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Beyond the radical hour: The changing discourse on race and ethnicity in Britain

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The dominant discourse on race and ethnicity in Britain has undergone a significant shift in the last decade. 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. 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 suggested that all major organisations in British society were characterised by institutional racism. [The Macpherson report \(1999\)](#), and its charge that major organisations were infused by institutional racism, 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, a major report of an independent commission on the future of multi-ethnic Britain chaired by Lord Parekh, a report which highlighted the importance of creating a multicultural 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 argued that this needed to be done within a human rights framework ([Parekh, 2000](#)).

While there were dissenting voices, throughout 1999 and much of 2000, the dominant discourse was a progressive one. There was an explicit commitment to egalitarianism, a genuine concern to combat racism, an espousal of multiculturalism and a concern to create a more inclusive representation of the nation. What I have called the radical hour did not, however, last long ([Pilkington, 2008](#)).

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 from February 1999, when the Macpherson report was published and its recommendations fully accepted by the government, 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' ([Cameron, 2011](#)).

Here I wish briefly to explore two questions. How radical was Cameron's position on multiculturalism? And how valid are the arguments marshalled against multiculturalism?

Cameron's speech was represented as a radical intervention, but the two main arguments used by Cameron were ones used regularly in the previous decade to disparage multiculturalism. The claim that multiculturalism divides people and entails political correctness was the common refrain of critics ([Pilkington, 2008](#)).

The co-ordinated attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 helped to consolidate an emerging discourse, evident earlier in the official response to the Northern riots in 2001, which saw institutional racism as less significant than the threat of Muslim disorder/terrorism and identified the central issue as that of cultural integration. If the responses to terrorism and disorder in 2001 signalled a de-prioritisation of equality as a central policy objective, mounting attacks on multiculturalism since that time indicate that diversity is no longer something to be celebrated. By the mid 2000s, it was already common to read or hear that the cultural separatism and self-segregation of Muslim migrants represented a challenge to Britishness and that a "politically correct" multiculturalism had fostered fragmentation rather than integration ([Modood, 2007](#)).

The arguments mounted by critics in the 2000s and repeated by Cameron in the present decade have been effectively rebutted. Multiculturalism cannot seriously 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 are not reluctant to make moral judgements ([Parekh, 2000](#); [Pilkington, 2008](#)). What is more, the one relatively new argument, notably that multiculturalism is in some way responsible for Islamic radicalism (and in turn terrorism) is unsubstantiated since the latter can also be found in France which has expressly rejected multiculturalism.

Contrary to Cameron, I concur with Modood ([Modood, 2007](#)) when he argues in favour of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism for Modood is a form of integration. It entails changes on the part of established institutions as well as minority groups in a process of mutual accommodation. What is crucial in the current context is that British Muslims are represented in the public sphere, that there is

genuine dialogue, that pragmatic and mutual adjustments are made and that over time we move towards a situation where, irrespective of difference, people experience equal respect.

There is little doubt that a discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society is on the retreat and in its stead a nationalist discourse from different sides of the political spectrum has been revived, a discourse which emphasises Britishness, highlights community cohesion 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 comprises a free floating signifier, signalling unease with immigrants and Muslims.

In this short article, I have been concerned to show how anxiety about Islamic terrorism (and increased net migration) has led to changes in the dominant discourse on race and ethnicity in the last decade with multiculturalism being attacked. The recent attacks epitomised by Cameron's speech, however, draw on old arguments and attack a straw man. The danger of these attacks is that we cease to value diversity, do not engage Muslims in dialogue and Britain's incorporation policies shift away from pluralism towards assimilationism and differential exclusion.