

Multiculturalism under siege

By Andrew Pilkington

Sea change? The dominant discourse on race and ethnicity in Britain has undergone a significant shift in the last twelve years. The advent of a New Labour government in 1997 signalled a renewed concern with egalitarianism and for a short period promised to inaugurate a new era whereby Britain was at last prepared to take serious steps to combat racism and promote race equality.



Andrew Pilkington is Professor of Sociology at the University of Northampton. He has written extensively on ethnic diversity and discrimination in Britain for decades and recently published *Institutional Racism in the Academy: A Case Study* (Trenton Books, 2011).

In its first year of government, New Labour commissioned an official inquiry, chaired by a senior judge, Sir William Macpherson, into the police investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager, by five white youths in 1993. Although the primary focus of the inquiry was on the police, the report contended that major public institutions in Britain were infused by institutional racism.

The Macpherson report (1999) was at first widely accepted across the political spectrum and led, among other things, to a much more proactive approach to promoting race equality, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. The same year saw the publication of the Parekh Report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain, chaired by Lord Parekh. The report highlighted the importance of creating a society which struck a balance between the need to treat people equally, the need to respect differences and the need to maintain social cohesion, and which did this within a human rights framework.

What I have called the radical hour did not last long. The backlash, already evident in the media reaction to the Parekh report, has steadily gained strength. The concept of institutional racism has been cast into the dustbin and multiculturalism has been castigated rather than celebrated as concerns over Islamic terrorism and rising net migration have taken precedence over issues to do with racism. Fast forward to February 2011. Here is David Cameron, the Prime Minister, speaking in Munich:

"Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream...We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values. All this leaves some young Muslims feeling rootless. And the

search for something to belong to and believe in can lead them to extremist ideology [which in turn can lead to terrorism]... When a white person holds objectionable views - racism for example- we rightly condemn them but when equally unacceptable views or practices have come from someone who isn't white we've been too cautious, frankly too fearful, to stand up to them...This has led to the failure of some to confront the horrors of forced marriage."

This speech was heralded as a radical departure from the orthodoxy of previous post-war governments. This was reflected in the headlines of most British newspapers the day after his speech, suggesting that "the days of doing deals with Muslim extremists are over" (*the Daily Telegraph*) and that "it's time for muscular liberalism" (*The Times*).

A number of themes were evident in the newspaper coverage of the Munich speech: the failure of multiculturalism; the danger of Islamic extremism; and the need to reassert Britishness. In most cases, a series of binary oppositions are repeated: us/them; British/Muslim; moderate/extremist. Most newspapers were in fact sympathetic to Cameron's speech, with the only critical editorial and commentary being in the *Guardian*. The coverage drew largely upon old themes evident for example in the media reaction to the Parekh report, such as the repeated refrain of political correctness gone mad and the identification of British Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism) or a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general).

But how radical was Cameron's speech on multiculturalism in itself? And how valid are the arguments marshalled against multiculturalism?

The first point that needs to be made is that the two arguments used by Cameron were ones used regularly in the previous decade to disparage multiculturalism. Multiculturalism divides people and entails political correctness were the common refrains of critics. These arguments have, however, been effectively rebutted. Multiculturalism cannot be seen as causing segregation since segregation predates the heyday of multiculturalism and is in fact declining. And the purported dominance of political correctness, and accompanying moral relativism that inhibits criticism of practices such as forced marriage, is clearly contradicted by the fact that people do

make moral judgements on such issues.

Cameron in short criticises a version of multiculturalism that advocates do not advance and indeed has not been institutionalised in policies. A useful distinction can be drawn here between a moderate and a radical conception of multiculturalism. A moderate conception sees policies that recognise and accommodate minority identities (for example being Muslim) as working in tandem with policies that promote a national identity that embraces these distinct identities (for example being British). A radical conception by contrast believes that it is unnecessary for policies that acknowledge different identities to be accompanied by others that seek to inculcate an overarching national identity. No country in the West has adopted radical multiculturalism. What is being attacked is thus a straw man.

"A discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society has been on the retreat since 2001 and in its stead a nationalist discourse (...) has been revived, highlighting community cohesion, emphasising Britishness and urging Muslims to integrate."

The media may have presented Cameron's speech as radical. But a discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society has been on the retreat since 2001 and in its stead a nationalist discourse from different sides of the political spectrum has been revived, a discourse which highlights community cohesion, emphasises Britishness

and urges Muslims to integrate.

This discourse is not unique to Britain and indeed Cameron's speech bore an uncanny resemblance to an earlier speech by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel in October, 2010 and a later speech by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy in February 2011. There seems little doubt that centre right politicians are trying to shore up support on the right at a time of declining popularity, increasing concern over immigration and the rising appeal of far right parties. Multiculturalism here is a helpful scapegoat. Attacking it resonates with an ill-defined unease with immigrants and Muslims.

In this short paper, I have been concerned to show how anxiety about Islamic terrorism (and increased net migration) has led to multiculturalism being attacked. The recent attacks epitomised by Cameron's speech, however, are neither new nor reflective of the actual conditions in Britain today. The danger of these attacks is that we cease to value diversity, do not engage Muslims in dialogue and that Britain's incorporation policies shift away from pluralism towards assimilationism and exclusion.