

In defence of Britain's multiculturalism

Is multiculturalism really dead in the UK as the political, media and theological establishments seem to suggest?

Mehdi Hasan

Multiculturalism is dead in the UK. Or, at least, that seems to be the depressing verdict of senior members of the British political, media and even theological establishments. In recent years, they have lined up to deliver the last rites for multiculturalism, their condemnation and critiques cutting across party and ideological lines.

In 2005, Trevor Phillips, the then chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (and now of the Equality and Human Rights Commission), warned that multicultural Britain was "sleepwalking to segregation". His analysis was shared by the Archbishop of York - Ugandan-born John Sentamu - and the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, among others.

In January 2007, before he became prime minister, Gordon Brown similarly claimed that multiculturalism had "become an excuse for justifying separateness". He preferred to talk of "Britishness" and a "stronger sense of patriotic purpose". In a speech in Munich in February 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron decried "the doctrine of state multiculturalism", which he claimed had "encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream".

But guess what? None of these critics of multiculturalism seem to be able to offer a settled, coherent or accepted definition of that which they seek to pronounce dead. "The doctrine of state multiculturalism" has a certain ring to it, but what does it mean in practise? To what specific government policies, if any, does it refer? Cameron did not bother to elaborate in his speech. I would argue that British politicians and commentators have constructed a mythical version of multiculturalism - a "cardboard cut-out", to use a phrase employed by Cameron's Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg - and held it responsible for a raft of sins, from segregation and separateness to extremism and terrorism.

To associate multiculturalism with terrorism and violence is outrageous. In August 2005, six weeks after the July 7 terrorist attacks in London, *Le Monde* published an essay entitled "The British Multicultural Model in Crisis". That same month, Gilles Kepel, the French scholar of Islamism, claimed that the London bombers "were the children of Britain's own multicultural society". Their attack, he said, had "smashed" the "consensus" behind multiculturalism in Britain "to smithereens".

This is absurd. By any conventional criteria, the London bombers were well-integrated - their ringleader, Mohammad Siddique Khan, was a well-known and well-liked teaching assistant who eschewed an arranged marriage; Shehzad Tanweer, who detonated the Aldgate bomb, was an outstanding sportsman who had studied sports science in Leeds, and worked part-time at his father's fish-and-chip shop in the city. All four bombers spoke fluent English.

Is it true that British Muslims lack loyalty to their country? Lack patriotism? Don't want to integrate? No, no and no. According to a Gallup poll published in May 2009, British Muslims are more likely than non-Muslim Britons to say they identify strongly with the United Kingdom (77 per cent for the former, compared to 50 per cent for the latter). British Muslims are also more likely than non-Muslim Britons to want to live in mixed areas, among people of different backgrounds (67 per cent, against 58 per cent).

Yet the attacks on "the British multicultural model" continue and intensify - and Islamophobia is on the rise. Multicultural cities such as Bradford, in the north of England, with big Muslim populations, are denounced as failures, smeared as ghettoised societies. Structural factors such as racism, poverty and industrial decline are ignored.

But I for one can't help but be a defender of the UK's multiculturalism, of what the late Roy Jenkins, the Labour home secretary in the 1960s, defined "as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance". I am, after all, a product of multiculturalism; I consider myself to be British, English, Asian and Muslim. I see no contradiction between these ethnic, national, cultural and religious identities.

My father arrived in this country from India in January 1965, with a second-hand London A-Z stuffed in his jacket pocket and £3 in his wallet. A child of the empire, he was born in Hyderabad in 1938 and came to Britain to study and work. It was not long before my father became a proud British citizen of Indian origin; he has since had two British children and a British grandchild. He arrived, however, in a country struggling to accommodate and integrate its burgeoning immigrant communities. Racial and cultural discrimination was rife; bedsits and hostels prominently displayed signs saying: "No dogs, no blacks, no Irish". My father had dog mess posted through his letter box.

Britain has come a long way from the nativist and assimilationist 1960s; opinion polls suggest this is a nation at relative ease with its racial, religious and cultural diversity in all walks of life. It is now 2012, not 1965. In this age of globalisation and devolution, Britain cannot return to some fantasy of a halcyon mono-cultural past. In the 21st century, identity isn't finite; loyalties do not have to compete. And the truth is that a truly liberal society is a multicultural society.

This piece is based on a longer article that first appeared in the New Statesman magazine in April, 2011.

Fuente: Al Jazeera's English [en línea]

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/2012819528793336.html>