

What's in a name?

Unconscious discrimination on the basis of job applicants' names could be eradicated if the Equality Bill were to provide for "no names" CVs. **Lynne Featherstone MP** explains her proposed amendment to the Bill.

KEY POINTS

■ As job applicants' surnames could lead to an unconscious discard of their applications, Lynne Featherstone is proposing an amendment to the Equality Bill to ensure that candidates' CVs are anonymous, perhaps identified by national insurance number only.

■ The Government has started an investigation into the MP's theory and initial findings showed significant discrimination.

■ Investigation into this issue is continuing, and Lynne Featherstone is hoping that if the evidence proves her right, the Government will accept an amendment at report stage of the Bill.

I had two interns a while back whose surnames were Hussein and Patel. They went on to get very good jobs – one at the Ministry of Defence and the other in public relations. But prior to coming to my office they had applied for hundreds of jobs and had not even got through to the interview stage. It wasn't rocket science to wonder if their surname was a barrier.

So I developed the theory that there might be a subliminal discard of applications because of an unconscious bias of some sort. My suggested proposal to counter any such bias is that we should move to anonymous job applications where the applicant uses something like their national insurance number instead of their name on written applications. Without a name, the ethnicity, gender and age of the applicant would be hidden (at least to some extent) and the application would be judged on its merits in terms of qualifications and experience.

Of course, when it comes to interview, all would be revealed. But once an applicant is in the room that subliminal discard is out of the way, and the force of character takes over. I have been in enough "equal ops" panel interviews to know that, regardless of the scores and the weighting given to questions and answers, it is far more to do with the instincts of the panel about the person than any of the "rules" of interview. So getting through to the interview is key.

We give children numbers to write on their exam papers to ensure that there is absolutely no bias in marking. This is really the same kind of thing. Another example is orchestras, where there was found to be huge bias towards male musicians. They introduced anonymous auditions where the applicant would play from behind a screen so that the only criterion was the quality of their musical ability – not their looks or their gender.

I floated my thesis during the second reading of the Equality Bill and it caused quite a stir in the employment world. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development supported the idea – although did not believe it should be mandatory. Some in the human resource industry thought

it was a stupid idea. Not deterred by this, at committee stage of the Bill, I tabled an amendment which would see this brought into law. The Solicitor General, Vera Baird, announced that, following my intervention at second reading, the Department for Work and Pensions had initiated some survey work to find out if my theory was correct. She said she was sorry to "tantalise" the committee, as the work would not be finished until the summer – but initial findings showed "significant discrimination".

Apparently the DWP sent out 3,000 applications with false names to companies to test if there was discrimination against applicants with foreign-sounding names. If the "experiment" demonstrates that there is deep and systemic racism then it is a valuable experiment. The CBI claimed the Government was wasting business time. The British Chambers of Commerce reacted badly saying that "businesses had enough on their plate without having to deal with the underhand tactics of the DWP".

However, my proposal will not actually cost business any money (or effort) and might drastically improve the situation for applicants for jobs, bringing fairness and equality.

The Government is carrying on with its experimental work over the summer. I don't know how many and what further type of experiments they are doing to evaluate my theory, but if proved it will be important to remove that barrier. I have tabled my amendment again for report stage of the Bill. If, as I suspect, the "significant discrimination" is proved by further investigation, then I would hope that my amendment will be accepted by the Government.

And to those who think this is just about racism, sexism or ageism, it is important to note that this is a theory based on science and is about eradicating subliminal reactions from affecting the employment process.

If this were to become law, or even best practice, it would really blast apart one of the biggest barriers to work that people can experience.

So, what's in a name? Quite a lot! ■

This article was written by Lynne Featherstone, Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey and Wood Green and Youth and Equalities spokesperson.