

## **The view from the inside**

Angela Saini

The corridors of power have long been a mystery to me. They are the hinterland where decisions are made, shaping how companies and institutions work, unfathomably influencing how we everyday people out there live and think. It's a world of wolves in suits, I imagine, swilling champagne and laughing over cigars, while I'm a powerless little mouse.

Until that door opens.

I've been invited to sit on a number of boards and committees lately, mostly for museums and scientific institutions, but also speaking to universities. Britain's establishment seems to have opened its arms to me. I know why, of course. It's because the cultural tide is shifting. They want people like me, people who write about race, to tell them what they can do better. I am their diversity.

I recall being slightly intimidated by some of these places as a child. Now I get to see the cogs and wheels behind the glittering façades. What surprises me first is how ordinary it all is. There are coffee and biscuits, reports an inch thick on which I'm expected to offer an opinion. Yet in the first hour of the first board meeting I attend, for perhaps the first time in my life, I feel heard.

This is what power feels like, I realise. It's a heady feeling, to know that people with power are not just listening to you, but paying full attention. It's the feeling I imagine that the members of the British government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities had when they were appointed.

Being in a room with people who have never seen the world from your perspective as a minority is like occupying a parallel universe. Things which seem obvious must be explained. No, you can't use that word, I want to

say. Which 'community' are you talking about here? We don't have a brown people's hotline, or one leader who tells us what to think. My eyes roll.

It's a heady feeling, but also a grinding one, now that I think about it. After a while, I learn to pick my battles. There's no point being combative all the time, I tell myself. It's easier to get things done if you play the game a little, a friend advises.

Months pass before it dawns on me that maybe I'm not there to be heard at all. I can't help feeling that they were already planning to publish their statement, have that conference, hold that new exhibition, and it would be the way they always planned to do it. They just want to make sure I'm on board. Because if I'm on board, it means that all the brown people everywhere in the world are on board. I'm their conscience, I realise, the person in the room designed to make them feel better about the choices they were already going to make.

I notice myself checking out emotionally. My attention starts to wander. I become less vocal, more quiescent. It's better to get something tangible done with people you disagree with than to oppose everything on principle, isn't it? That's how this all works.

I think about the British government's commissioners, those who all complied with the conclusion in the report that there was 'no evidence of systemic or institutional racism'. I wonder how many biscuits they had eaten that day.

None of them are bad people, though, I'm sure. They must feel they're doing the best under the circumstances. And isn't the most important thing that we're here at all? Isn't that some kind of progress?

### **Angela Saini**

Angela Saini is an independent British science journalist and the author of three books. She presents radio and television programmes on the BBC and her writing has appeared in *The Sunday Times*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *National Geographic* and *Wired*. She has won a number of national and international journalism awards. She has also been a judge for the Orwell Prize for non-fiction.

Her latest book, *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, was published in 2019 to widespread critical acclaim and named a book of the year by the *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *Sunday Times*. Her previous book, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong*, has been translated into thirteen languages. Both are on university reading lists across the world.

Angela has a Masters in Engineering from the University of Oxford and was a Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 2020 she was named one of the world's top 50 thinkers by *Prospect* magazine. She is currently working on her fourth book, on the origins of patriarchy, to be published in 2023.

As the founder of the 'Challenging Pseudoscience' group at the Royal Institution, Angela researches and campaigns around issues of misinformation and disinformation.

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A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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