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Idris Elba Posts Full Text Of Powerful Diversity Speech Online

By Ali Jaafar 43 mins ago



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[Idris Elba](#) has posted the full text of his powerful address to the UK's Parliament yesterday about the need for greater diversity and representation on our screens. Ironically, Elba's address comes slap bang in the middle of a wider debate on the lack of representation at this year's Academy Awards- Elba's stirring performance in Cary Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation* being among the notable absentees- but the truth is the speech was set months ago with Elba writing much of the text weeks ago. Nevertheless, Elba's speech stands as an important and vital contribution.

Elba's speech in the House of Commons, marking a year since the launch of UK broadcaster Channel 4's 360° Diversity Charter, called on a "Magna Carta moment" for broadcasters in terms of the need for greater representation in front of and behind the camera. "I'm not here to talk about black people," said Elba. "I'm here to talk about diversity. Diversity in the modern world is more than just skin colour- it's gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, social

background, and – most important of all, as far as I’m concerned- diversity of thought.”



Idris Elba
@idriselba

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Parliament 🤔 THE most important speech I've ever made, no other time has made me realise the torch I hold. @Oona_King

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Please see below for the full text of the speech:

“Thanks for such a warm welcome. I could almost feel at home... In fact we’re not far from where I grew up in East London, but as a young man, I never thought I’d come here. In fact as an older man, I never thought I’d come here. But Oona invited me to speak here today. You know what she’s like, she’s

a bit obsessed with diversity. I told her to get out more, & stop watching TV. Thing is, when you get out more, you see there's a disconnect between the real world & TV world. People in the TV world often aren't the same as people in the real world. And there's an even bigger gap between people who make TV, and people who watch TV. I should know, I live in the TV world. And although there's a lot of reality TV, TV hasn't caught up with reality. Change is coming, but it's taking its sweet time.

Why change?

1. Because the TV world helps SHAPE the real world. It's also a window on our world. But when we look out the window, none of us live in *Downton Abbey*.

2. Because the creative industries are the foundation of Britain's future economy.

You guys want to safeguard Britain's economy, right? That's your job?

3. If you want to safeguard the economy, you have to safeguard the Creative Industries; and they rely on TALENT.

Talent is our lifeblood – we can't afford to WASTE it, or give it away.

But when you don't reflect the real world, too much talent is trashed.

Talent is everywhere, opportunity isn't.

And talent can't reach opportunity.

Especially on our small island – that's why British talent gets exported all over the world.

We haven't done enough to nurture our diverse talent.

But before I go any further I want to say something really important:

I'm not here to talk about black people; I'm here to talk about diversity. Diversity in the modern world is more than just skin colour – it's gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, social background, and – most important of all, as far as I'm concerned – diversity of thought. Because if you have genuine diversity of thought among people making TV & film, then you won't accidentally shut out any of the groups I just mentioned. Anyway, on the whole, I don't think of myself as just a 'black actor'. I'm an actor, not a number. Just like anyone else.

Yo u know what I mean; all the MPs in the room, (by the way, thanks so many of you for coming.

Oona tells me it's really unusual to get 100 MPs to turn up, she says often she can't even get one.) But you guys know what I mean, about not just being a number. I suspect, for those of you who have children, you don't just speak as a politician, you speak as a parent. Well I'm not just a black man, and you're not just a politician.

None of us are just one flavour or one colour. If we were, we'd be one-dimensional. And that's what used to drive me mad as an up and coming actor. My agent and I, we'd get scripts and we were always asked to read the "black male" character. Or "the athletic type." And that was just Crimewatch... But when a script called for a "black male", it wasn't describing a character. It was describing a skin colour. A white man – or a caucasian – was described as "a man with a twinkle in his eye".

My eyes may be dark, but they definitely twinkle! (Ask the Mrs...) And I was like "I wanna play the character with a twinkle in his eyes!" So I got to a certain point in my career, and I saw that glass ceiling;

I was very close to hitting my forehead on it.

I was busy, I was getting lots of work, but I realised I could only play so many "best friends" or "gang leaders". I knew I wasn't going to land a lead role. I knew there wasn't enough imagination in the industry for me to be seen as a lead.

In other words, if I wanted to star in a British drama like Luther, then I'd have to go to a country like America. Now some people might say "but back then, Britain hardly had any black detectives, so how could you expect us to have a TV show about one? How could you expect the BBC to have the imagination to put Luther on TV? ...because it's TELEVISION?!"

And the other thing was, because I never saw myself or my culture on TV, I stopped watching TV. Instead I decided to just go out and become TV.

If I aspired to be on a level with the Denzil Washingtons, and the Robert de Niro's, I had to reinvent myself.

I had to transform the way industry saw me. I had to climb out of the box.

In other words I didn't go to America because I couldn't GET parts. I went to America because I was running OUT of parts. They were all the same sort of parts. But 20 or 25 years ago there were a handful of casting directors, without whom I wouldn't be here today:

– Doreen Jones

– Priscilla John

– The Hubbards

– Leo Davis

– Mary Selwaye

These people regularly auditioned me, they saw the twinkle in my eyes, and put me up for roles that definitely weren't written for me or my type. At which point I'd like to add, the BBC was the broadcaster to give me my first break. In all honesty they've been incredible to me, not to mention our country, and the

WORLD. They also had the imagination.

It's that same imagination casting director Nina Gold had, when she cast the film *Attack The Block*. She searched the whole of London for raw talent, much of it diverse. She found [John Boyega](#), a British African.

Nina then put Boyega up to be the hero in the latest *Star Wars* blockbuster. Since when did the lead character in *Star Wars* come from Peckham? Since a woman with imagination became the casting director.

It's the vision of people like Nina, and those 5 original casting directors, that allows me to stand before you today.

That, and the fact I refused to be pigeon-holed.

I'm not gonna lie, it was really hard work.

What all this taught me, is too often people get locked inside boxes. And it's not a great place to be.

Ask women, they'll say the same thing. Or disabled people. Or gay people. Or any number of under-represented groups. So today I'm asking the TV & film industry to think outside the box, and to GET outside the box. This isn't a speech about race, this is a speech about imagination. Diversity of thought. Thankfully in our country, we're free to say what we want. But we're not as free as we think, because our imagination isn't that free. We can't help putting people inside boxes, it's a national pastime... Funny thing is, it's not good for the people locked in the box; but it's also not good for the people deciding what's ON the box. Audiences don't want to see caricatures Because the point about a caricature is this: you've seen it all before. So I want our incredibly creative and successful TV industry to be more imaginative with the cultural exports we send around the world.

We have an amazing record. Think about Britain's place in history. For half a millennia we shaped the world.

Winston Churchill said he could save the British Empire from anything – except the British... Like all great men he had his flaws. He wasn't too hot on gender equality... All the women MPs here today, you probably know what he said to the first woman MP:- – that having her in Parliament was as embarrassing as if she'd walked into the men's toilets! Some of Churchill's attitudes were plain wrong. But he was truly visionary when he said this: "the empires of the FUTURE are empires of the MIND." Now before I leave the subject of Empire, I should mention I'm honoured – just the other day – to have become an Officer of the British Empire.

The exact title is “Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire” – a snappy little number.

And of course the word “Empire” is laden with meaning – especially to the son of a Ghanaian mother and Sierra Leonean father. The irony is not lost on me. The British Empire brought great progress to many, and for others, great suffering. But history isn’t always neat and tidy, the sums don’t always add up. What’s for sure, though, our Empire gave birth to the multi-cultural miracle that is modern Britain. And for that I’m grateful. So back to “Empires of the Mind”: That’s my theme: how can we change our mindset?

How can we be more imaginative to make our creative industries more successful? How can Britain influence the world to embrace diversity, and be more tolerant?

When you look at the news today, nothing could be more important. But just because we do better than most countries, doesn’t mean we have nothing to learn.

Look at the lesson of the Olympics. What did we learn?

- * We learned that if you invest in sports, you win gold;
- * that our country is a nation of volunteers;
- * that disabled sport can be more thrilling than NON-disabled sport
- * and that VIPs can find their way to Newham

(if they have their own bus lane)...

We came third in the medal table – an amazing achievement.

But make no mistake, we could have won more gold. Here are two incredible statistics:

50% of British medal winners went to private school. Yet only 7% of British kids GO to private school.

How many Mo Farah’s did we miss? How many Jessica Ennis’ will never be discovered? Think what we could have achieved if we’d fished for talent consistently among the other 93% of British kids. And that’s what we **SHOULD BE DOING** in ALL industries, including the TV & film industry:
– be more consistent about looking for talent everywhere

Even so, when Mo Farah is wrapped in the British flag, (Somalian born, raised in Newham); – and when the entire British nation cheers him fanatically, the world intuitively learns more about diversity and tolerance.

We show the world that Britain thinks outside the box. That’s how we changed from an empire based on raw materials and military might; to a cultural power exporting talent & creativity. We don’t steal gold any more. We WIN it. From hard power to soft power. And in terms of soft power, nothing is more powerful

than the media. Only one other country in the world influences what people watch more than us. In terms of real estate on this earth, we're a small island. But in terms of culture we're a continent. The Britain I come from is the most successful, diverse, multicultural country on earth. But here's my point: you wouldn't know it if you turned on the TV. Too many of our creative decision-makers share the same background.

They decide which stories get told, and those stories decide how Britain is viewed.

Even to ourselves. Especially to ourselves. Furthermore, how Britain is viewed on the world stage should concern all of us. It's all our business. And that's why everyone should care about our media industry – it's the custodian of our global identity. But everyone knows British broadcasting these days can be a tough gig.

Execs running TV companies, (Hi there) you need to make cash, grab audience, and please Government.

And these days you're in a fight to the death with the streaming people. And the platform people. And the content people.

The war never ends. Technology has turned TV on its head. The audience is now consumer and "commissioner".

If young people don't see themselves on TV, they just switch off the TV, and log on. End of.

They create their own channels. Their own audience. They become their own CEOs. They don't need us.

Because as the experts in the room know, the TV industry is about two things:

– the pipes, and what you send down the pipes.

The pipes used to be just the broadcasters. And the broadcasters were the only ones who could send content down the pipes.

Now, anyone can send stuff down those pipes.

Before, there were only 4 broadcasters. Now, everyone's a broadcaster.

A lot of young people never switch on a TV. They're on their mobiles all day long.

Times are truly changing. The times when TV was the only window to the outside world, are long gone.

Kids have windows in their pockets.

But what will bring the change we need?

Three things:

1. A change of mindset: get all commissioners and content creators to think about diversifying at the beginning of the creative process, not the end.

2. Transparency: friendly competition between broadcasters. See who's actually doing the best creative diversity. Benchmark it.

That encourages everyone to do better.

3. A different approach towards risk. The story of Netflix is that risk-taking delivers audiences

Let's be honest. Too often commissioners look at diverse talent, and all they see is risk.

Black actors are seen as a commercial risk.

Women directors are seen as a commercial risk.

Disabled directors aren't even seen at all.

In general, if broadcasters want to stay in the game, their commissioners must take more risk with diverse talent.

Now if you're thinking "who's he to say all this?", I asked myself the same question.

I asked Oona, actually, "who am I to say all this?!"

And she started going on about me being a "British export..." (She was talking about me as if I was a crate of Nigerian Guinness...) If some people see me as an export, that's fine, but I only come with my story and my observations. I don't pretend to be anything I'm not. So what am I? I'm a product of my imagination. Made in Hackney. Made in Newham. Made in Dagenham. But above all, made in my mind:

Seeing it, thinking it, doing it. I used to fit tyres in Dagenham, now I make films in Hollywood.

And the difference between those two lives comes down to one single word – OPPORTUNITY. By the way, I got my tyre-fitting job through a Youth Training Scheme. Good old YTS Schemes, who remembers them in the 80s?? Before that, for a while I went to a school for disabled kids. I had severe asthma.

I finally got my first break in the creative industries from the

Prince's Trust. Yeah, the good old Prince Charles stepped straight up for me, right in there, well done! Helped me break into theatre, and from there tv and film. The Prince's Trust subsidised my first ever audition for the

National Music Youth Theatre. They gave me £1,500, because my parents didn't have enough money; – there were hardly any black kids there, none of us could afford it. And although back then obviously I never met Prince Charles, we both had one thing in common: We both fell into the same line of work as our parents. Yeah it just sort of happens...

My Dad worked in a car factory, so before I could get work as an actor, I ended

up doing night shifts at Ford Dagenham. In fact Ford Dagenham turned out to have more opportunity, and more diversity, than the TV industry I was trying to break into. And without the Prince's Trust I probably wouldn't have made it – because so many invisible chains can hold you back. Historically in Britain, you never escaped.

If you started at the bottom of the heap, you most likely died at the bottom of the heap. Things started to change inside this incredible building; the building where every British monarch has been crowned since 1066. While I'm on the subject of 1066, I should say my history's not all that. A long time after I left school, someone explained what the Magna Carta was. For people in your industry, Magna Carta is the basis of modern democracy: For people in the music industry, Magna Carta is a rap album by friend Jay-Z. So Magna Carta was a peace treaty between the King and the Barons (shout out to the Barons in the room today). The idea was, the King couldn't just take things off people on a whim. IT WAS ABOUT THINGS BECOMING FAIRER. It was preceded by the Domesday book, a big map of Britain which counted up what everybody had. Back then, King's always had their eye on everyone else's stuff.

They weren't sorting out drama auditions for YTS kids... But back to my point: in a funny way, broadcasting needs a Magna Carta. We need to start doing things more fairly. It's not so much a Peace treaty; more an Opportunity Treaty. We need to count up what everybody has, see the lay of the land, and see who has which careers in TV? Who makes TV? Who's allowed ON TV? And when they get the opportunity, which roles do they play, both on and offscreen. Are black people often playing petty criminals? Are women always playing the love interest or talking about men? Are gay people always stereotyped? Are disabled people hardly ever seen? Do some people have their careers taken away on a whim? Is their talent unfairly ignored? So yeah, back to the box; Back to the stereo-typing. Take gender stereo-typing: "girls love dolls, boys love cars".

Well actually I DO love cars. I'm a stereotypical boy who loves his fast cars. Yeah, I don't mind playing Achilles in *Tr oillus & Cressida*, but I'd rather break the land speed record in a Bentley at nearly 200 mph.

Just can't help it. And I just have to ask myself, "is it because I'm a man?" (The answer is probably "yes.")

So women also have to ask themselves a question: When they disappear off our screens over the age of 40, "is it because they're FEMALE??" (The answer is

probably “yes.”)

And is that why they always get paid less than their male co-stars? (The answer is DEFINITELY “yes!”)

That brings me on to Channel 4’s conference on Diversity in the Media tomorrow. I agreed to speak in Parliament today, because I want to highlight the important discussion taking place tomorrow. The CEOs of Channel 4, ITV, and the BBC, are just some of those industry leaders meeting to discuss diversity.

And Channel 4’s research for the conference is really interesting. The headline finding is that British TV is awash with low-level sexism. The interesting comparison, is that the same figure for low-level racism was only a tenth of that. This means women on TV are 10 times more likely to be treated

negatively than black people on TV. That’s crazy, right? I’m not saying you expect black people to be treated worse than women (although God help black women) But as Viola Davies said last year when she became the first-ever black woman to win an Emmy for drama, “you can’t win an Emmy for a role that’s never been written.” That’s why we need more imagination from our directors, our producers, our casting directors, our writers – especially our writers. So I’m just saying we need to be more aware. In the 1970s, popular TV programmes like the *Black & White Minstrels*, and *Love Thy Neighbour* were awash with what you might call “light- hearted racism”.

At the time, though, everyone thought it was absolutely fine to go along with it. The same with homophobia. The same with disability. Well I want to say something very clear to all the women in the TV & film industry, onscreen and offscreen: I don’t think it’s absolutely fine to go along with it. Audiences shouldn’t think it’s absolutely fine to go along with it. Above all: the industry shouldn’t think it’s absolutely fine to go along with it. Instead we need to educate ourselves out of it. And however far we have to travel ONscreen, we have many more rivers to cross OFFscreen. When we take this problem in the round, this lack of opportunity leads to me being asked the same question again and again. This is what every young actor asks me: “should I go to America to become a successful actor?” I’m always in a quandry. Because it’s not always true that the grass is greener: But the reason I went to America, is because the USA has the most famous diversity policy of all: It’s called the American Dream.

The problem is the GAP between the dream and reality. That gap is what

Martin Luther King set out to fill with his dream. To champion diversity is to champion the American dream. It's to say that if you work hard and you have great talent, you will have the same chance as anyone else to succeed.

It guarantees no more than that, but that in itself is a golden guarantee.

And I want that guarantee here in Britain. I want that British dream.

The stats show we haven't had it in the past. In fact we don't really have it in the present. It's a shocking fact that only 1.5% of British TV is made by B.A.M.E directors. But the other thing we haven't had, is this commitment from those at the very top of broadcasting, combined with the current level of strategy, finance, transparency, and accountability. This is the new system they've put in place, working together within the Creative Diversity Network. Yes we are trying to turn a tanker. But the tanker is turning.

And we have so many great people to learn from, like Keli Lee at DisneyABC, who has done so much to change the face of American TV. Keli made sure that one of the most powerful people in American TV got their break. That is Shonda Rhymes, and those of you who haven't heard of her, well you will...

– She's the creator of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal* among many other hit shows

Shonda isn't just THE ONLY black woman in America to have her own night on TV (with 3 hit shows back-to-back on one night). Shonda is the only person in America to have that. She's done what no one else has. At least partly thanks to Keli. And Keli's own Diverse Casting Initiative is responsible for a lot of the diverse talent we see onscreen, so it's great news we're looking to do something similar in the UK.

And now, for the last time – I promise you – back to fast cars... I was surprised to hear, the CAR industry and steel industry combined don't bring in as much cash to Britain as our creative industries. So let's make sure our creative industries get all the talent this country has to offer:- whether that talent just walked out of Oxbridge, or off the factory floor.

In conclusion, then, let's have a bit of a Magna Carta moment in British Broadcasting. Let's make things fairer. And let's see who's got what. Luckily we have just the thing.

– It's taken British Broadcasting several years to develop, but it's called Project DIAMOND.

For the first time we'll have hard data across the TV industry on who's doing exactly what, where, and when. Let's take the guesswork out of it. Our

broadcasting industry will be the first in the world to have hard data about which groups are locked inside the box. It'll show us which Broadcasters' diversity policies work best. Once we know that, we can benchmark progress. And that's all I'm asking: let's make some serious progress. It's what Lenny Henry and so many others have asked for. In conclusion, these are the things that will bring about change:- being more imaginative in all we do

- fishing for talent more consistently across all groups, not just some groups
- implementing transparent systems to benchmark what Broadcasters actually do
- understanding "risk", and re-evaluating commercial risk
- implementing dozens of targeted policies, like those you heard at the beginning of this meeting
- If you're really interested (and I hope you're ALL really interested), make Channel 4's Diversity Charter your bedtime reading. Google it. (It might keep you awake longer than you think!)
- Check out what the BBC, Sky, ITV and others are doing to be more diverse. So my message today is let's get more professional about this whole area;
- our economy depends on it;
- our future depends on it.

Nelson Mandela said "anything difficult always seems impossible until it's done." But the good news is, we're not trying to put a man on the moon. We're just trying to redesign the face of British TV. And because British TV helps shape our world, and is the window onto our world, this is a debate for everyone.

And yes, let's make our cultural empire even more successful than our military empire. I'll leave you with this thought: I don't want to give away any spoilers, but in the new *Star Wars* film, isn't it amazing the princess grows up to be a General??! Seriously: let that sink in: the princess grows up to be a General! That's all I'm asking for:-

some proper imagination,
- untold stories
- the road less travelled

Let's think outside the box. In fact let's smash the box. Given we're in London let's "MASH the box." G'wan, mash it up! Lords, Ladies and gentlemen, officers of the Empire, and any princesses,

Thank you for listening!

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