

# Strength in Diversity? Multiculturalism Reassessed

Ref: PB/003, September 2004

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000 the report of the Commission on the Future of Multiethnic Britain highlighted the need to rethink the British identity and national story and for a focus on common values and the generation of greater 'social cohesion'. A second, and more urgent, impetus to actively address some of the perceived problems of equality and difference came from the disturbances in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley the following year.

However, one of the consequences of a welcome broadening of the race equality and equal opportunities agenda to include issues of how communities interact and the broader consequences for social stability has been to open up ground for an attack on 'insular' communities and the desirability of multiculturalism itself.

The emerging agenda has also opened up opportunities for some to bring forward arguments that, in addition to social stability, social and cultural diversity has negative consequences for the public welfare system.

At one level it is clear that the government has a commitment 'to develop a successful multicultural society'. The Home Office consultation document 'Strength in Diversity' asks how we can shape and promote the shared values that underpin citizenship, and suggests that citizenship will need to promote wider ownership of these common values and a shared sense of belonging.

However, there is a growing fear in black and minority

ethnic communities that in terms of acceptance and tolerance, the British government is backtracking and succumbing to more reactionary and assimilationist forces operating across Europe and in the UK. The lack of voice of ethnic minorities themselves in the debate (Trevor Phillips excepted), and the climate of fear being generated is evident within minority communities.

While a debate about the nature of Britishness and what constitutes 'core' British values is to be welcomed, there is a danger that government will misunderstand what is at stake in the argument over multiculturalism, and the nature of the challenges it now faces. In common parlance, the push for multiculturalisation has become confused with, and often limited to, a multi-racialisation agenda, with concerns now being expressed that acceptance of ethnic minorities in our midst implies all / any values are equal (a moral relativism) and a fear that 'anything goes'.

In fact, the multiculturalisation vision was deeply value-laden and has been driven by a concern for all to be able to contribute for the benefit of society, unhindered by unwarranted social differentiation that marks specific peoples out for unfair discrimination. Contrary to the commonly held view that multiculturalism leads to segregation and separate development, in fact its primary aim is to strengthen bonds between people from different backgrounds. *It is an integrating - not divisive - force.*

Recognition of the new and emerging forms of discrimination presents new challenges for government that cannot be responded to effectively on the basis of confused and out-dated policies and strategies intended to deal with 'old' racism. It requires a return to fundamental principles that underpinned the multicultural vision for the UK and which is as relevant, if not more relevant, today as it was in the 1970s.

We argue that government needs to take a principle centred approach to the sensitive, emotive and highly contentious issues of cultural diversity and social cohesion. We believe that any sustainable and effective approach needs to be;

- *Multiculturalist* in its true sense; focused on removing the unwarranted obstacles to all groups contributing for the benefit of all.
- *Central* to government policy: recognising that it is impossible to modernise public services without simultaneously multiculturalising them
- *Reflective and setting out clear and achievable targets*: Government needs to be as rigorous on target setting in this area as it has been on other public service targets where visible progress is being made.
- *Holistic*: focusing not just on what needs to happen in marginalised groups and their interaction with other groups, but what needs to be done to build confidence and bring about change in the broader society.
- *Integrated*: recognising that progress has varied across departments of state and that differing approaches and policy conflict undermines the overall potential for impact.
- *Dynamic and alert*: being aware that patterns of discrimination are not fixed but will evolve over time, change shape, and that entirely new forms of social differentiation and discrimination can and are emerging.
- *Grounded*: responding to the real felt concerns of marginalised groups and the wider society. For some black and ethnic minority communities this may include concerns about increasing hostility, violence and far right activity. Some white communities may have real concerns and anxieties about identity and notions of what it means to be 'British' and 'English'. Government needs to be seen to also respond to their experience of marginalisation which is underpinned by direct class discrimination.
- *Broadly owned*: government cannot develop and implement a broad ranging strategy on its own. The development of strong partnerships with influencers, gatekeepers, community and voluntary organisations from all communities that goes beyond consultation is critical for success.

We believe that this approach offers the best prospect of both restoring some sanity to a heated but confused

debate, and a way forward where all British peoples, irrespective of unwarranted and discriminatory social markers, can see a future for themselves in a multicultural Britain.

## CONTEXT

In 2000 the report of the Commission on the Future of Multiethnic Britain highlighted the need to rethink the British identity and national story and for a focus on common values and the generation of greater 'social cohesion'. It called for the development of a balance between cohesion, equality and difference, and for the building of a pluralist human rights culture in which 'people are treated equally, but also with regard to real differences of experience, background and perception'. The Commission report generated huge media interest at the time, but little substantive debate or action in the public policy arena.

A second, and more urgent, impetus to actively address some of the perceived problems of equality and difference came from the disturbances in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley the following year. These disturbances led to the commissioning and publication of Lord Ouseley's 'Community Pride, Not Prejudice' on Bradford, and 'Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team Chaired by Ted Cante'. These reports placed the need for community and social cohesion on the public policy agenda, alongside imperatives to tackle racism, economic disadvantage and social exclusion.

However, one of the consequences of a welcome broadening of the race equality and equal opportunities agenda to include issues of how communities interact and the broader consequences for social stability has been to open up ground for an attack on 'insular' communities and the desirability of multiculturalism itself. Following the widely reported perceived failure of the Dutch multiculturalism 'experiment', the argument that minorities need to abide by agreed 'British' rules (based on assumptions that they are not already doing so) has also been brought into the public domain, and has to some extent been echoed by Commission for Race Equality Chair Trevor Phillips, who has talked about the need to move 'beyond' multiculturalism to a teaching of 'British' cultural values in order to tackle the problem of 'communities in their silos'.

This has happened in a context where broader public attitudes towards ethnic minorities are seen to be hardening, manifested in increasing Islamophobia post 9/11, growing public resentment and hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers fleeing humanitarian emergencies, and near to one million British people voting for the BNP in recent local and European elections, as well as recent statistics indicating a steep rise in stops and searches of people of asian origin. Commentators, even in the liberal press, refer

to British people as 'increasingly unwilling 'hosts' - 80% of whom are not in a hospitable mood' (Polly Toynbee, the Guardian 7.4.04). In practice, the focus of debate has shifted away from 'old' forms of racism towards perceived problems in integrating people of different faiths, in particular Islam.

The emerging agenda has also opened up opportunities for some to bring forward arguments that, in addition to social stability, social and cultural diversity has negative consequences for the public welfare system. In his Prospect essay David Goodhart quotes conservative politician David Willetts 'If values become more diverse, if lifestyles become more differentiated, then it becomes more difficult to sustain the legitimacy of a universal risk-pooling welfare state'. Empirical data relating to this hypothesis is hard to find in the UK, and in many ways it is an obviously spurious argument. There is little acknowledgment by Goodhart and others that it is people from developing countries and visible minority cultures that have delivered, and are delivering, a large part of health and social care services and making a significant contribution to new enterprise development and growth in the UK.

One government response to the emerging issues has been a range of ideas and proposals for more active efforts to be made to integrate newcomers, from citizenship courses and ceremonies, English language proficiency testing, to the monitoring of the patterns of settlement. There has been less emphasis on the fact that integration is necessarily a two way process (implicit in the debate is an assumption that it is migrants who are responsible for not integrating), and that wider society and long established (and not just ethnic minority) communities need to be part of any agenda for more active citizenship and involvement. For example, the disturbances that have driven the community cohesion agenda are not about new migrants at all, but about relations between long settled, and predominantly English speaking, communities.

### **STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY?**

At one level it is clear that the government has a commitment 'to develop a successful multicultural society'. Whilst diversity can pose significant challenges and dilemmas, such as how to reconcile the needs of a mainstream secular society with the needs of communities whose primary indicator of identity is faith, the British government does not see such conflicting views and demands as insurmountable, or necessarily inimical to society as a whole. The title of the Home Office consultation document, 'Strength in Diversity', further reinforces and reaffirms its pluralist stance.

Echoing a 1960s predecessor's famous definition of integration (Roy Jenkins) the current Home Secretary also made the British government's formal position clear in a recent

speech to the IPPR where he said 'Integration in Britain does not mean assimilation into a common culture so that original identities are lost. Our approach is pragmatic, based on common sense, allowing people to express their identity within a common framework of rights and responsibilities'. He went on to say 'we have no intention of banning the expression of identity through religious symbols in public institutions like schools, as they have in France. As Home Secretary, I am proud to see the adaptation of uniforms in the police service to allow people to wear Sikh turbans or Muslim hijabs. As Education Secretary, I was proud to allow equal entry of Muslim schools into the state system as with schools for other faiths and denominations'.

The Home Office consultation document 'Strength in Diversity' asks how we can shape and promote the shared values that underpin citizenship, and suggests that citizenship will need to promote wider ownership of these common values and a shared sense of belonging. It implicitly supports the definition of what it means to be British by the Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group chaired by Professor Sir Bernard Crick, which stated quite unambiguously that: "To be British seems to us to mean that we respect the laws, the democratic political structures, and give our allegiance to the state (as commonly symbolised in the Crown) in return for its protection. To be British is to respect those over-arching specific institutions, values and beliefs that bind us all, the different nations and cultures together in peace and in a legal order. For we are all subject to the laws of the land including Human Rights and Equality legislation, and so our diversities of practice must adhere to these legal frameworks. To be British does not mean assimilation into a common culture so that original identities are lost. Assimilation to such a degree has not, after all, happened for most people in Wales and Scotland, nor historically for Irish and Jews or even for smaller communities such as the Poles who once fled from persecution. There is no reason why loss of a distinctive identity should occur to immigrants from the new Commonwealth or from elsewhere."

The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, took this further in his recent Speech to the British Council where, in a re-examination of the roots of Britishness, he identified six values that run as a 'golden thread' through British history. He sees these as being liberty (including tolerance for minorities and restriction on arbitrary state power), civic duty, fair play, adaptability, creativity and inventiveness and an outward looking internationalism. He recognises that there is also a more substantive issue about the importance of integration set against respect for diversity, and states that because a multiethnic Britain should never ever have justified a crude multiculturalism where all values became relative, the common values that we all share should be reflected in practical measures such as encouraging the use of the English lan-

guage. However, he goes on to say that upholding British values summons us to do far more to tackle discrimination and promote inclusion and that there should now be a greater focus on driving up the educational attainment of pupils from ethnic minorities and a more comprehensive New Deal effort to tackle unacceptably high unemployment in areas of high ethnic minority populations.

Nevertheless, there is a growing fear in black and minority ethnic communities that in terms of acceptance and tolerance, the British government is backtracking and succumbing to more reactionary and assimilationist forces operating across Europe and in the UK. In contrast to the clear policy positions set out in official documents and speeches, the political responses to press and media sensationalism and the fears of some parts of the public, are muted at best. The debate is also notable for the interweaving of migration, anti-terrorism and crime issues in a way that destabilises relationships across all communities, settled or new. The lack of voice of ethnic minorities themselves in the debate (Trevor Phillips excepted), and the climate of fear being generated is evident within minority communities.

#### MULTICULTURALISM REASSESSED

While a debate about the nature of Britishness and what constitutes 'core' British values is to be welcomed, there is a danger that government will misunderstand what is at stake in the argument over multiculturalism, and the nature of the challenges it now faces.

In common parlance, the push for multiculturalisation has become confused with, and often limited to, a multi-racialisation agenda, with concerns now being expressed that acceptance of ethnic minorities in our midst implies all / any values are equal (a moral relativism) and a fear that 'anything goes'. In fact, the multiculturalisation vision was deeply value-laden and has been driven by a concern for all to be able to contribute for the benefit of society, unhindered by unwarranted social differentiation that marks specific peoples out for unfair discrimination. Contrary to the commonly held view that multiculturalism leads to segregation and separate development, in fact its primary aim is to strengthen bonds between people from different backgrounds. *It is an integrating - not divisive - force.*

Secondly, the multicultural vision has never been limited to concerns about race. Rather it recognised the multiple cultures that make up a healthy society, and aimed to break down all social differentiators that form the basis of discrimination and exclusion. These included not just race, but also gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and, perhaps most critically of all, class. Multiculturalists have long recognised that equalities measures that were perceived as targeting some of these specific groups and

ignoring the disadvantage and discrimination faced by others, for example white working class communities, would be a recipe for tension and conflict.

Thirdly, multiculturalists recognised from the outset that discrimination was dynamic and would evolve and change in response to wider events and social changes. While government is struggling to make sense of the links between racism, faith and ethnicity, multiculturalists recognise that 'old' racism, based on biological notions of difference, is being replaced by a new 'ethnicism', a pernicious form of discrimination that can be based on a wider range of social differentiators, including place of origin exhibited in hostility towards migrants from Eastern Europe, and faith, reflected in fear and hostility towards people of Islamic faith. The strength of these new forms are visible in that they are being echoed by commentators who would see themselves as liberal in outlook.

Recognition of the new and emerging beliefs and forms of discrimination, ethnicism, present new challenges for government that cannot be responded to effectively on the basis of confused and outdated policies and strategies intended to deal with 'old' racism. It requires a return to fundamental principles that underpinned the multicultural vision for the UK and which is as relevant, if not more relevant, today as it was in the 1970s.

#### A PRINCIPLE CENTRED APPROACH

We would argue strongly that government needs to take a principle centred approach to the sensitive, emotive and highly contentious issues of cultural diversity and social cohesion. What might these principles be? We believe that any sustainable and effective approach needs to be;

- *Multiculturalist* in its true sense: focused on removing the unwarranted obstacles to all groups (whether race, gender, disability, age, disability, sexual orientation, disability or class background) contributing for the benefit of all.
- *Central* to government policy: recognising that it is impossible to modernise public services without simultaneously multiculturalising them, transforming their nature and meeting the diversity of needs. This is a precondition for effectiveness in public service delivery.
- *Reflective and setting out clear and achievable targets*: based on learning from the wide range of strategies and initiatives that have been attempted and the obstacles encountered. Government needs to be as rigorous on target setting in this area as it has been on other public service targets where visible progress is being made. To date departments have been relatively slow in opening up to wider influences, and in some areas, for example, ethnic minority recruitment into police and fire services, this threatens the very basis of modernising public serv-

ices and making them more effective and responsive to the UK population.

- *Holistic*: focusing not just on what needs to happen in marginalised groups and their interaction with other groups, but what needs to be done to build confidence and bring about change in the broader society.
- *Integrated*: recognising that progress has varied across departments of state and that differing approaches and policy conflict undermines the overall potential for impact.
- *Dynamic and alert*: being aware that patterns of discrimination are not fixed but will evolve over time, change shape, and that entirely new forms of social differentiation and discrimination can emerge. We can already see this in the move from increasingly unacceptable forms of 'old' racism (based on skin colour) to new forms of 'ethnicism' gaining a foothold, marking people, for example on grounds of faith, language and place of origin.
- *Grounded*: responding to the real felt concerns of marginalised groups and the wider society. For example, for some black and ethnic minority communities concerns about increasing hostility, violence and far right activity

are likely to take precedence over generalised exhortations to 'integrate', particularly if they have come together for safety as a result of historical experience. Similarly, some white communities may have real concerns and anxieties about identity and notions of what it means to be 'British' and 'English'. Government needs to be seen to also respond to their experience of marginalisation which is underpinned by direct class discrimination.

- *Broadly owned*: government cannot develop and implement a broad ranging strategy on its own. The development of strong partnerships with influencers, gatekeepers, community and voluntary organisations from all communities that goes beyond consultation is critical for success.

We believe that this approach offers the best prospect of both restoring some sanity to a heated but confused debate, and a way forward where all British peoples, irrespective of unwarranted and discriminatory social markers, can see a future for themselves in a multicultural Britain.

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