Beyond Multiculturalism

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is a Senior Researcher at the Foreign Policy Centre, a leading European think tank. She is a commentator on race, multiculturalism and human rights, writing regularly for the Guardian and the New Statesman, and broadcasting on radio and television.

ABSTRACT

The author contends that in order for Britain to create a new, more inclusive national identity it must move beyond old notions of multiculturalism. Social democrats must find better ways of binding people together, through education, politics, and culture. She suggests Britain has something important to learn from a country like Canada, which encourages equality, diversity, and citizenship rights. A common citizenship culture, based on a fundamental respect for human rights, is what will allow diverse nations to prosper.

Seeds have now been planted which may lead all Britons to grow into to a new sense of themselves as active participants in a collective enterprise. The Human Rights Act is in place; the idea of dynamic, self conscious individual responsibility and involvement is becoming ever more important; class deference is slowly fading away. As Jonathan Freedland, Tom Nairn[1] and other writers have argued, we need to be connected in more meaningful ways than through our existing institutions and emblems, which no longer work or resonate in the way they once did. The citizenship culture is upon us, and with the national landscape reshaping itself so dramatically, old multiculturalism – which I critique in detail in my pamphlet *After Multiculturalism*[2] – has come to the end of its useful life.

All societies and communities need to take stock periodically to assess whether existing cultural and political edifices are keeping up with the people and the evolving habitat. Nothing is forever. The most progressive ideas, which are right and appropriate at one historical moment can, in time, decay or become defensively self protective. The old British multicultural model has reached that point in 21st century Britain. It does not inspire the young and cannot embrace our most important social developments. It blocks the imagination needed to comprehend and respond to the changes described above. And it is disabling Britons of colour from seeing themselves as key shapers of the emerging citizenship culture.

Our world has been unimaginably transformed. Devolution has set into motion a process of fragmentation and reinvented nationalisms which will imperil the ideal of an open state with diversity at the heart of it. A Mori survey in the *Economist* revealed that only 18% of Scots and 27% of Welsh identified with Britain. In England the figure rose to 43%, but even here 41% described themselves as English and 49% felt an affinity with their regions above all else.

Too many groups – now also including the Scots, Welsh and English – have only a competitive agenda where they struggle against other communities for resources and power and for cultural superiority. They do not really see the world view of others. Where once people of colour were happy to call themselves Black, we are now Asian, Hindu, Caribbean, African, Muslim, Shia Muslims., Kashmiris, Khalistanis. This then gives us a platform for making demands which are not only positive, but also negative, against other groups. Liberals who were once happy to be multiculturalists (because it was easy) now have grave reservations about the project.

Our national identity is in a state of flux and is causing endless anxieties. It is not only the right which is afflicted. Recent furores have been engineered by the editor of the serious left of centre quarterly David Goodhart and others who argue that both national identity and the welfare state are threatened by "too much diversity." Reactionary politics are fashionable now.

The uncertainties produced by globalization are creating new insecurities across the planet. Global business enables the making of immeasurable economic gains, but also creates a loss of control, of self determination, cultural annihilation and greater global devastation and inequalities. As Andrew Marr puts it, "global power is inside the products that are inside our houses and inside the computer web that is now inside our heads."[3] In many cases the reaction to this bewildering opening up of our lives has been a greater (and more idealized) identification with old histories and smaller, neater identities.

Although enlightened political leaders are increasingly talking about diversity and our connectedness to Europe and globalized economies, there is much work to be done before a real confidence settles in again. Professor Stuart Hall agrees that this is a testing time for both old fashioned multiculturalism and post enlightenment liberalism, with both sides struggling with the enormous implications of their encounter: "I think one of the things that multiculturalism has done is to problematize some of the traditional political ideologies leaving unresolved the two major issues of our times – difference and equality."[4]

The concept of citizenship has the capacity to transcend these unresolved binary debates and to start putting into place binding values, even if these lead to some 'multicultural losses.' An expansive citizenship is indispensable in the modern world. Multiculturalism and anti-racism were essential during the Thatcher era to fight for cultural entitlements and racial justice, but both had unforeseen consequences which must now be addressed.

The discourse of multiculturalism and the reality of integration

We have made remarkable progress since Mr. Powell gave speeches about foaming rivers of blood, and this is most evident in assertive, multifarious cities like London and Manchester. But we do not yet have the optimistic and integrated society we all hoped for, in spite of thirty years of multicultural theology and practice. For many British citizens it is a self evident truth that Britain is now incontrovertibly a multicultural country. For others, this statement feels patently absurd. They argue that the majority of indigenous people have yet to personally meet a Black or Asian Briton; they live in their safe white enclaves, continuing long settled conventions. In demographic and geographical terms this is an indisputable truth. Two thirds of the British people still live within five miles of where they were born.

The glitzy, talked-up version of multiculturalism, although embraced by a good many Britons,[5] probably means even less to the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, officially among the poorest people in Britain today. Eighty percent of Pakistanis have incomes which are below half the national average. Consider the historian Linda Colley's scepticism:

> Politicians and pundits shape existing national identities. They rarely by themselves invent or sustain them. And while it may be valuable to try to identify core national values, it is in practice difficult to do so in a way that commands broad assent, unless you descend to uttering platitudes. This is particularly the case in a multi-national, multi-cultural, infinitely diverse polity like Britain.

She gives two examples of communities she lives close to – white people in rural Norfolk and Bangladeshis in the East end of London – who do not buy into the idea of a "fast paced, high octane multicultural Britain."[6] On the other hand, those who understand and advocate advanced and deeper multiculturalism, accept that this remains an ideal that is trying to flower and that will require determined effort to keep alive and spread.[7]

To most people, multiculturalism is something that black folk do and that is also entirely located in domestic urban politics and policies. In part this is because the entire discourse on multiculturalism in this country has been built around these assumptions, by both black *and* white Britons. In local areas throughout the country, people have been encouraged by grant giving bodies and local politicians to promote themselves as particular ethnic minorities. You get money for projects if you can show that as group A you are more 'excluded' than group B. Rarely do we get the encouragement of projects which foster a sense of common purpose or collective citizenry. Multicultural turf wars are everywhere.

In local areas throughout the country, people have been encouraged by grant giving bodies and local politicians to promote themselves as particular ethnic minorities. You get money for projects if you can show that as group A you are more 'excluded' than group B. Rarely do we get the encouragement of projects which foster a sense of common purpose or collective citizenry.

Anti-racist and multicultural policies

In 1997, the European Youth Survey published by MTV found that young white Britons (16-24 year olds) were the most racist in Europe. Thirty percent disagreed that all races and cultures are equal, and 26% said they would never date anyone who was of a different colour. Many of these people were born into multiculturalism.

At school in particular, white children have been alienated by the way multiculturalism was played out, in that all previously colonized societies were uncritically 'celebrated' and white civilizations implicitly accused and undermined. There is essential work to be done on providing a more relevant and inclusive curricula, but one does not redress past injustices by inflicting guilt on or diminishing those who are three generations removed from those who were responsible. Yet that is what has happened in far too many cases. As Roger Hewitt found when he studied young people in schools in South London where the black teenager Stephen Lawrence was murdered by racists: "White pupils, to some extent, seem like cultural ghosts, haunting as mere absences the richly decorated corridors of multicultural societies."[8]

But in an ironic twist, some of those who have most resented multiculturalism are now resorting to using the arguments perfected by multiculturalists. A very angry representative of the Countryside Alliance told Andrew Marr that his folk were the new despised minority in this 'multicultural' society.[9] In 1999, the Commission of Racial Equality had a number of complaints from English Britons about discrimination against them by the Scots, and a major investigation into racism in prisons launched in 2000 by the CRE includes a prison in Wales where English prisoners are complaining about discriminatory practices.

Ties That Bind

Social democrats have got to find a way of responding which allows for the tribal needs of all Britons and yet rejuvenates the national spirit – for a deeper attachment to the European Union and also a sense of global connectedness. All of this must be underpinned by ideals of human rights and justice. Gordon Brown best describes this when he says:

> My vision of Britain comes not from uniformity but from celebrating diversity, in other words a multi-ethnic and multinational Britain… outward looking, open, internationalist with a commitment to democracy and to tolerance.[10]

Progressive people need to promote the view that this island belongs to everyone, and that it is confident enough to progress devolution and feel empowered by the ever changing demographic profiles and cultural inflows which are a condition of modernity. It is only the unimaginative or the uncourageous who fear this. But for the centre to hold, there are binding values based on human rights and social responsibilities which apply to everyone.

Progressive people need to promote the view that this island belongs to everyone, and that it is confident enough to progress devolution and feel empowered by the ever changing demographic profiles and cultural inflows which are a condition of modernity. It is only the unimaginative or the uncourageous who fear this.

Those from societies which have unacceptably unequal gender roles will have to surrender these for the greater good. Those with an inflated view of their own greatness will have to do the same. No one group has more rights than any other group. We need to recognize that fundamentalist secular liberalism (based entirely on individual rights and freedoms) diminishes too much the need for individuals to belong and believe, and that social spaces must strive for integration and cross fertilisation of ideas which can be interrogated by others. This has serious implications. There can be no room for an established religion, nor any state funded denominational schools. Arts funding should foster artists from all backgrounds who are negotiating integration, cultural enlightenment, and growth, instead of going largely to 'establishment' art and then 'ethnic' art.

All this is best achieved if we become a nation of 'live' citizens. Linda Colley has usefully suggested that we should develop a Millennium Charter for Citizens or a Contract of Citizenship Rights. This would be a good starting point.

Stories to connect and to liberate

The integrity of this nation state is under severe pressure. The Internet, migration, e-commerce, and multinational co-operations may be exciting, but they destabilize customary boundaries and props. Britain is particularly susceptible because of the ubiquity of the English language and because all of the institutions and ideas which anchored this nation for so long – the monarchy, and the class structure for example – are losing their grip.[11] Will we just muddle through, a, state full of inchoate allegiances[12] or will we need something more substantial to reconnect us?

The old British identity is indeed passing away. Something modern is coming into being. It is a pity, therefore, that these modern ways of describing this cosmopolitan nation are constantly undermined by politicians, nervous not to offend middle England and the xenophobic popular press. You cannot be a cosmopolitan nation if the main narratives about your country dwell on threats (mostly imagined from the 'other'). You need other narratives, which reveal a different history and which emphasize connections.

This regenerative project has already been initiated in the United States by enlightened people. In his excellent book, *A Different Mirror,* Berkley Professor Ron Takaki asks: "Will Americans of diverse races and ethnicities be able to connect themselves to a larger narrative? Whatever happens we can be sure that much of our society's future will be influenced by which 'mirror' we see ourselves."[13] We need these ties that bind even more since we have no active written constitution, nor flag worshipping tendencies. Here the challenge is to bind and enthuse by fundamentally rethinking notions of heritage, belonging, and greatness. As the critic Maya Jaggi says: "Cultural heritage is widely seen as an embodiment of the spirit of a nation, part of the cement of a national identity for what is after all an 'imagined community.'"[14]

Instead of saying that Britain has become a multicultural country since the war and that we should learn to 'tolerate' difference, people need to take pride in the fact that Britain has always been a country ready to embrace difference throughout its history, albeit sometimes through control and acquisition. Thinking the unthinkable is an essential part of leadership. True globalization should mean the free movement of capital and goods, as well as skills and people. *The Economist* has consistently argued for more liberal and rational immigration policies. Europe, with its ageing population and low birth rates, will require the energy of more immigrants. It is important to release the British population from its own panic about hordes of immigrants. Their good life may depend on it.

Education

In schools, colleges, and universities, black and white children must be taught their connected yet diverse heritage. Equality, and only equality, can ensure such an

exchange. Both will need to go beyond these historical identities while remaining connected to them. They will also need to develop a deep affinity to Europe and to their diasporic communities, while learning ways of critically interrogating both. No black or Asian child should be left to detach themselves from Shakespeare and Tolstoy. No white child should be ignorant about C.L.R. James or Salman Rushdie, even if they never get around to reading their words. The complex histories of Empire and slavery (including the culpability of non-white people) should be a central part of the history syllabus. This kind of curriculum would foster integration and real dialogue.

Citizenship education is another tool which will prove to be ground breaking, although 'multiculturalists' are concerned that race is not given enough space and is submerged by other more broad based ideas. These are misguided concerns. This is the way to avoid the mistakes made by those promoting multicultural education in the seventies and eighties. It is about all the children. The emerging curriculum concentrates on values, participation, respect, and an open-minded approach to knowledge, which for too long has been deliberately restricted by the powerful and (ironically) the powerless.

The curriculum for the future would incorporate cosmopolitanism, 'Europeanism', local, ethnic, religious, and regional identities. It would teach Muslim children to see themselves as European Muslims and English children to see themselves as European Englanders. They would also be proud to be British, participants in a global economy, as well as international bodies and conventions, and upholders of common human rights.

Culture and politics

We need to completely rethink every sector to do with the arts. Social memory, which depends on the stories we tell about ourselves, should be re-cast.[15] Vast areas of success (the British Film industry, for example) remain stubbornly white. Any public funding of projects needs to ensure that cultural white heartlands change and modernize and emulate those who have already begun the process. The best example at present is the British Council, which is rapidly moving away from its image of an old Imperial institution to one that is dynamic, modern, diverse, and internationally valued.

A new strategy using the vocabulary of citizenship should be developed in this country. Political leaders should plan this strategy to include attitudes on Europe, diversity within the British Isles, and globalization. Joined up government means that the Foreign Office, Home Office, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Overseas Development, Cabinet Office, the Department of Education and Employment, The Department of Culture, Media and Sport can now work together and begin a process of change.

We can learn from other countries. In Canada, diversity is encouraged within strong boundaries of commonality. The project is steered by the federal government and the central principles of equality, diversity, and common values are reinforced by policies, speeches, and citizenship rights. The word includes indigenous people, the English and the French, and all other immigrants groups. Like the new South Africa, in spite of some resistance, the country proudly defines itself positively as a nation of various peoples.[16] Both countries have extended international responsibilities and take pride in this fact. The always threatening isolationism of the United States is rarely, if ever, seen in Canada.

Anti-discrimination

The only logical institutional framework to facilitate the changes described above is a Human Rights Commission. All citizens must be enabled to get redress if they are discriminated against. They include the young, the old, white, Asian, black, and other Britons, gay people, women, lone parents, those locked in poverty, people who follow the various religions, and so on. To have only some of these people protected while others suffer injustices is not only unfair, but extremely unwise, because it makes the unprotected victims resent the laws and institutions which exist to help particular groups.

A vibrant common citizenship culture which can foster genuine respect, equality, and consideration across various groups – including those who have arrived in recent years – and diversity together with tough anti-discrimination measures may just give us the kind of country for which so many of us yearn. The challenge is to persuade those who are determined to go back to the future, the cynics who see such ideas as vacuous and sentimental, and those who feel (understandably) that letting go of the multicultural agenda will only lead to losses which will never be recovered.

Notes

1 See J. Freedland, *Bring Home the Revolution,* Fourth Estate, 1998 and T. Nairn, After Britain, Granta, 2000.

2 Published by the Foreign Policy Centre, 2000.

3 *The Day Britain Died,* Profile, 2000, p. 134. This book accompanied the television series with the same title referred to below.

4 Interview with Yasmin Alibhai-Brown for *National Portrait,* Op. Cit.

5 For a good example of this view see *BritainTM: Renewing our identity,* Mark Leonard, Demos, 1997.

6 *Britishness in the 21st Century, Downing Street Millennium Lectures,* January 2000.

7 Professor Stuart Hall acknowledged this on *Radio 4, Desert Island Discs* on 13th February 2000.

8 *Routes of Racism, The Social Basis of Racist Action,* Roger Hewitt, Trentham books, p. 40.

9 BBC2, *The Day Britain Died,* BBC2, 2nd February 2000.

10 *The Guardian,* 12th November 1998.

11 See Chapter 1 of *Who Do We Think We Are?* Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Penguin, 2000.

12 *Britishness in the 21st Century,* Linda Colley, Downing St Millennium Lectures, 8th December 1999, p. 8. See www.number-10.gov.uk for full text.

13 *Little, Brown,* 1993, p. 17.

14 *The Guardian,* November 3rd 1999.

15 See my pamphlet *After Multiculturalism,* Foreign Policy Centre, 2000.

16 For details see *True Colours,* Institute for Public Policy Research, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 1999.