

Politics for Change: Black Lives Matter in Europe

An interview with Alice Bah Kuhnke

September 11, 2020

The murder of George Floyd in the US earlier this year exposed police brutality and galvanised action across the world. It has also demonstrated the deadly consequences inherent in the structural racism that plagues societies on both sides of the Atlantic. How can we ensure that this wave of anger translates into a politics for change? We spoke to Alice Bah Kuhnke, Vice-President of the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament, about fighting structural racism in Europe and the role of democratic debate and the EU in this process.

Green European Journal: The murder of George Floyd sparked virulent protests all over the world, even though this wasn't the first time that police brutality against African Americans has been highlighted. What makes this case different?

Alice Bah Kuhnke: It's true. Unfortunately, George Floyd or Breonna Taylor are not the only people to have been killed by police brutality. This begs the question of why this indignation is only coming now. Since the death of George Floyd, there have been many outcries, demonstrations and local and even regional reactions. This time it is indeed different. I don't have the answer as to exactly why, but it's worth looking at the specific context in which the murder took place. It was so terribly visible on video and was shared millions of times on social media. In this day and age, news and information travel fast.

We also have to consider the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has made many people all over the world more vulnerable than ever. Confined to their homes, people have had more time to follow the news and social media more closely than usual. These are some of the circumstances that have raised international awareness of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Everybody got to clearly see the ugly face of police brutality, while simultaneously being confronted with their own Covid-19-related vulnerability.

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Do you think this will be a defining moment leading to lasting political change, or is it a momentary wave of anger and indignation?

That is still to be determined. It's up to us to decide what will come out of this moment. I hope that we are mature enough to not only grieve and condemn the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but that we look beyond to understand that this isn't just about police brutality and the murder of two African-American people; these acts were consequences of the structural racism in our societies. If we understand that, we will be able to translate these murders into a politics for change.

In America the Black Lives Matter movement has put forth a range of demands such as defunding the police and removing statues of people associated with racism. Are these the kind of policies you would associate with a “politics for change”?

The United States has its own context. You can't compare the structural racism and its consequences in the US with Europe or the rest of the world. That's important to understand because we cannot just copy-paste the demands and policy proposals from one country to another. That would be oversimplifying things, although some of the demands of Black Lives Matter in the US can also have an important impact in a European context.

Let's take the demand to remove statues of people associated with racism. In the United Kingdom, a statue in Bristol of the slave trader Edward Colston was removed by protestors and replaced by a sculpture made by the Black Lives Matter movement [it was subsequently removed by Bristol Council].

First off all, racism and discrimination aren't going to disappear because a statue has been torn down. If that's what people think, then we are in big trouble because the problems are so much wider and deeper.

Let's be very clear on this: people can't just go out onto the streets and pull down whichever statue they don't like. We don't live by the law of the jungle. We live in a democracy where we have necessary democratic processes. We need to have discussions about what should change. I believe every responsible politician in every municipality in every EU country should invite their local citizens to an assembly to discuss the statues in their city and ask: are these the statues that we want? Are these the heroes that we need and how should we interpret them? Then, after these discussions – long discussions that should take several months – there should be a meeting where a democratic decision is taken on whether we take the statues down, put them in a museum, or keep them. That's how we do things in a democracy. The idea that whoever is the strongest in the street at a given moment can tear anything down is deeply authoritarian.

Authoritarian tendencies are not solely confined to the far right but are also present in left-wing movements.

Indeed, and as Greens we must strongly defend democratic processes in which everybody is heard, including minorities and people with different opinions. Just because hundreds of thousands of people are in the streets wanting to take a statue down, that doesn't make it the right thing to do. Politicians need to be brave enough to say that and argue in favour of democratic processes. I often hear that people have had enough of talking and that now is the time for action. That's wrong. Democracy is about conversation – not only about talking but also listening, especially to minorities and those who see things differently. Enabling such processes is our responsibility.

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But what about the civil rights movement, civil disobedience and Martin Luther King? Aren't civil disobedience and direct action also part of a democratic conversation, particularly when democratic processes prove unresponsive?

Green parties across Europe are all closely connected to green grassroots movements. Both on our own initiative and in support of broader agendas, Green representatives and supporters will always be found at demonstrations and publicly criticising injustice in any undemocratic society. As a politician, I see myself as a representative of their beliefs and political wishes.

Having said that, one has to push for change within the common juridical framework that is put in place by all of us, the people, through democratic decisions. Even if you want to change the framework – or the system, if you prefer – you have to start changing it from within. The process sometimes seems slow, but during my years in politics I have repeatedly seen ideas and wishes turning into concrete actions. With politicians in our political institutions who are driven by wishes that correspond with the people, change is possible. That is why the best way to change things is to vote for a political party and politician who you trust will represent your beliefs and fight your battles.

What's the situation with anti-racism protests in your home country, Sweden? What challenges is Sweden facing in particular?

When it comes to racism and discrimination, Sweden is facing similar challenges to those in countries like Denmark or Germany. Most hate crimes committed are racially motivated, and people of African descent are more exposed to physical violence than the rest of the population. Structural discrimination in Sweden is visible in different areas of society: in the workplace, in the education system, in political institutions, and in our everyday lives. The result of this is unequal life chances, where some are privileged with better opportunities than others. In the end it is all about power – the power to shape our lives and the society we are part of.

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One problem is that we are lacking proper statistics and data on structural racism. Such information is necessary for politics to be able to deal with the issue. Most of the information available comes from civil rights organisations and NGOs. So there is first and foremost a need to strengthen data collection and awareness raising. Of course, we know there is racial discrimination on the labour market, when it comes to housing or even just entering restaurants and bars. This has been amply documented by NGOs and journalists. But not enough is being done about it because there is structural racism within agencies and the whole of society.

You once said that the Swedish Greens need to “go where the far-right extremists go”. What did you mean by that?

For many years in Sweden, it was considered a God-given truth that you shouldn't debate with extremists. That you should just ignore them instead of giving them the floor to let them express their hateful views. That was a mistake. The idea that we shouldn't debate with certain people is filled with conceit. I understand the arguments behind it, but I think Greens need to engage and let people also hear our arguments and points of view. We need to be brave and take that debate head-on, not shy away and let the extremists carry the debate to wherever they want to take it.

People of colour are also underrepresented in politics. What is necessary to ensure that people of colour are better represented in political institutions?

This is an incredibly important issue because our democratic system depends on one central factor – trust. If the parliamentary system and its representatives don't have trust, then they don't have anything. Trust is the most important, most valuable factor in politics and in maintaining democracy. When people can't mirror themselves in their parliamentarians, they will never feel fully represented, and trust can erode. This is particularly true for the European institutions, which are mostly run by older white men. This make-up doesn't represent the EU in its

entirety. It is a huge problem which is actually undermining democracy, something we can't afford to do.

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However, it's important to recognise that there's no quick fix for this. It takes years to change an institution and its make-up. As Greens, we also need to look at our own parties and organisations. Looking at the Green Party of Sweden, for example, I see that we have a problem with regards to diversity from the top down to our youth organisation. We ourselves must do our homework. We need to make sure that young people – no matter how well-off their parents are, where they live, which schools they go to – want to join political parties and become involved in politics. That means we must be better at reaching out to all people.

The German Green Party, long considered a party of white academics, is planning to adopt a diversity statute which aims to ensure that minority groups are represented on all political bodies with a minimum rate equal to their representation in the general population. What do you think of such a proposal?

This is a great ambition and I'm proud that my sister party is setting such a goal. But this kind of proposal also demands a lot of work to ensure that competent people occupy these positions. That is key and here Greens can do better. Of course, being black can impart competence on certain issues, as can being a migrant. We need to understand that and take the time to identify the right people.

Apart from representation, what changes are needed to overturn structural racism in Sweden and the wider EU?

We need to use every tool at our disposal, including legislation at all levels. In a European context, a first step would be to unblock the anti-discrimination directive, which has been blocked in Council since 2008. Here, I have been appointed rapporteur. This directive aims to expand protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation outside the labour market. In most member states, intersectional discrimination is not covered by national legislation. The directive remains a shameful symbol of the lack of political will to legislate on anti-discrimination from the side of the Council and the member states. It must be unblocked immediately. To this end, I expect the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to act and do her utmost to mobilise the Council during the German Presidency. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the worldwide protests that followed, send a clear message to politicians: the people demand action now.

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Alice Bah Kuhnke is co Vice-President of the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament and former Swedish Minister of Culture and Democracy.

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