

# In praise of multiculturalism

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**Almost everyone now agrees that it has failed. Has it really?**



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SWEAR WORDS, like everything else, are subject to fashion. Since the London bombings of 2005, a new obscenity has entered the lexicon, alongside the anatomical and the blasphemous: multiculturalism. Once it connoted curry and the Notting Hill carnival; these days, when applied to British politicians or their policies, “multiculturalist” is almost as derogatory a term as “socialist” or “neocon”. Even more than they agree about most other things, the main political parties are united in their conviction that multiculturalism is a perniciously naive idea whose time has gone, or ought never to have come at all.

Last week, for example, David Cameron, the Tory leader, warned an unenraptured audience of Islamic leaders about the dangers of “cultural separatism” in Muslim communities. “The creed of multiculturalism,” he alleged—meaning, roughly, a combination of indulgence and subsidy for minorities and their institutions—had contributed to a “deliberate weakening of our collective identity”. Two Labour ministers, meanwhile, suggested the creation of an annual holiday to help cultivate a renewed sense of Britishness. A commission set up by the government last year, to advise on segregation and extremism, recommended this week that less money be spent on providing civic information in Urdu, Arabic and so on, and more on unicultural English lessons. The need to rethink Britishness for a post-multicultural age is a regular theme for Gordon Brown, the (Scottish) prime-minister-not-much-longer-in-waiting.

The shock of hearing a suicide-bomber's video testament delivered in a Yorkshire accent—hitherto more associated with cricket commentary than terrorism—spelled the end for multiculturalism. But even before the bombings the word was becoming a slur. Rioting by Asian youths across northern England in the summer of 2001 forced curry-house multiculturalists to confront the reality that government nonchalance had helped to engender. As well as the burned cars, they saw fossilised social mores and the angry alienation of second- and third-generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants, some of whom profess more allegiance to the global *umma* than to Britain.

All that is real, tragic and terrifying, and becomes more so with every blood-curdling terrorist plot that British police uncover. All the same, poor, deplored multiculturalism has been much less bad than its many detractors now claim.

There are three reasons why the legions of anti-multiculturalists are wrong. First, left to their own devices many immigrants to Britain have prospered. Indians and some other minorities do better than whites in schools. There are many types of British Muslims, and some of them are moving up and out. The 2005 bombers, it now seems, were shaped and motivated as much by strife within Muslim communities—fanatical Islamism serving as a perverse form of intergenerational rebellion—as by schisms between Muslims and wider British society. Nor have immigration and multiculturalism led to so very much restlessness among the natives. The nasty, if clownish, British National Party has occasionally picked up the odd council seat, but it is a piffling force compared with far-right outfits elsewhere in Europe.

Second, multiculturalism's detractors tend to concentrate on the easy targets. It is plainly true, for example, that Britain should anathemise egregious practices such as forced marriage or “honour killing”. That government commission and others are right to emphasise English lessons, especially for women, since an inability to speak it harms their children's prospects as well as their own. The commission is right again to imply that too much funding has historically and divisively been offered to community groups that cater to only one ethnicity or religion. (The commission also advocated better cultural preparation for new arrivals, for example to help them understand the British philosophy of queuing and thus avoid ruckuses at bus-stops and post offices.) But less tends to be said about what, in the end, are the most important determinants of segregation, namely housing and education. “Multicultural” policies—letting people, by and large, live and educate their children where they like—may have inadvertently created neighbourhoods and schools in which almost every face is the same colour. But as well as being illiberal, most of the alternatives would probably create more trouble and anger than they prevent.

## **Americans in glass houses**

Finally—and for all the disparaging talk about Londonistan, capital of Eurabia—other countries, including those where the disparagement of multiculturalism is sharpest, have less to teach Britain about integration than is often assumed. That is partly because they have failures too, and partly because their circumstances are too different to be

meaningfully compared. Mr Cameron talked admiringly about the American solidarity embodied in the pledge of allegiance and Mount Rushmore. Yet in Chicago and elsewhere, black Americans are more ghettoised than any minority is anywhere in Britain (they also intermarry less than blacks in Britain). Slavery, of course, makes black Americans a special case—but so are any number of British Muslims. Many are refugees; others are from families who migrated to the old imperial motherland from backward parts of Pakistan and Bangladesh, to work in British factories that subsequently closed. Many of their American counterparts may indeed stick the Stars and Stripes on their front lawn as devoutly as do other hyphenated Americans; but, apart from their faith, they may not have much in common with the Muslims of Burnley or Oldham.

The vogue for promoting a new, inclusive Britishness is well-intentioned, but probably doomed. National identities cannot be confected—and besides, the British already have one. Privacy and freedom are two of its nicer components, and multiculturalism, for all its failings, has been a fine expression of it.