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From institutional racism to community cohesion and beyond

Professor Andrew Pilkington

Structure of presentation

- Britain is comparatively progressive on race and ethnicity

- Threats to such progressiveness from changes in the dominant discourse over the last decade

- A way forward

Britain in Europe

Britain has a better record than its European partners on race and ethnicity:

1 Race relations legislation is stronger and more embedded

2 There is greater sympathy to a multicultural approach in relation to ethnic diversity

The radical hour

- The advent of a New Labour government in 1997 signalled a renewed concern with egalitarianism
- The promotion of equality generally was again a central concern in policy formulation and, with the publication of the Macpherson report in 1999, race equality itself became fore-grounded.

The Macpherson report: A brief history

Origins: Murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993;

Racist murder not unique but this particular case resonated with people across society;

Stephen's parents search for justice eventually led to a judicial inquiry in 1997 chaired by Lord Macpherson;

The inquiry report was published in 1999 and its findings accepted by the government.

Macpherson report: Findings

- 'The conclusions to be drawn from all the evidence in connection with the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's racist murder are clear. There is no doubt but that there were fundamental errors. The investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers' (Macpherson, 1999: Para 46.1).

Macpherson report: Reception

- 'The inquiry's assessment is clear and sensible. In my view, any long-established, white-dominated organisation is liable to have procedures, practices and a culture that tend to exclude or to disadvantage non-white people. The report makes 70 wide-ranging recommendations, and I welcome them all' (Home Secretary, Hansard, 1999: Col 391).

The retreat

- The media hysteria in reaction to the Parekh report in 2000, signalling anxiety over who we are
- The reaction to the Northern riots in 2001, with its emphasis on community cohesion and the cultural integration of Muslims signalling a de-prioritisation of (racial) equality as a central policy objective
- Mounting attacks on multiculturalism from 2004, signalling that (ethnic) diversity is no longer to be celebrated

The latest onslaught: Cameron on multiculturalism

'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).

The criticisms of multiculturalism

1 It overemphasises differences between people and thus obscures communalities. It is in short divisive and thus corrosive of social cohesion.

2 It smacks of political correctness. Political correctness has stifled freedom of expression, inhibited open cross-cultural dialogue and made us reluctant to defend our values.

But they are attacking a straw man

- Proponents of multiculturalism highlight the need for respect for difference to be complemented by adherence to some common values and indeed no country in the West has adopted radical multiculturalism

- 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, including proponents of multiculturalism, are not reluctant to make moral judgements about these practices

- Cameron, like his predecessors, in short criticises a version of multiculturalism that advocates do not advance and indeed has not been institutionalised in policies.

We need more multiculturalism

It is crucial 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. What is especially damaging to multiculturalism are ideologies that represent the social world in terms of a simple binary opposition, the West/Islam whereby people are divided into two mutually exclusive categories, such as Islamophobia and Islamist ideologies (Modood, 2007).

But the critics are winning

- Since 2001 a discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society has been on the retreat and in its stead a nationalist discourse from different sides of the political spectrum has been revived, a discourse which highlights community cohesion and urges Muslims to integrate

- This discourse has become extremely powerful as others have become sidelined and has become institutionalised in public policies in a range of areas, including immigration and counter terrorism

The declining salience of race equality

- Equality Act 2010 extended general duties to different strands of equality, with EHRC having an enforcement role; BUT
- Specific duties, enshrined in statutory codes of practice, including the requirement to have in place an equality action plan and conduct EIAs have been replaced by the need, on which there is merely guidance, to publish limited data and set one or more objectives;
- At the same time, the red tape challenge and the cut in funding for the EHRC signal that 'racial equality is sliding down the government's agenda'

All is not lost: A way forward

- It is critical in my view that we ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between the principles of equality, diversity and social cohesion.
- We still live in a society in which racial discrimination is outlawed and a multicultural approach persists
- The shifting nature of racial discourse since 2001 is in my view threatening to undermine the gains we have made. We must not allow this to happen.