

MULTICULTURALISM, DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY: BRITAIN IN THE 21st CENTURY

This article calls for the Government to take a lead in setting the agenda and tackling issues to do with the unfolding debate about British identity and recent questioning about multiculturalism. However, the Government's attempts to do just that (such as the proposed oath of allegiance) have encountered criticism and some ridicule. not just from members of the new immigrant groups, but has also re-ignited tensions within the union itself amongst traditional nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Is the UK morphing into a new form of “non-nation state?”

There's an old joke about 'TIME' magazine which has a commentator reflecting that whenever the publication makes a feature of a particular social/political/fashion issue, one can rest assured that the subject has been around so long that it is either passé or is in the process of being solved. If the commentator is only half right, then Europe (and Britain in particular) may be on its way towards working effectively as a multicultural society, because the heading of TIME's cover article in its 26 February 2007 edition was "Getting Along – A Europe of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds is a fact of life".

In our earlier article¹ 'What is Diversity?', we pointed out that the concept of diversity was influenced by developments in the USA and was of relatively recent provenance in the UK. Diversity was not, for example, featured in Good Practice Guides on equality issues produced as recently as the early 1990s. The same could not be said of multiculturalism. As long ago as the late 1960s Roy Jenkins described multiculturalism as "*an equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance*".

In recent times there has been a kind of firestorm about multiculturalism with attacks from across the political spectrum. In the last five or six years, newspapers, learned journals,

¹ "What is Diversity?" IRIS Consulting website: www.irisconsulting.co.uk/articles; June 2001

television and radio, not to mention politicians, have regularly featured news stories and have commented on the issues surrounding immigration, integration and, often, the *problems* of multicultural societies. The attention given to these topics has not been restricted to any particular part of the political spectrum or to particular audiences. From the Daily Mail in the UK, to the Financial Post in Canada, to journals such as International Economy there is a steady stream of analysis and comment.

In the UK, from some, comes the charge that an emphasis on the virtues of a multicultural approach encourages separatism and exclusivity and ‘un-Britishness’. For example, Ruth Lea, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies (a centre-right think tank) suggests that there are two ways in which people interpret multiculturalism. The first way she describes as the more common but also the most destructive, and that is that every culture has the right to exist and there is no over-arching thread that holds them together.

The second definition of multiculturalism, she sees as synonymous with diversity — where people have their own cultural beliefs and they happily coexist — but there is a common thread of Britishness (or whatever you want to call it) to hold society together. Ruth Lea described this as a positive acceptance not a negative tolerance.

Karen Chouhan, Chief Executive of The 1990 Trust (a black-led human rights organisation), points out that to understand multiculturalism is to appreciate that it means many different things. To some it is merely sampling different cultures, such as a carnival or the South Asian festival known as a *mela*.? To others, it is the road to challenging structural inequalities.

However, for Trevor Phillips, Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), multiculturalism is about separateness. In 2004 he argued that it was time to rediscover the nation’s belief in “core British values” and to integrate “under an umbrella marked with the colours of the Union flag.”

Arguments about multiculturalism and the meaning of equality have rumbled on for decades. One might be hard-pressed to argue, however, that the recent salience of the topics in

Western Europe and the USA and Canada, unlike places such as South Africa, cannot be traced to 9/11 and to subsequent events in Britain, Europe the Middle East and Afghanistan. A small illustration of the effect of these events is the way the educational achievement of people of Bangladeshi origin has been discussed. According to Kenan Malik, writing in the January 2007 edition of the CRE's magazine, "Commentary", Bangladeshis were viewed as Asians in the past and, if not disaggregated from "Indians", the former's different educational achievements could be ignored. Recently Bangladeshis have been viewed as Muslims and poor educational results put down to 'Islamophobia'. One does not have to buy into Malik's general argument in the article to recognise how the categorisation has changed in the public discourse.

Before exploring further, it might be instructive to step back in time and view how 'difference' (or, at least, visible difference) was viewed in Britain in the 20th century, and even further back to reflect, briefly, on the interaction between different faith groups in Europe.

A look at how the media in Britain viewed people, often refugees, arriving from other parts of the world during the 20th century helps provide a perspective on some of the current issues. In an informative article Gavin Schaffer, of the University of Portsmouth, illustrates the continuing tension between:

- Britain's self-image as a country that could be relied on to provide refuge for vulnerable and persecuted individuals, and
- the fear of being changed by the 'incomers' or of immigrants taking advantage of British hospitality.

This tension could be seen more starkly in times of danger to the State, for example in the run up to the 2nd World War.

Using the media as an admittedly imperfect barometer of at least part of the public's attitudes, we see The Daily Mail in early 1940 featuring headlines such as "Luxury war for aliens", and "Immigrants off to the seaside" – referring primarily to Jewish refugees from Hitler's depredations. This contrasted with the way the paper portrayed refugees from Belgium. For example: in May 1940, referring to the Belgian refugees, the Daily Mail spoke

of gatherings of 'tired, forlorn groups' who 'clutched small bundles of household treasure' while 'tiny children, dirty and weary... whimpered at their feet'. German and Austrian refugees, many of them Jewish, were described as people who: "own their own cars, own their luxury homes and live in unlimited freedom in the Isle of Man" (*History Today, Vol 56, January 2006.*)

In recent times, The Daily Mail and other popular papers (and, it must be said, along with many in the political establishment), have seen asylum seekers and immigrants as a potential security threat. In the Mail's case, this contrasted with a robust attack in 2005 on the Home Office for attempting to send back failed asylum seekers from Zimbabwe. Public discourse has also seen mainstream politicians appearing to be hesitant in defending refugee groups and immigrants in general, or (at least) vigorously explaining the context in which such movements take place.

The state of the nation and its place in a difficult and/or dangerous world clearly has an impact on the way we discuss difference, as does the contrasting value that can be placed on people depending the group from which they come. In all the uproar about immigration and how people 'fit in', what 'values' the newcomers hold and what it means to be 'British', it is noticeable that there has been little, if any, comment from the print media in particular about the sizeable numbers of South Africans that have entered Britain since the formal collapse of apartheid – and this at the same time that newspapers, politicians and commentators have been agonising about 'our crowded island'. Overcrowding and 'values' clearly depend on a number of factors. These include:

- the 'identity' of those contributing to the 'overcrowding',
- what we know or care about the values different people bring to our diverse society, and
- how we view the countries from which they arrive.

In the Mail's case, people from Zimbabwe appear to be viewed more sympathetically than incomers from other parts of Africa – a stance not unconnected surely with the paper's view about Mugabe and co.

This is neither to argue that a multi-cultural, multi-race, multi-faith society has no issues to debate, nor that the process of treating people with dignity and in the spirit of equality is an easy one. Nor is it to argue that adjustment and compromise are not called for from everyone involved. What is often lacking, however, is a sense of perspective.

We need to remind ourselves that the first decade of this century, like that of the 20th, is an age of immigration. During the latter period significant numbers of people left Western Europe, emigrating to the United States and to the former's. In the latter half of the last century and into this one, the trend has been for people to move into the old imperial countries and from Eastern Europe to more prosperous regions/cities in the west. Neither of these migrations has been without significant upheavals and they have both seen an upsurge of debate, anxiety and, at times, scaremongering in the receiving countries. One only has to spend a short time in the Ellis Island Museum in New York to see the adverse response of some of the media in the USA in the late 19th and early 20th century to the people who were entering, and to find echoes in that country's current high profile debate about illegal immigrants, primarily from Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico.

Debate' might at times seem a charitable word to use in this context. At least one talk-show commentator on US television in November 2007 was heard calling for the building of a wall/fence across the USA/Mexico border that would rival the Great Wall of China! Others constantly claim that Spanish-speaking immigrants 'keep to themselves, don't want to learn English and don't buy into the values'. Any facts to the contrary are often swept aside in a heightened climate of uncertainty and concerns about the vulnerability of borders to terrorist infiltration, the economy and, of course, the rapidity of change – all of which find an echo in Europe in general and the UK in particular.

The adverse comments at the turn of the last century focused on the immigrants who arrived steerage class; little was said about people of higher socio-economic status who arrived to settle. What is instructive is that the scaremongering and adverse comments took place in a country that, unlike western Europe, held a view of itself as a society that welcomed newcomers, exemplified in the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty "give me your tired /your poor/your huddled masses yearning to breathe free".

All too often the emphasis was on difference, the lack of similarity of values, the fear of imported dangerous ideas (Bolshevism at the turn of the last century), even the likelihood of diseases being spread (TB then as now) reminding one how some phenomena do not change a great deal. This does not mean that we can sit back and assume that the mere passage of time will bring about a harmonious settlement of the current, often heated, debate about how people of different races, religions, beliefs and values can agree on how to live and work as citizens of Britain. From different parts of the political spectrum in the UK, as in much of Western Europe, there seems to be a consensus that “muddling along” will not do.

What, then, are the key factors that will be important in determining how successful we will be in facing up to our changed and changing society?

- **Honesty.** We need to recognise that although discussion about minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers is not new, the events of 9/11 and since then have added a dimension that make calm, yet vigorous, debate less than easy. The virtues or otherwise of multiculturalism are increasingly seen through the prism of Britain and the western industrialised states vis-à-vis Islam and its adherents both here and in the rest of the world – (and this article too is not unaffected by such parameters).
- **Acknowledging complexity.** For example, how we all get along in Britain is *not* simply or solely about the ‘integration’ or otherwise of people labelled as ‘Muslim’. Recognising this would be part of an honest debate. “Cohesion” – a much loved word in the current climate - has as much to do with young white men who are failing in our schools, or with the growing disparities of wealth (in the UK and the USA in particular), or with the falling behind after primary school of many young men of Afro-Caribbean origin, as it does with ‘alienated’ young men of the Islamic faith.

- **Recognising reality.** This means facing the fact, as TIME magazine points out, that Europe and Britain are already diverse societies – the issue is how we use this fact to our advantage.
- **Resisting doomsayers.** These include people like Bruce Bawer who, in his book 'While Europe Slept' claims that Islamists are, to quote TIME, "determined to subdue and colonise Europe", or Princeton University's Bernard Lewis who claims that Western Europe will have Muslim majorities by the end of the century. These fears find an echo, however inchoate at times, in a European sense of history marked by a clash between Christianity and Islam.

It would be shallow to advance the argument 'Christian Europe bad, Islam good', for example, by reference to what appears to be at first glance the benign rule of the Iberian Peninsula by Islamic rulers. The complexity of the relationships between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Peninsula during the several hundred years of Islamic rule does not admit of such simplicities.

On the other hand it would not be too difficult to find voices in Islam today who *do* see the advancement of the tenets of Islam as an ultimate universal goal and who have hard-line views unacceptable to most people in Europe, on for example, how relationships between the state, mosque and individuals should be ordered and views about the role of women and the rights of sexual minorities that most people in the UK would find unacceptable.

However, we need to remind ourselves that there is, in the words of Professor Akeel Bilgrami at Columbia University, "much scope for Muslims retaining their identity as Muslims, even as de facto they shed this or that aspect of their faith. It has already happened in many parts of the world. That is to say that there is much scope for them to acquiresecularism even within their commitment to Islam" (*Daedalus, Vol 132, 2003*).

While that posits a view that gives secularism an elevated status – and not everyone would agree with such a view – it does suggest that in a plural society individuals are more than capable of negotiating their own views of identity and 'fit' within a diverse population.

- Acknowledging that societies and nations are not static entities. Even within homogenous populations throughout history, the role, position, values and behaviour of individuals and classes shift and change as different economic and political events unfold. Part of the problem in the UK, more than perhaps in the USA, might be that for many in the majority a common sense of what constitutes 'Britishness' is lacking. Ernest Hillebrand, in an essay entitled "*Migration and Integration: The Errors of the European Left*" (*Policy Network*, 18 April, 2007) claims that from such a perspective there has been both a naivety in the assessment of the processes of social integration of the 'newly arrived' and an arrogance towards the experiences of historic immigration countries such as the USA. The fear in Europe about the consequences of nationalism in the 20th century may have inhibited many from exploring useful practices in other countries that have helped facilitate successful nation building.
- **Facing the complex nature of our country.** This entails the ability and willingness to recognise the varied nature of individuals and groups in society and how this poses challenges as well as rewards. One consequence is the need to acknowledge and learn from the many differences between the UK and, for example, patterns of migration to the USA, France and other parts of continental Europe. While 80% of immigrants arriving in Western Europe in the 1960s and 70s were low or unskilled workers, this was not true for those going to Canada or for significant numbers of, say, Asians from East Africa arriving in the UK. A failure to recognise the different needs and experiences of minorities can lead to sloppy thinking, easy sloganising about problems and 'one-size fits all' solutions. An example is the oft repeated – and inaccurate – claim that Britain is becoming more segregated and, as a consequence, that Muslims from 'segregated' backgrounds were more likely to hold radical views than those who have 'integrated'. A Manchester University study examined the cases of 75 Muslims charged with terrorism offences, looking at the areas they came from and examining the percentage of the Muslim population in those areas. The study found that there was a *higher* chance of people being charged with such offences if they lived in an area with a *low* percentage of Muslims in the local population!

While the study went on to say that this might be a statistical quirk, the authors were quite clear that the view that Muslims charged with terrorist offences are most likely to reside in places with high proportions of Muslims is unfounded!

- **Avoiding easy stereotypes.** Failure to do so when deciding on policy initiatives can lead to inept and/or ineffective action. An obvious example is to talk about 'Muslims' as if there was some coherent, homogenous group to which this label could be appended in all circumstances. Muslims, like people of other faiths and none, are distinguished as often by their differences as their similarities. These differences are not confined to views about the interpretation of Islam, but embrace factors such as socio-economic status, educational achievement, housing patterns and the differences between men and women at school and work. Another small but telling example is the oft-repeated view that Asian Muslim students educated separately are likely to be less than willing to integrate than others. Government-funded research at the University of Lancaster found that white children when educated separately, however, were *more* intolerant of other faiths and races than Asian Muslim students and that the former were *less* willing to integrate than the latter.

Summary

We are, in essence, talking about two separate but interconnected issues in the debate around multiculturalism. These are mainly linked to the discussion around rights and responsibilities. If there is a tension between people from different ethnic backgrounds, who has to act to change that? Those who feel persecuted (learning English and their British History as rapidly as possible) or the majority (claiming that the very notion of Britishness may be under threat)? In many respects the debate has been confused by the continuing references to integration and what it means to be British.

A more balanced approach can be achieved by continuing to emphasise the need to respect and allow difference within an overall framework of common underlying values, such as equality and fairness. This is supported by the view that Britons have much to learn from

other cultural influences, such as the Islamic belief in the extended family and the respect shown to parents. Above all, they see no contradiction between pride in being British and pride in their own religious or cultural values.

LORD PAREKH, professor of political philosophy, Chair of the 2000 report 'The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain', suggests that multiculturalism basically means that no culture is perfect or represents the best life and that it can therefore benefit from a critical dialogue with other cultures. In this sense multiculturalism requires that all cultures should be open, self-critical, and interactive in their relations with other each other. Crucial here is the acknowledgement that no culture is static and that there are as many differences within different 'cultures' as there are between them.

This then is the theory. How to put this into practice and inspire tolerance at a time when many are claiming that there are heightened community tensions is the key issue and circuitously brings us back to the main theme of this article. The UK, like many other societies is a curious mix of acceptance and hostility. Sir Gulam Noon – is quoted in the Observer as saying “The host community doesn't object to you keeping your culture intact. I remember that in the Fifties and Sixties there were only a handful of mosques and now there are more than a 1,000. Temples, too, have sprung up and the Neasden temple welcomes a large number of English visitors.”

On the other hand Abbez Lam - human rights campaigner - is quoted in the same article as saying that “The pre-condition for multiculturalism is a society free of racism. The experience of many grassroots communities in Britain is one of being discriminated against, racially abused, harassed and attacked, while the authorities turn a blind eye to our suffering. Under such circumstances there is no basis to talk about multiculturalism or integration”.

There are therefore no quick or easy solutions. It would be all too easy to assert that this is a matter for the Government, but although action by the latter is a necessary condition for progress, it is not sufficient. Many other players have a role, including organisations of civil society, trade unions and the business community, as well as individuals and, perhaps more in the spirit of hope over experience, the media – print particularly. An essential step, then,

would be for the Government to start leading this agenda rather than merely being reactive, whether this is in response to the fear generated by communities who are concerned by competing demands for scarce resources, or by the mischievous role of some elements of the media. The Government appears to have lost control of the agenda – not helped by the disarray over official statistics on the number of people entering the country. With such a loose handle on the numbers preaching about common values of Britishness is likely to prove difficult.

Having expectations of all communities in terms of core values is not unreasonable. At the same time the Government needs to move forward with a serious debate about how far we have to go in tackling both the conditions that allow unhealthy divisions to grow, and eliminating race discrimination in every corner of society. In this way will we help create the conditions that will allow Britain to be a (truly multicultural) society at ease with itself, confident of its future and based on mutual respect and key, core, shared values.

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