

# The price of multiculturalism

*What the responses to the killing of Anthony Walker in Liverpool and the failed bombings in London reveal about contemporary Britain.*

by Michael Fitzpatrick

**The universal presumption of the police and the media is that Anthony Walker - the 18-year-old black man who died after being attacked with an axe at a Liverpool bus stop last Friday - was the victim of a racist murderer.**

Though there are other plausible explanations for the tragic death of a young man in a city with a reputation for violent crime, none fits the script that was ready to hand to explain an event about which there is still little reliable information. The familiar script is that Walker's death confirms that Britain is in the grip of a wave of race (and faith) hatred, one that predates, but has been exacerbated by, the recent London bombings. The prevailing consensus is that dealing with this onslaught on Britain's ethnic and religious minorities requires a major programme of legislative and police action, together with wider interventions from political, religious, educational and community leaders.

It is striking that a similar incident on the same evening in London, in which another young man was fatally stabbed on a bus, merited little media attention (as the victim was white and the attacker black, this did not fit the script) (1). It is also striking that, whereas several authorities have expressed concerns that damning media reports on some of the alleged London bombers now in custody might prejudice court proceedings, no such concerns were voiced about those who have subsequently been charged over the killing of Anthony Walker in Liverpool.

If we look at the transformation in the role of concepts of racism and anti-racism in British society we may gain some insight into these contrasting responses to recent violent incidents.

## **The transformation of race**

More than 20 years ago, I was involved in Workers Against Racism, a group that organised resistance against racist attacks in East London and elsewhere (2). We also campaigned against immigration legislation that provided a framework for racist discrimination in the operation of the police and criminal justice system, the labour market and the provision of public services. This framework was supported by all the major political parties and institutions of British society, sustaining a climate of racism in which individual prejudices against black people enjoyed broad official approval (even if some manifestations of these prejudices, such as the activities of fascist organisations, were considered excessive).

While the mainstream denied or ignored racism and its consequences, anti-racism was the preserve of what was regarded as an extreme left fringe (though some anti-racist postures were subsequently adopted by opportunist politicians, notably in local government and particularly in London).

Today, anti-racism has been installed as one of the central themes of Britain under New Labour, with the support of all sections of the British establishment. When institutions as staid and conservative as the Football Association and the British Medical Association (representing areas of society with grim histories of prejudice and discrimination) both officially endorse anti-racist campaigns, this is a sure sign of a transformation of the place of race in British society.

It is true that the framework of racist immigration and nationality legislation remains in place, but the ascendancy of anti-racism has dramatically restricted the scope of racial discrimination in the day-to-day operation of society, notably in relation to employment and services. No doubt, personal prejudices against black people persist and may sometimes take an offensive or violent form. But the crucial change is that these prejudices no longer enjoy official sanction and hence have little systematic impact on the lives of black people.

As the Conservative Party discovered at the UK General Election in May, even a subliminal appeal to an assumed common heritage of prejudice ('Are you thinking what we're thinking?') is no longer effective. Racism has become redefined as a moral and psychological deficiency, requiring either firm policing or therapeutic correction. Whereas anti-racism is cool, modern, youthful, racism is ignorant, vulgar, old-fashioned. Once guaranteed mainstream approval, racism is now anathematised, a greater offence to contemporary sensibilities than even homophobia or sexism (concepts which have also made the transition from the margins to the mainstream).

Thus while the great Yorkshire cricketer Geoffrey Boycott has been rehabilitated as a commentator despite his conviction on charges of domestic violence, there is no way back for football pundit Ron Atkinson after his use of the N word about a black footballer last year (despite the testimonials of several black footballers to his honourable record as a manager).

### **The ideology of multiculturalism**

The triumph of anti-racism is one aspect of the consolidation of the wider ideology of multiculturalism over the past two decades. By the early 1990s it became clear that the traditional sources of cohesion in Britain were no longer adequate to provide a focus of unity for an increasingly fragmented and fractious society. John Major's pathetic evocation of warm beer and Norman Tebbit's cricket test only served to confirm the exhaustion of the traditional elite (confirmed by the subsequent collapse of the Conservative Party, one of its historic bulwarks).

By the end of 1990s, even the prospect of a spate of Second World War anniversaries and royal commemorations was insufficient to rekindle a spirit of national unity. Multiculturalism emerged to fill the gap: if British society could not sustain a unifying theme, then it could make a virtue of

necessity and attempt to celebrate its diversity and promote a vision of tolerance and harmony, even if this vision existed in some tension with reality. The dramatic success of London's 2012 Olympic bid, poignantly on the eve of the 7 July bombings in the capital, confirmed the appeal of Britain's new multiculturalism, at least to an international audience.

Multiculturalism flourished as an opportunist strategy to resolve the British establishment's crisis of legitimacy. It emerged out of the exhaustion of past traditions and, to some degree, required the repudiation of historic sources of national pride, notably the British Empire and the legacy of imperialism. Its advocates expressed a spirit of national self-abasement as they recalled the shameful legacies of slavery, conquest and war. But mainstream gestures of apology and shame had the effect of encouraging attitudes of anger and resentment among Britain's ethnic minorities. Instead of producing harmony, multiculturalism has nurtured hatred. There are a number of negative consequences of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism has encouraged the politicisation of identity in ethnic or religious terms. Earlier immigrant minorities, such as the Irish or the Jews, cleaved to their national and racial traditions in ways that were largely personal and private. They may have participated in public acts of worship but their ethnicity rarely took a political form. By contrast, the identity of being a Muslim has come to define many people in British society to the exclusion of all other characteristics.

The children of Irish or Jewish immigrants had some choice about whether to follow or reject their parents' allegiances, matters which undoubtedly caused much family strife, but did not become political issues. By contrast, the children of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent or the Middle East have little option but to adopt the label of Muslim, which is thrust upon them by British society as much as by their own parents. If young Muslim women have embraced the hijab as a badge of identity in a way their mothers never did, as a public political symbol, this is more a result of the demands of British multiculturalism than a spontaneous assertion of allegiance.

Furthermore, the distinctive character of the identity promoted by multiculturalism is the identity of victim. In the world of multiculturalism, claims of victimhood provide the basis for recognition and status. Thus British Muslims proclaim a litany of persecutions and humiliations of Muslims around the world - in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Israel, in Bosnia - as the justification for their sense of grievance and their claim to a privileged position in the hierarchy of victimhood. (As a veteran campaigner against imperialist oppression in various parts of the world, I have opposed British interference in all these instances, though also in many others, irrespective of the faith of the victims.) But the cult of victimhood in Britain has merely a vicarious relationship with the sufferings of people in Iraq or Palestine - its real origins are to be found in Britain.

In the competitive struggle for prestige (and state resources) unleashed by multiculturalism, every minority must justify its claim by elevating its sufferings. Even established minorities feel obliged to enter the fray: while Muslims inflate every personal slight into a manifestation of Islamophobia, Jews cite the desecration of graves with swastikas as proof of a new wave of anti-Semitism.

While the opportunism of community leaders is shameful, it is important to recognise the origin of this problem in the British establishment itself. If Tony Blair feels obliged to apologise for the Irish famine or for Britain's role in the slave trade, it is only to be expected that some individuals will take advantage. The elevation of victimhood has a corrupting and infantilising effect: it encourages members of ethnic minorities to exaggerate and parade their sufferings as a means towards personal and communal advancement. The result is to unleash a sense of grievance that is unlikely to be assuaged by the meagre offerings of the state to the local mosque or temple.

Having nurtured resentments, multiculturalism then appeases demands for retribution against oppressors, real or imagined. When in 1989 Islamic fundamentalists issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie over his allegedly blasphemous book *The Satanic Verses*, the first instinct of the advocates of multiculturalism was to criticise Rushdie for his insensitivity towards the devout Muslims who took offence at his book. A similar response greeted the suspension of a play in Birmingham in December 2004 that upset local Sikh sensibilities. The proposed government legislation on the theme of 'faith-hatred' - the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill - seeks to give such censorship of views critical of religion the force of law.

If the law sanctions such repression in the cause of multicultural harmony, no doubt devotees of particular minority cultures will feel encouraged to take further action to enforce what they consider due respect to their particular tribal traditions. Further strife seems inevitable.

The potent forces unleashed by multiculturalism provide the context for the lurch towards narcissistic violence among second-generation immigrants in British society. Young people whose parents struggled to find a place in Britain find themselves both attracted and repelled by the society in which they have grown up. One of the suspects for the abortive 21 July bombings is reported to have been a devotee of gangsta rap; one of the 7 July bombers was a keen cricketer. Other suspects seem to have found themselves on the margins, unemployed, surviving on benefits, with records of petty crime.

In the past, second-generation immigrants often found new sources of identity through the trade unions, socialist and communist movements (which would have scarcely existed in Britain without Irish, Jewish and other immigrants). The disappearance of such sources of collective identification and aspiration is another factor that has encouraged the retreat of some young people into the mindset that culminated in the London bombings.

## **Notes**

(1) See Tara McCartney, 'I kept saying, "Help me, help me", but no one did', *Guardian*, 4 August, an account which ignores any racial aspect and focuses on the reluctance of fellow passengers to come to the aid of the victim.

(2) See Keith Tompson, *Under Siege: Racial Violence in Britain Today*, Penguin, 1988.

Fuente: Spiked Politcs. On Line. <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/0000000CACE2.htm>