is not only manifested in the victimisation of those who work in these institutions, but also in the erosion of everyone's ability to do their job and to develop trust and engagement with the communities they work in. When funding is cut, the two things that go first are training and community engagement. The outcome is organisations disconnected from those they serve and those who staff them.

30 But there is a bigger problem: a government that has successfully trashed the very notion that any of these entrenched issues exist. The Tories, in pursuit of a divisive culture war that establishes their party as defender of an embattled populace besieged by political correctness, have impoverished our ability to think constructively about preventing bullying, misogyny and racism. Principles such as social and professional good conduct, respect for others, engagement with communities and enforcing appropriate standards of behaviour, are slammed as "wokeness" by the party and the rightwing press.

So the crisis will grind on, the whistleblowers will continue to appeal, the reviews will continue to be commissioned, and we will be told that it's all seemingly incomprehensible.