Dreaming of a Multicultural One Nation – the future of immigration

Review of ***The British Dream: successes and failures of post-war immigration*** *by David Goodhart, Atlantic Books 2013, 381 pp, £20*

David Goodhart hopes there will be a Labour government, or a Labour-led coalition, from 2015 onwards. He himself belongs, he says, to the 'political tribe of north London liberals' and is 'a journalist of leftish sympathies'. His subject-matter in this book is immigration policy, and the extent to which Britain can be a multicultural One Nation.

It is possible to imagine Britain, Goodhart warns, 'little by little becoming a less civil, ever more unequal and ethnically divided country — as harsh and violent as the United States'. In such a Britain, he imagines, the welfare state will have largely withered away, for white British people will be increasingly unwilling to pay taxes to support people who belong to (one of Goodhart's favourite phrases) 'visible minorities'. He sees his book as a wake-up call to prevent such a dystopia.

The book is addressed to Labour and Lib Dem opinion leaders; to senior managers and civil servants who work with and advise elected politicians in the delivery of public services; and to activists and campaigners in the voluntary sector. It is a work of polemical journalism and reportage, not of scholarship, and has strengths and weaknesses accordingly.

The strengths are that there are many anecdotes and striking phrases, and there's relatively little jargon. The weaknesses are that over-simplification is commoner than thoughtful and tentative nuance, and that too many facts and quotations are left unreferenced and therefore uncheckable.

Although aimed essentially at the centre left of the political spectrum, where it has been well received by, for example, Jon Cruddas in the New Statesman, and where it chimes well with Labour's One Nation rhetoric, the book is likely to be read also, and with an even warmer welcome, on the centre right. Its influence could be substantial. It could also, alas, be deeply pernicious, for some of its good ideas are poorly and unhelpfully expressed and there are several ideas that are not good at all, but highly dubious. It is the ill-expressed and dubious ideas which are most likely to be attended to in the months and years ahead.

The book starts with a lengthy list of acknowledgements – well over 200 individuals are named as having helped the author in his travels and conversations. Presumably some of these friends and contacts read and commented on drafts of parts of the book, and

maybe some of them even read and reviewed the manuscript as a whole. There is no reference, however, to such assistance, and there are signs that the manuscript was not in fact checked by people who could have helped remove errors and inconsistencies, and could have challenged the more dubious claims and generalisations.

For example, anyone with a reasonable degree of knowledge of the book's subject-matter would have pointed out that Trevor Phillips was previously chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, not of something called the Equalities Commission; that the Border Agency is the correct name of what Goodhart calls the Borders Agency; that the Racial and Religious Hatred Act is the correct title of a relevant piece of legislation in 2006; and that the word Islamophobia was not coined by the Runnymede Trust.

If someone had read the text as a whole they would have pointed out inconsistencies such as the claim in one chapter that school students of Bangladeshi heritage are failing to make progress in the education system but the mention in another that such students now have achievements higher than the national average for all students. (The truth is that indeed children young people of Bangladeshi heritage now have impressively good results in the education system, particularly in boroughs such as Tower Hamlets in east London.).

Factual errors and inconsistencies such as these are serious in that they raise doubts about the book's general soundness and reliability. Pointing them out, however, risks seeming or being merely pedantic and petty. It is the book's essential arguments, and unresolved contradictions within them, that need close consideration, not its incidental details.

The book's valuable features include its insistence that issues of race and immigration should be rationally not emotively discussed, and that discussions must centrally include narratives, understandings and dreams about national identity and national history, and concepts of imagined community and emotional citizenship, as distinct from citizenship that is merely formal or legal. Within this context Goodhart refers from time to time to Danny Boyle's pageant at the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games as an iconic and vivid illustration of what the concept of One Nation can mean in practice. 'When a country is changing very fast,' he says, 'it needs stories to reassure and guide it', stories which are 'about connecting majority to minority and old to new'.

The book's pernicious features include its caricatures of multiculturalism, and of thinkers such as Bhikhu Parekh and Tariq Modood who have devoted their careers to thinking in depth about how multicultural societies such as Britain have developed, and how they are likely to shape out in the future; its very sketchy depictions, at best, of the importance of law and legislation; its embracing, in effect, of a Daily Express view of British Islam and British Muslims; its cavalier endorsement of the view that 'humans are group-based primates who favour their own and extend trust to outsiders with caution'; its insufficient attention to the global and international context and to relevant issues of gender and social class; and its disinclination to consider the continuing influence of racisms in their various forms (behavioural/attitudinal; colour/cultural; personal/institutional; crude/subtle; street/dinner-table).

Goodhart ends his book with an imagined history – 'a British dream' – of the next 20 years. The details in this are deliberately and provocatively far-fetched but are nevertheless challenging and engaging as symbols, and as triggers for reflection and deliberation.

They include the provision of a DVD of Danny Boyle's ceremony for all new citizens; the creation of a new immigration and integration department in central government which will be the first choice for fast stream graduates entering the civil service; re-definitions of immigration statistics to enable the higher education sector to expand very considerably with hundreds of thousands of foreign students each year; the creation (paid for by scrapping Trident modernisation) of a six-month compulsory citizenship service programme to be completed by all young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five; the introduction of a living wage for all; and the election of a prime minister who is both Tory and black.

The dream, yes, of a member of 'the political tribe of north London liberals'! For some of the rest of us, though, particularly in view of the discussion by which the dream has been introduced, it has the elements of a nightmare.

This review by Robin Richardson was published on the Left Central Blog in summer 2013.