

Multiculturalism

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General articles

Bhikhu Parekh's personal preface to *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (Profile Books 2000) provided, and continues to provide, an excellent starting point for all discussions of multiculturalism in modern Britain. Six fundamental principles are succinctly summarised and a vision is presented of Britain developing both as a community of communities and as a community of citizens. Three values, Parekh argues, have to be held in balance: equality, diversity and cohesion.

<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/meb/reportIntroduction.html>.

On 20 March 2002 Bhikhu Parekh introduced a debate on multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism in the **House of Lords**. Several of the contributions to the debate, including the summing-up by **Lord Bassam** on behalf of the government as well as Lord Parekh's own speech, are well worth studying.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200102/ldhansrd/vo020320/text/20320-09.htm>

It is also worth reading the short academic essay on multiculturalism by **Ien Ang** in *New Keywords*, published by Basil Blackwell in 2005. The author is director of the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney. In this article she recalls that the term multiculturalism was coined in 1965 in Canada and she discusses the various meanings and nuances that it has acquired over the years.

<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/newkeywords/PDFs%20Sample%20Entries%20-%20New%20Keywords/Multiculturalism.pdf>

A polemical and up-to-date defence of multiculturalism – providing, that is, it is combined with a rigorous concern for race equality and with combating both overt and institutional racism – was provided by **Gary Younge** in *The Guardian* on 19 September.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1573144,00.html>

For articles about the recognition of Muslim identities in a multicultural society such as present-day Britain, [see below](#).

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Surveys and quizzes

The majority of British people think multiculturalism makes the country a better place, according to a **BBC poll** published on 10 August 2005. But almost a third think it 'threatens the British way of life' and just over half think 'parts of the country don't feel like Britain any more because of immigration.' The poll also suggested the 7 July bomb attacks had not led to an upsurge in intolerance. Just over a thousand people were surveyed and in addition there was a booster survey of two hundred British Muslims.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4137990.stm>

'Since the bombings of 7 July,' the **Observer** noted on 31 July, 'Britain has been convulsed by a debate about who we are. How can we celebrate our national diversity, while harbouring communities who would seek to murder us? Is 'Britishness' compatible with loyalty to a greater force? Should we be clearer about what it means to be a citizen, like Americans and

the French? A variety of Britons were asked for their views. Those interviewed included **Kwame Kwei Armah, Shami Chakrabarti, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Paxman and Iqbal Sacranie.**

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/focus/story/0,,1539660,00.html>

In November 2002 the **BBC** initiated a debate on multiculturalism by inviting people to send their thoughts on British identity. A wide-ranging selection of messages was placed on the BBC website.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk/2002/race/1993622.stm

More recently the **Daily Telegraph** did the same thing in partnership with YouGov. One of the many contributors wrote: 'Being British is about driving in a German car to an Irish pub for a Belgian beer, then travelling home, grabbing an Indian curry or a Turkish kebab on the way, to sit on Swedish furniture and watch American shows on a Japanese TV. And the most British thing of all? Suspicion of anything foreign.'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/08/02/nbrit02.xml>

In July 2005 the government published *Life in the United Kingdom*, a 150-page book for prospective British citizens. 'If you want the passport,' commented the **BBC**, 'you'll have to read the book and then answer 24 questions drawn from its contents. So let's see how well you do...' An irreverent and entertaining quiz was provided. Incidentally, the Home Office document contained some factual howlers – for example about when Mrs Thatcher came to power, and (in its opening paragraph) about the legal and constitutional differences between UK and Great Britain.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4099770.stm>

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Comment and discussion in summer 2005

'What happened?' 'What changed?' 'What now?' These were the key questions at a symposium organised in July 2005 by the think tank **Open Democracy** in association with the Muslim magazine **Q News**. 'The first generation of Muslims that came to this country,' said Humera Khan, one of the panellists, 'did not come with dysfunctional families and politicised views. I can remember, being someone who is from a migrant family in the early 60s, a passive community, keeping themselves to themselves. The question to ask is how this peaceful community can have children who are full of anger, hatred and susceptible to radical ideas.' Other contributions included:

'If British society views the kids that are involved in this project as separate to the rest of society, a lot of problems that they are trying to solve and the young people that they are trying to address will effectively be excluded from the rest of society.'

'I think the broad causes are known and they are a series of factors that have produced humiliation... Violence legitimised by religion wipes away the stain of humiliation.'

'I found my British identity by finding my faith.'

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/content/articles/2729/transcript.pdf>

The Conservative leader, **Michael Howard**, published 'Talk about the British dream' in *The Guardian* on 17 August. 'For years, he began, 'it has been taboo to question our society's record of integrating people of different colours, creeds and backgrounds. We were told that we had one of the finest records, bar the odd blip. That complacency was shattered by the London bombings...'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1550390,00.html>

'Multiculturalism has failed,' wrote **Michael Portillo** in *The Sunday Times* on 17 July. 'It is tempting in a tolerant society to want to see other people's point of view... We can understand that a devout Muslim might find western society licentious and irreligious. But the time for sophistry has passed. Our citizens and our society are under threat from those who believe that difference is a justification for terror and murder. Our country has the right to assert its values and require from everyone living here compliance with our laws and respect for our standards.'

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2088-1697223,00.html>

The same approach was taken by **Boris Johnson** in *The Daily Telegraph* on 4 August, though his column also paid generous tribute to successful multicultural policies at his child's primary school in Islington. 'We should teach English, and we should teach in English. We should teach British history. We should think again about the jilbab, with the signals of apartness that it sends out, and we should probably scrap faith schools. We should forbid the imams from preaching sermons in anything but English; because if you want to build a society where everyone feels included, and where everyone shares in the national story, we cannot continue with the multicultural apartheid....'

<http://opinion.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/08/04/do0401.xml>

An article by **Jonathan Freedland** in *The Guardian* on 4 August, entitled 'The Identity Vacuum' seemed to reach conclusions similar to those of Howard, Portillo and Johnson, but had considerably more depth: 'This, then, is the challenge. To forge a Britishness which welcomes difference - but which is not so loose, so nebulous, that it leaves a hole where national identity should be. We need that sense of kinship if we are to see each other as members of a shared society - not representatives of a faceless enemy.'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/story/0,16132,1562411,00.html>

Also, some of **Freedland's** articles in July and August on the London bombs contained reflections on multiculturalism. On 18 July his article began: 'It should be the most banal photograph in the world: four men entering a commuter railway station on a dreary Thursday morning. And yet you could stare at it for hours...' The article continued: 'The killers are not terrifying monsters, but the kind of lads you see on the streets of any British town any day of the week. They do not carry guns or knives - the things we have been conditioned to fear - but backpacks, like students or tourists. And this is not Baghdad or Basra but Luton, a town whose name could be a byword for nondescript averageness. The lesson of this picture is, change your nightmares - your fears are out of date. For scenes of bland normality, like this one, can contain devastation...'

http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1530753,00.html

Hanif Kureishi was a further contributor to the debate on multiculturalism. Amongst other things, he included a reflection on education: 'You can't ask people to give up their religion; that would be absurd. Religions may be illusions, but these are important and profound illusions. And they will modify as they come into contact with other ideas. This is what an effective multiculturalism is: not a superficial exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas - a conflict that is worth enduring, rather than a war. When it comes to teaching the young, we have the human duty to inform them that there is more than one book in the world, and more than one voice, and that if they wish to have their voices heard by others, everyone else is entitled to the same thing. These children deserve better than an education that comes from liberal guilt.'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1542189,00.html>

Henry Porter and **Matthew Parris**, writing respectively in *The Observer* (31 July) and *The Times* (27 August) used personal anecdotes about their own feelings in order to construct arguments against cultural diversity, anyway so far as Muslims, particularly Muslim women, are concerned.

'Sitting outside the pub in Tavistock Crescent,' wrote **Porter**, 'I found myself resenting the idea that one group of people had removed themselves from the values that I admire about Britain, regardless of the level of tolerance and generosity offered to people of all faiths and

backgrounds. Not only have some Muslims wilfully detached themselves from this great and ancient democracy, but they are actually opposed to it.

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/focus/story/0,,1539661,00.html>

Parris described seeing a Muslim woman in a public area in Sydney: ‘...The full veil covered her face so that only her eyes were visible... I was surprised by my reaction ...But my response was immediate, and reflexive. I thought: “This is completely unacceptable.” I did not (and do not) mean “unacceptable” objectively — anywhere in the world or at any time in history. I meant here, now, in Sydney; or in any 21st-century Western country whose history, outlook and ways of life are rooted in European thought.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1065-1752017,00.html>

Polly Toynbee wrote trenchantly and vehemently against all religion and against, as she saw it, attitudes of appeasement of religion by politicians: ‘All the state can do is hold on to secular values. It can encourage the moderate but it must not appease religion. The constitutional absurdity of an established church once seemed an irrelevance, but now it obliges similar privileges to all other faiths. There is still time - it may take a nonreligious leader - to stop this madness and separate the state and its schools from all religion. It won't stop the bombing now but at least it would not encourage continued school segregation for generations to come. And it might clear the air of the clouds of hypocrisy, twisted thinking and circumlocution whenever a politician mentions religion.’

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,1534015,00.html>

An academic comment on some of the writings by journalists and politicians was provided by **Roger Hewitt**, based at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of London. Writing in *The Independent* on 4 August he said: ‘What is perhaps more surprising than the actions of the few is the fundamental stability of community relations. It seems, in fact, that far from being about to crumble, our multicultural society has come to develop strong roots. The need for over-arching "isms" in some kind of charter for living together appears to have withered away. We are left, despite the tragedies and confusion, with the more normal burden of getting by, being accommodating to one other and to new groups, to transformations and all the social and cultural fluidity that London especially, but not uniquely, has come to embody...’

<http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/article303452.ece>

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