

Black on board



John Mayford
CEO, Olmec



Jaco Marais: Hello, and welcome to the Good Governance Institute, the Public Good podcast. In this pre-recorded episode, we'll be introducing Olmec. They are a charity with an initiative called Black on Board. What is it, why do we need it, how did it come about, who's on it, when is it happening and how do we sign up to it?

My name is Jaco Marais, I'm your host, and I think you'll want to listen to this.

I'm very excited to welcome John Mayford, the chief executive of Olmec, a black and ethnic minority-led race and ethnicity organisation. They run Black on Board, which I'm very excited to hear about. Welcome, John.

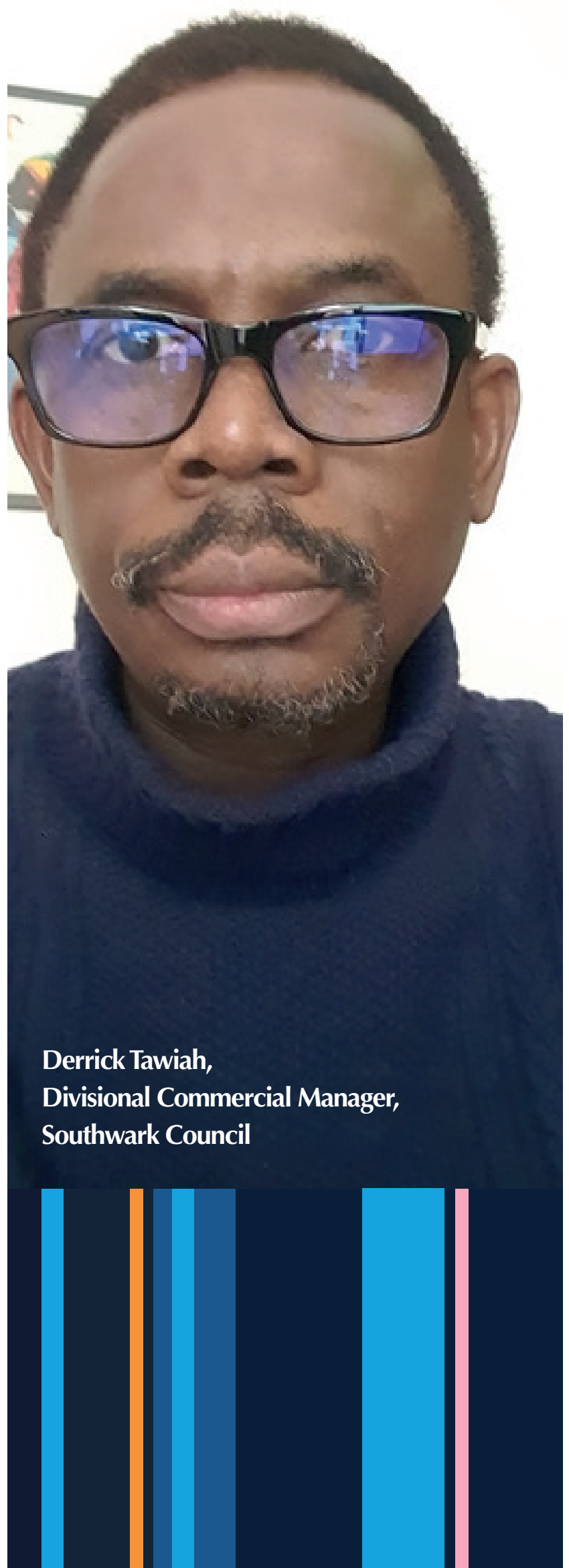
John Mayford: Thank you very much. Jaco. Great pleasure to be here.

Jaco Marais: And also, Derrick Tawiah, a divisional commercial manager at Southwark Council. He is an accountant with a focus on issues concerning race and equalities.

So I wanted to start by asking about Olmec, and how it came about, John?

John Mayford: Some people are like 'what, is that an acronym?' It's actually the civilization that predated the Aztecs and the Incas in South America, in modern Mexico, and the Olmecs had chocolates and pyramids, around about the same time as the Egyptians, Jaco. So us having this conversation now resurrects the memory of that civilization.

Olmec is a Windrush generation organisation, and it's a very inspiring story that really inspires me every time I think about it. So Olmec was



**Derrick Tawiah,
Divisional Commercial Manager,
Southwark Council**

really the child of black and Asian families coming together in the 1960s, during a period when people of colour faced a lot of racism in the UK. Those of us who know legislation, and remember the response of the majority of British society will remember signs like 'no dogs, no blacks, no Irish' in boarding houses, and people getting turned down for jobs because of the colour of their skin. It's important to remember and understand that environment.

Essentially, black and Asian families clubbed together to buy housing, because it was difficult for them to access housing at the time. It was difficult for them to access the money to buy houses, to get loans from banks and all the normal routes that people would take to buy housing. So the community clubbed together and, to cut long story short, they created a housing association, which was formed in 1974.

And then fast forward to 2003, that housing association had reached a turnover of around about £200 million. It was a very inspiring housing association. It was called Presentation Housing. It was black-led – black and Asian families always had a majority on the board, as they still do today.

So there was this great thought by those wonderful families who came together to create that fantastic housing association, and Olmec was born in 2003 to champion race equality.

About a year after Olmec was came into existence Southwark Council approached Olmec about how we would diversify housing boards in the borough of Southwark, where

different organisations had tried to diversify housing boards unsuccessfully.

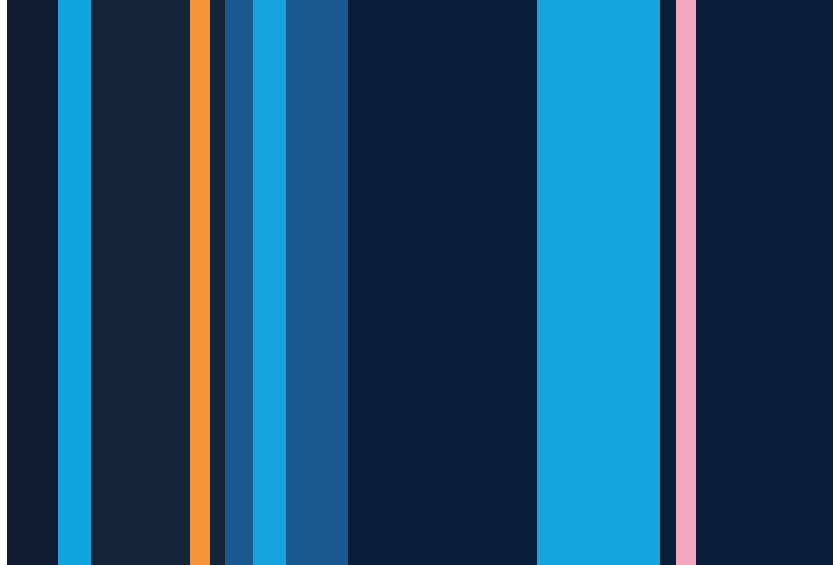
Jaco Marais: Thank you. That really provides some context. Derek, how did you get involved with Olmec and Black on Board?

Derrick Tawiah: I'm an accountant by trade, and I was already a board member before I joined the Black on Board programme. So I was very sceptical about doing this. It was just another extension target in terms of my personal development. In terms of the so-called career progression piece at the council, I'm already supposedly at that level. So from my perspective, it wasn't really going to add much value or shape what I was going to do next. That's what I thought.

So, I reluctantly joined the programme, the Black on Board programme, and how wrong was I? It really, really opened my eyes. I thought I knew a lot about governance – and I did – but it refreshed my knowledge.

And also in terms of delivery and mixing with different people, it opened my eyes to how people think about governance and what it is – and its limitations in terms of its effectiveness.

It reopened my eyes to how cost-cutting impacts literally all aspects of organisations that you're involved in. So the teaching was refreshing,



mixing with people was refreshing, some of the mantras that came out of the course were refreshing, like 'each one teach one'. And one of the things that I really like is 'give yourself permission to be powerful'. I could actively see people's mindsets on the course changing and people growing as individuals.

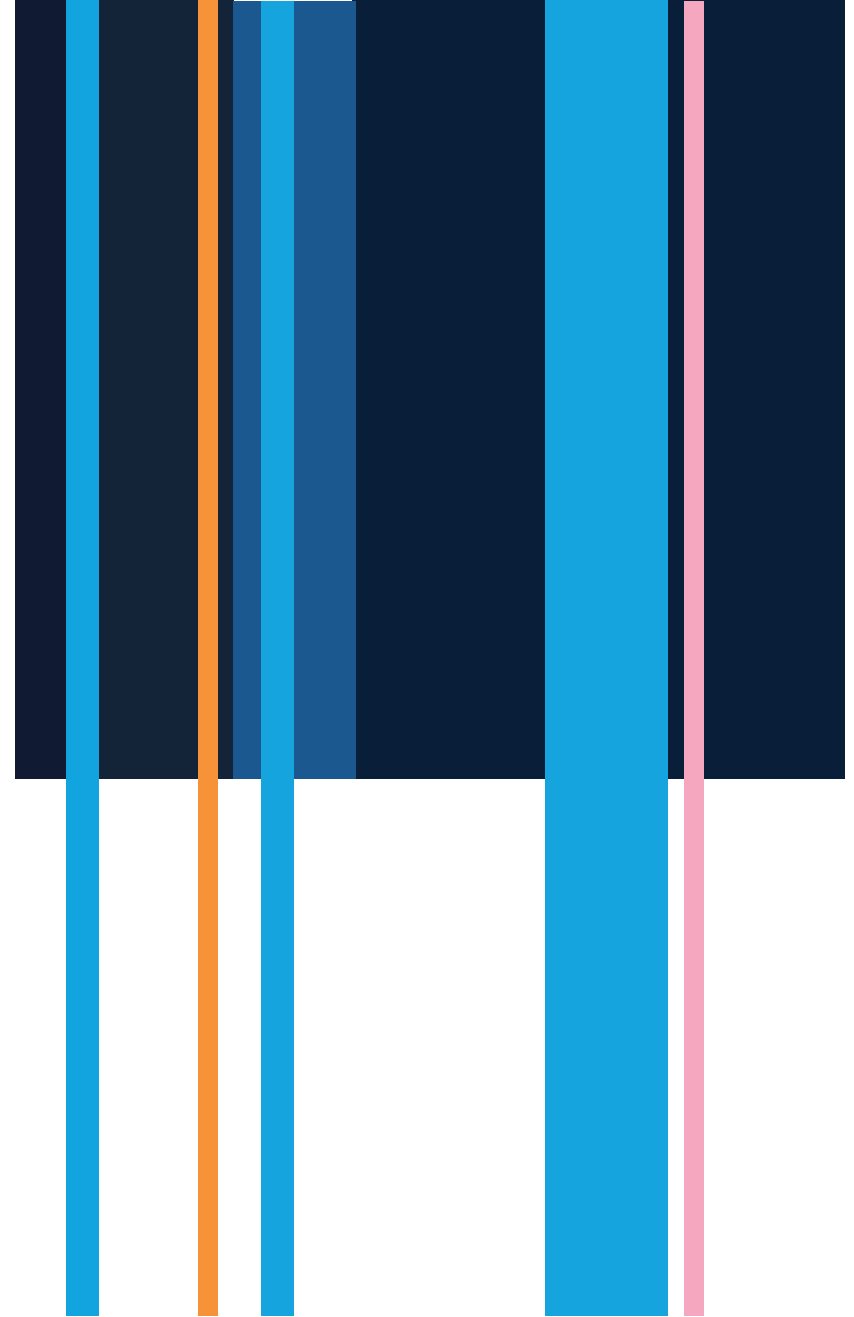
Southwark Council recognises that it has a lack of diversity at the more senior management levels. Black on Board is one of many strategies that they've got in place to actively encourage people from the BAME community into board positions, so that they can understand how a board works, all the functions of a board, and that they can use that to shape what they do in their day-to-day work, and they can also use it to shape what they do in relation to the community.

Jaco Marais: So, who changes the world? If I give myself permission to be powerful, what should I become? Should I become a very rich person? Should I become a politician? Or should I join a board?

John Mayford: I heard a phrase recently about being on boards, and that phrase was, if you're not on the board, you're likely to be on the menu.

Jaco Marais: What does that mean?

John Mayford: It means that if you haven't got a voice or a stake in the board – and I'm thinking about people of colour, I'm thinking about women, I'm thinking about everything we talk about as the protected characteristics and the Equalities Act, people with disabilities, sexuality, and so on and so forth – if you're not on the board, you're likely to be on the menu.



When you look at the stats of what's happening in society, which you can do if you go onto the government's race disparity audit, or if you look at the Runnymede Trust, and you look around, and you see that 46% of minority ethnic people are living in poverty, or a black person is 18 times more likely to be stopped and searched under Section 6 than their white counterparts... If you look at all these different indicators, that's what that phrase means: if you're not on the board, you're on the menu.

So part of our mission to make a fairer society. And for us, what does equality mean? What does equity mean? It simply means that we should have institutions that reflect the makeup



of our community. So 45% of London is made up of black and minority ethnic people. In our institutions, is that reflected in the decision-making? Do they reflect that demographic? Fourteen percent of the UK population are now people of colour and it's projected to be about 30% by 2050, according to Runnymede Trust. Do our boards and our leadership reflect our community? Because we think that if it doesn't, we've got a problem in terms of fairness – and in terms of decisions being made that meet the needs of our diverse communities.

I don't know if you know that there are 300 languages in London, about 200 in New York. Are the needs of all those people – who might have a European background, or a South Asian background, or a South American, Brazilian Black background – are all those needs being met? So it's really about fairness.

Jaco Marais: Yeah, I'm actually particularly interested to hear from Derrick about the ethnic makeup of Southwark and whether the board is representative in your organisation.

Derrick Tawiah: When you say the board, you're talking about senior management?

Jaco Marais: Yes, I'm sorry, I should know better.

Derrick Tawiah: To Southwark's praise, we know we now have a new chief executive officer who is a woman of colour, Althea Roderick. She joined approximately 10-12 weeks ago. So that's been an incredible experience. That's going to be an interesting journey for her and for us, and she's doing a fantastic job.

But notwithstanding that, if you look at the

makeup of the senior management, they've got various grades. A target grade could be, say, a grade 14 and above to be senior management. I'm not going to give you the absolute correct stats because I haven't got them to hand. But there is a 20% or 30% disparity in the number of staff that are at senior levels, compared with representation in relation to the ethnic makeup.

Jaco Marais: Of the population, you mean?

Derrick Tawiah: No, of the staff team. So if you looked at the staff team, say 50% of the staff team were of BME background. As soon as you get to the higher levels it suddenly drops to about 5% or 4%. So, at the bottom level, levels were well represented. But as you go up, that representation goes down disproportionately.

Jaco Marais: And then, of course, I think the population is 50% BME in Southwark, or something like that. Is that correct?

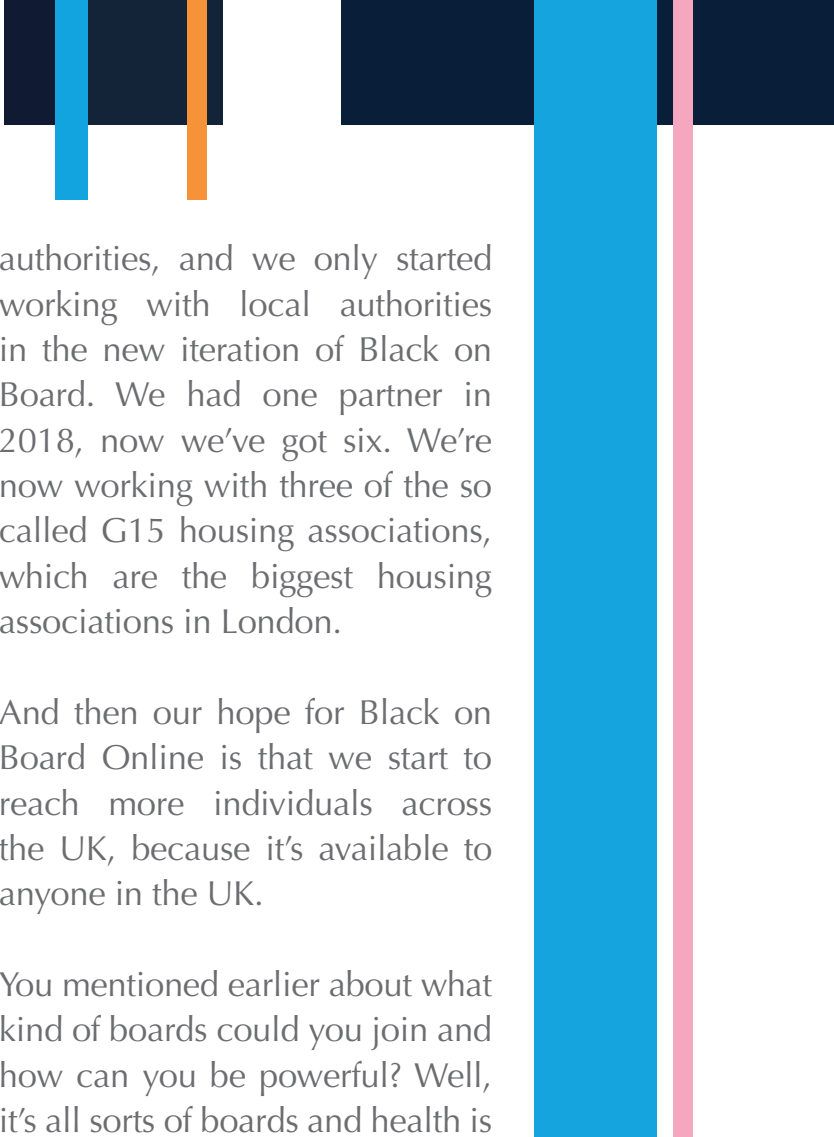
Derrick Tawiah: It's something like that.

John Mayford: It's 60%

Derrick Tawiah: So the key thing for Southwark is that it's got a very diverse community. You need to have a diverse voice heard at all levels. It's important that you have that representation. But I just wanted to talk about that stat you mentioned in relation to healthcare and COVID. You've also got to recognise that ignoring COVID, there's always been a history of inequalities in health in relation to the BME community.

One thing I've looked at it is death of BME women in childbirth. BAME women are statistically a lot more likely to die in childbirth





than people of a non-BAME background, and that's skewed something like four to one, five to one. And that's a shocking statistic.

Jaco Marais: In 2022.

Derrick Tawiah: So it's really important that we get that representation on the board to understand and to unpick what's happening in these organisations so that we can get the quality assurance piece sorted out and sort out the issues, rather than not addressing them, not challenging them, not having diverse voice on the board to ask the appropriate questions.

Jaco Marais: So how is Black on Board trying to fix this problem? Because there's obviously a disparity in the makeup of the population, the staff and the leadership.

John Mayford: Okay, that's a great question, Jaco. One of the things to emphasise straightaway is that we're a charity and we are a small social enterprise. So we have to give context to that answer by talking about what Olmec is trying to do as an organisation. And the issue that you raised is a societal one.

There needs to be a government response, which I'll come on to. But in terms of the impact of Olmec, I'll just mention numbers. We know that we're going to train about 300 people of colour in the next 18 months or so. So we are creating a significant impact in terms of what we do directly to change living breathing human beings, and we're working for all sectors, really.

And the size and scale of Black on Board has really accelerated since 2018. So, for example, we're now working with six London local

authorities, and we only started working with local authorities in the new iteration of Black on Board. We had one partner in 2018, now we've got six. We're now working with three of the so called G15 housing associations, which are the biggest housing associations in London.

And then our hope for Black on Board Online is that we start to reach more individuals across the UK, because it's available to anyone in the UK.

You mentioned earlier about what kind of boards could you join and how can you be powerful? Well, it's all sorts of boards and health is one that we're a sector that we're looking at. We've just started a partnership with NHS Health Education England, so we're doing a specific programme with them. We have done presentations to the office of the Commission for Public Bodies, which is basically the governing body that oversees all public bodies. So we have done some work at strategic level.

I think one of the most exciting stories is the formation of the Black on Board Community, where people who've gone through Black on Board have said: "Look, we want to develop this into a voice, and then from that voice into a movement," and our numbers tell us that that Black on Board Community will grow to 1,000 members by 2025, based on our current contracts and expansion.

So Jaco, that's what we're doing.

But Olmec can't do it on its own. It's the organisations that make up the coalition for race equality in the UK. And it's actually having government action, and there's some quite positive signs in terms of the Commission for Public Bodies setting a 14% target. The question is, are they going to uphold that? The G15 has set targets of 30% of their boards being made up of people of colour. So there are some encouraging signs and movements that we can build on. But there is a long way to go.

We're looking at forming partnerships with universities, and so on. Olmec is working with partners in what we call the coalition for race equality.

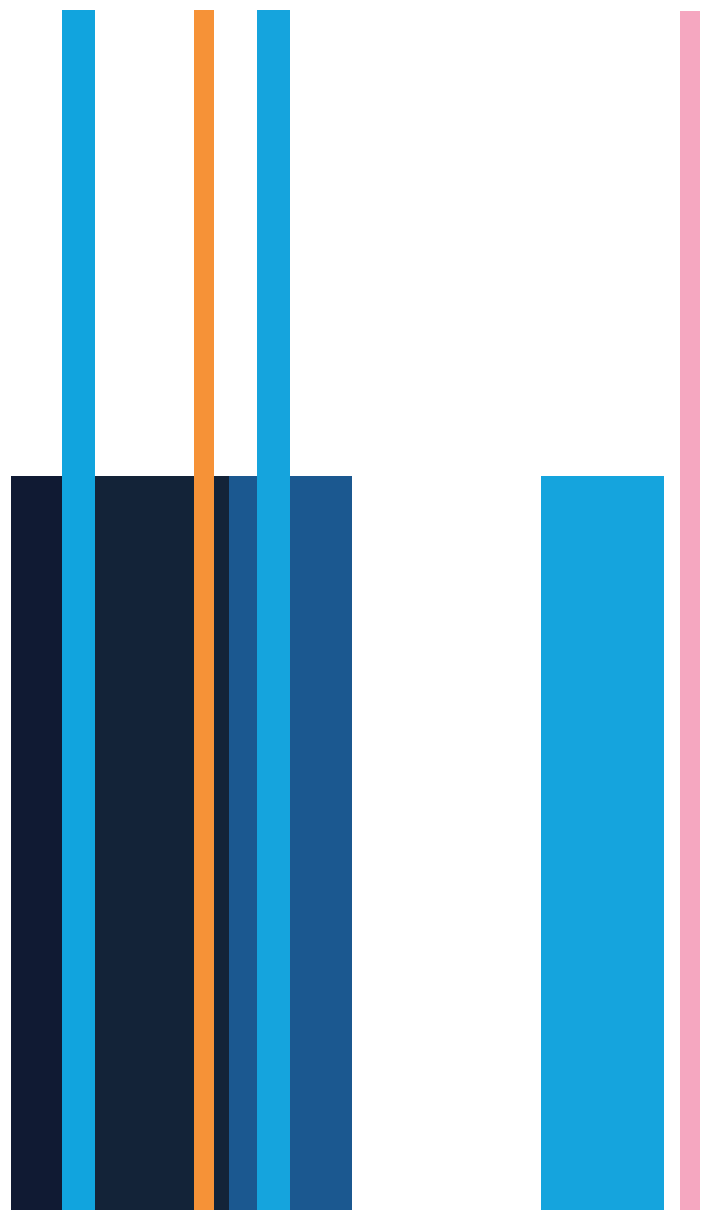
Jaco Marais: What are some of the challenges to this work? I see newspaper headlines, for example, wanting to defund I think it was called wokery in the NHS.

John Mayford: Well, that's a really interesting question. I mean, we have to say that the recent administration has moved to the right on this issue. It's quite interesting that concepts like institutional racism, widely accepted in the race equality sector, were also accepted under the governments of Margaret Thatcher, and John Major, and Theresa May. So for example, the Scarman Report, following the Brixton riots / uprisings in 1981 accepted that as a concept. It was accepted on the report following the death of Stephen Lawrence. When Theresa May established the Race Disparity Audit in 2017, Olmec was one of 12 organisations to invited to Downing Street to look at that.

So all of those governments, under both colours in fact, also during the Labour administration,

accepted that concept. But the current administration doesn't accept the concept.

This issue of wokery is fascinating to me. Where does that come from? I first heard that phrase in about 2010-11, in relation to Akala – it was a friend of mine who knows of Akala's mum. It means politically aware, and socially aware. It's got its roots actually in reggae culture, which I'm very familiar with being an old punk and reggae person growing up in the late 70s. You talked about conscious reggae, which meant people like Peter Tosh or Bob Marley and Linton Kwesi Johnson or Steel Pulse and all those people. Steel Pulse were talking about what was happening in Birmingham in 1976-77. People talking about poverty, people talking about Marcus Garvey and all these ideas, not just boy-meets-girl lyrics.





So you look at that, and then you can look further to thinking about concepts like realising false class consciousness. We won't go into that, but that's what Marx was on about. So it just meant aware.

Then, what we've seen in the last period is a concept which is rooted in Caribbean culture being taken to mean something completely different. What lies behind that concept? I think Jacob Rees-Mogg talked about wokery and it becoming a religion and defunding certain parts of the civil service.

It's been taken to mean something completely different. It's been linked in with this concept of cancel culture.

If you take another jump back to, say, the 1980s, in some ways it's a replaying of what was political correctness - for wokery, think PC - and how the media labelled politically correct people.

It's just a replay of that. Instead of cancel culture, you had the label 'loony left' didn't you? If I think about the media that I grew up with in the 60s, 70s and early 80s, and go back to things like Love Thy Neighbour, or programmes like that... Have a look at the language that was used in Love Thy Neighbour in the 70s, what was seen as acceptable and what was unacceptable.

My point of view is, let's not have discussions about labels that allow people to shout at each other from two opposing positions. Let the conversation be driven by data. Let's have a conversation about representation at board level. Let's have a conversation about the topic of health inequalities that Derrick was talking

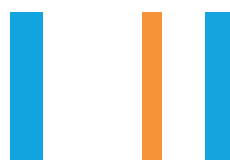
about. Let's stop talking about labels and start talking about data.

Jaco Marais: The difficult thing about evidence and data, it can be construed in different ways. So I wanted to bring in ethics and come back to the Nolan Principles, and that's why we have these standards. That's why I was wondering what does fairness mean to you? And would it be helpful if we added it as a directive - a principle that people stand by before they commission reports such as this one?

Derrick Tawiah: Fairness is straightforward, it needs to be that. But really you can either use it to underpin any one of the Nolan Principles, or you can identify it separately by itself. So, for me, fairness isn't just about equality, equity, inclusivity. They're the key things I want to see in relation to fairness. It underpins everything: openness, honesty, integrity, selflessness, accountability, and so on. That's what fairness is to me.

Jaco Marais: Why is it such an instinctive human feeling? Why is it not part of our culture, our systems, our decision-making processes in public life?

Derrick Tawiah: Because fairness may sometimes mean that you're not going to be in power. A lot of the things that we do are based on control and positioning as opposed to what's right. When you're working in the governance area, sometimes you've got to look at what's fair and what's equitable, and what's the outcome for the people that you serve as opposed to yourself. Often, I find that people in public life, they're serving themselves as opposed to serving the community. And it's about making sure that balance is evidenced.



Jaco Marais: So we come back to that need for representation really, that quote that you said about if you're not on board then you're on the menu.

John Mayford: Change has to happen with black and white, and all shades of people working together. We do work around allyship. So next week, I'm going to be delivering a training session to the NHS on allyship. That's about what white people can do in terms of addressing race equality, and also how people can have a conversation where people feel safe to talk about race. One of the unhealthy things about this so-called culture war is the lack of that safe space. It's very important.

Also, it's very important to understand that Olmec doesn't exclusively just work with people of colour. So anyone of any colour can join the Black on Board community. You just have to support the aims of race equality through economic and social justice, which is the reason why Olmec was set up.

We do, on the other hand, have some projects that are specifically for people of colour and Black on Board is one of them. But we need to think about that in the same way that that's addressing unfairness. Only 1.5% of FTSE100 index company board members are people of colour.

So, Black on Board was set up to address unfairness. In the same way that, if we look at, for example, women's refuges, there's a reason for having women on women's refuges. There are reasons for having specific projects that meet the needs for specific people, and so it is with Black on Board.



But anyone can join the Black on Board community. Olmec has had white board members again. Not many, but we've had white board members, it's not closed. When we work with employability, we work with white people. But our definition there is that we work with predominantly black and Asian in predominantly black and Asian communities. We do work with white people.

When we support social enterprises and cooperative set ups, our definition is that that 51% of the membership or the board has to be people of colour. Of course, we've worked with many white people overall. So I think all of that work is important.

Being inclusive is important, working together, and it's the only way we'll solve race equality in this country.

Derrick Tawiah: Can I add something to that? In Southwark we've got a programme called Southwark Stands Together. One of the key things about Southwark Stands Together is that we can't do the same things that we've done historically. So we're about putting together change and the change is going to be disruptive to an extent. But we've all got to be involved and we've all got to be engaged in that change.

So it's not about black people making change, it's not about white people making change. It's about all of us making change so that together the outcomes are equal, inclusive, equitable and fair for all of us.

So in the context of Olmec and Black and Board, at the moment, if you look at the – I'm going to call it the critical mass in terms of representation – we're so far off the mark

that it's not really a question that needs to be asked, because we're just trying to encourage participation at the moment. Once we get to the point where we've got representation at a critical level, then you can start to talk more about what we should be doing on the consensus side. But at the moment, in terms of what the representation that we've got, it's miniscule.

Jaco Marais: Well, that's really the first focus really.

Derrick Tawiah: The focus just needs to be on the representation.

Jaco Marais: Absolutely. The Good Governance Institute will definitely be getting involved and signing up. We look forward to people Googling and finding out what Olmec is about and how they can get involved.

Derrick Tawiah: Thank you for giving us a platform to talk about Black on Board and long may it continue.

Jaco Marais: Well, it's been an absolute pleasure

John Mayford: Jaco, thank you so much. Just to echo Derrick, thanks for your generosity in giving us this platform on the podcast. Really appreciate it. Thank you.

Jaco Marais: Not at all. We want to through the Good Governance Institute create a better, fairer world, and this is a sure way to do that. So thank you very much.

John Mayford: Thank you.



Derrick Tawiah: Many thanks, take care.

Jaco Marais: Thank you for joining me in the Public Good podcast. I look forward to hearing the comments about today's discussion. But I think the discussion highlighted some of the fantastic work Black on Board is doing to try to level a very uneven playing field.

My name is Jaco Marais. If you have any questions or comments related to today's discussion on the Public Good podcast, please don't hold back. We look forward to responding to you on Twitter, @goodgoverninst and by email advice@good-governance.org.uk

