

Does multiculturalism have a future?

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When people ask if multiculturalism has a future, the short answer is yes. But the question of how we secure that future is more complex than anyone imagined during the passage of the Race Relations Act 1976. At one level, multiculturalism is merely a statement of fact: many cultures living side by side. But minority groups also view multiculturalism as a bulwark against assimilation, a rejection of the cultural blancmange that inevitably discards their heritage in favour of pearly kings and queens.

Multiculturalism asserts the rights of minority groups to celebrate and maintain their own cultures and, more importantly, to access resources from a state historically riddled by institutional racism. Minority groups should view with fear and trepidation the backlash against multiculturalism, and the move away from identity politics. Or should they? In fact, a move away from identity politics may actually help some minority groups escape the segregated backwaters – or inner city sink estates – that confound attempts to achieve meaningful integration.

But moving away from identity politics requires a rethink of Britain’s approach to race over the last 30 years. During that time, people from ethnic minorities often found it helpful to identify themselves exclusively in terms of race or ethnicity. The British approach was largely successful insofar as ethnic minority groups, despite widespread racism, integrated more meaningfully than in most other European countries. And yet British multiculturalism is in desperate need of modernisation. It faces a sustained attack as mainstream white culture becomes more insecure, and as poverty among some minority groups, especially Muslims, becomes more entrenched.

So what might modern multiculturalism look like? It must change in two key respects. Firstly, it must recognise that our identities are more complex than

ever before. On a basic level, cultural complexity means that the traditional multicultural approach (epitomised by a community centre for each group) is no longer practical. Nor is it desirable. Today, government spends money on bringing communities together, not keeping them apart. This means that voluntary sector funding will move from single-identity groups to (wait for it) multicultural groups – organisations that bring people with different cultural identities together under one roof.

Secondly, modern multiculturalism must do more than actively ‘promote racial equality’, as required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act. It must also actively promote community cohesion. Some would argue that this is a get-out clause for public authorities who have yet to make good on the promises made when the legislation was passed in 2000. But this would make the best the enemy of the good.

We can’t put our heads in the sand and pretend that British multiculturalism doesn’t need modernising to reflect today’s realities. For example, marginalised young white men cannot be absent from our thinking about equality of opportunity and cultural identity, or tackling racial violence. What are we saying to them? Or does multiculturalism ignore mainstream culture? This would be foolish at a time when the latest Home Office figures show that nearly half the victims of racially-motivated murder are white. Celebrating minority identities cannot mean ignoring the majority. If it does, the majority will reason that multiculturalism is harmful to them, and this in turn harms minorities.

The outcome we all aspire to – the reason Labour governments put legislation in place – is that life opportunities are not governed by race or ethnicity, or any other facet of a person’s identity. The bottom line for multiculturalism has been, and will remain, promoting equality of opportunity. There is a growing recognition that Martin Luther King was right first time around: separate is never equal. Where multiculturalism has encouraged separatism, it must change. But where other government policies have encouraged separatism – for example, housing and schools admission policies – they too must change.

This requires a huge shift in thinking. When I first made a BBC documentary in 1998 raising the issue of ethnic segregation in schools and the need to consider ethnicity quotas (to keep a school population integrated rather than segregated), it was viewed as outlandish. Today, the need to integrate schoolchildren from different ethnic and religious backgrounds is seen as one of the most pressing problems in areas with high racial tensions. I recognise the difficulties associated with quotas, the frightening spectre of ‘bussing’ children, and the terror of

any politician at the prospect of interfering with the fiction of parental choice in school admissions. But the social problems associated with a generation of ethnically-segregated children are greater than all these other problems combined, and must be urgently addressed.

One solution is for neighbouring schools to integrate at a much more fundamental level when delivering curricular activity

(say through joint abilitystreaming of core subjects), rather than coming together for just one hour's citizenship education per week.

These are the sorts of solutions that a modern multicultural society must develop. We can celebrate whatever we want, from Chanuka to Eid, Christmas and pearly kings and queens. But we must do so within a society that promotes the integration of many cultures, not one that manages their separation.

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