

Why Muslims reject British values

As ministers accuse Muslims of failing to integrate into mainstream society, a leading black intellectual and anti-racist campaigner calls on Tony Blair's government to face up to the reality of continued racism in Britain

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No country in Europe could be prouder of its multicultural experiment than Britain. But in the wake of the bombings of 7 July, multiculturalism has become the whipping boy. In a widely heralded speech, Margaret Hodge, the Work and Pensions Minister, blamed a surge in white, working-class racism on its black victims' failure to 'integrate', adding that 'promoting an understanding of other cultures should not involve abandoning British cultures and traditions', such as, apparently, school Easter bonnet parades, which she claimed have been eclipsed by Diwali celebrations. She was speaking to a debate which has moved so far to the right that the gains made by the black struggle are being jettisoned. Even the term 'coloured' instead of 'black' is up for rehabilitation. What's next? The replacement of 'racism' by 'colour bar'?

The road to assimilation, as opposed to integration, is already being cleared by scrubbing out multiculturalism. It is unlikely that Blair's Commission on Integration would have arrived at any other conclusion. But multiculturalism did not create segregation or ethnic enclaves. There is a failure to distinguish between the multicultural society as a fact of Britain's national make-up, arrived at through the anti-racist struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and multiculturalism as a cure-all for racial injustice, promoted by successive governments. The first envisages a culturally diverse society. The second - not really multiculturalism, but what I term 'culturalism' - engenders a culturally divisive society.

'Culturalism' or 'ethnicism' was Margaret Thatcher and Lord Scarman's answer to the racism that ignited Britain in 1981. In his investigations into the Brixton riots, Scarman located the cause of the riots in 'racial disadvantage', the cure being to pour money into ethnic projects and strengthening ethnic cultures.

As the institute of Race Relations pointed out at the time, the fight against racism cannot be reduced to a fight for culture; nor does learning about other people's cultures make racists less racist. Besides, the racism that needs to be contested is not personal prejudice, which has no authority behind it, but institutionalised racism, woven over centuries of colonialism and slavery into the structures of society and government. Scarman, however, denied its existence.

For 20 years, our analysis was largely ignored, until Sir William Macpherson unexpectedly gave it official currency with his 1999 report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence, finding institutional racism throughout the police force. But the notion was soon killed off again by the tabloids and the right.

Now Tony Blair's government seems determined to undermine the functioning diverse society that exists in large parts of Britain, on the basis of a segregation theory conjured up to explain the alienation of Muslim youth. This theory is not borne out by the facts.

First, in as far as the idea of segregation has validity, it applies not to the 7 July bombers, but to the generation of their parents, when it arose from racial segregation in public housing combined with the closure of the factories and foundries where they worked.

Second, all of the bombers were well integrated. Abdullah Jamal, formerly Germaine Lindsay, was married to a white, English woman; Mohammad Sidique Khan was a graduate who helped children of all religions; Shehzad Tanweer, also a graduate, often helped in his father's fish-and-chip shop; Hasib Hussain's parents sent him to Pakistan because they felt he had fallen into the English drinking- and-swearing culture.

Yet these young men were prepared to take their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens in the name of Islam. One reason, therefore, must be as Mohammad Sidique Khan stated it: the invasion and destruction of Iraq.

The more Blair denies his complicity in the destruction of Iraq and its part in the terrorist cause, the more he has to find other reasons for 7 July, and the more he engages in the politics of fear to erode democratic rights and civil liberties. Conversely, the sooner he owns up to the Iraq debacle, the sooner he will be able to address the most important element in apprehending terrorists: intelligence, intelligence, intelligence.

Instead, his government substitutes authoritarian measures. The September 2005 anti-terrorist bill was the fourth counterterrorist measure in five years, expanding the definition of terrorism and creating new terrorist offences. The Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001, hurried through parliament after 11 September, effectively abolished habeas corpus for foreign nationals. When the law lords ruled against this, the government merely replaced detention without trial with control orders. Now it has signalled it will extend them to British nationals, while the proposal to hold suspects for three months without trial is internment by another name.

Blair argues that 'the rules of the game have changed'. But the game is democracy, and one part of it cannot be changed without starting a chain reaction that damages the whole and debases British values.

And yet Blair exhorts ethnic minorities to live up to these British values. When our rulers ask us old colonials, new refugees, desperate asylum seekers - the sub-homines - to live up to British values, they are not referring to the values that they themselves exhibit, but those of the Enlightenment which they have betrayed. We, the sub-homines, in our struggle for basic human rights, not only uphold basic human values, but challenge Britain to return to them.

But the greatest threat to Western values arises from globalisation and market fundamentalism, changes that affect personal morality. For the market reduces even personal relationships to a cash nexus. And the transition from welfare to market state has made corporations rather than people the priority of government, which, in turn,

replaces moral values with commercial values, caring with indifference, altruism with selfishness, generosity with greed.

Once there were great movements, within countries and internationally, against poverty and exploitation and all kinds of injustice - against capitalism and imperialism. Today, there are no great working-class movements, no Third World revolutions. Hence, struggles against poverty, against dictatorships and against foreign occupation grow up around religion, 'the sigh of the oppressed', and take on the characteristics of millenarian movements. At the same time, they give rise to distortions such as fundamentalism.

Yet I am not without hope. I see Islamic fundamentalism as a passing phase, certainly in its intensity, because 7 July has also rebounded on the Muslim leadership and clergy in this country, demanding that they consider what is being done in the name of the Koran. And in the soul-searching that must follow, I see the first stirrings of the Islamic Reformation.

From that may follow a profound and desirable shift in the anti-imperialist struggles waged by the Muslim world: away from individual acts of terror, to mass, collective action that finds common cause with the anti-globalisation, anti-imperialist movement beyond it.

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Report finds 'economic apartheid'

Vikram Dodd

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Ethnic minorities suffer from economic "apartheid" in Britain, race watchdogs have claimed after a study found that two-thirds of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are living in poverty.

The study, by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, reveals that ethnic minorities suffer twice the level of poverty of white Britons, as discrimination and disadvantage blight their life chances.

Analysing official figures, the foundation found vast differences in child poverty among different groups. One in four white children live in poverty, compared with 74% of Bangladeshi children, 60% of Pakistani children, and 56% of black African children. Even for children of Indian parents, a group thought to be doing well economically, the rate was higher than for whites, with one in three growing up in households with incomes below the government's definition of poverty.

Kay Hampton, who chairs the Commission for Racial Equality, said: "This research tells us a shocking story, an invisible apartheid separating modern Britain. It is a sad truth that a baby born today will have their future dictated by their race, not their abilities or efforts."

Ethnic minority groups are also being overlooked for jobs and paid lower wages. Qualifications such as university degrees are no protection against job discrimination. According to the report, "all the evidence suggests that employer discrimination exists and plays a significant role experienced in the 'ethnic penalty' experienced by members of minority ethnic groups".

The study shows that Britons of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are stuck at the bottom of the wealth league table. While discrimination is one factor, others include the fact that few women have paid employment. Guy Palmer, one of the study's authors, said: "Where Pakistanis and Bangladeshis work one adult is earning - typically the man, supporting two adults and two to three children."

The study finds that many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are paid so little they are still classed as poor. "Income poverty" traps one in nine whites, but six out of 10 Bangladeshis, four out of 10 Pakistanis and three out of 10 Britons of black African heritage.

Colette Marshall, UK director of Save the Children, said poverty must be tackled with greater investment in benefits, better childcare to help mothers work, decent wages, and targeted investment in education.

Jim Murphy, minister for employment and welfare reform, said: "As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has acknowledged, the lives of ethnic minority groups have improved over the last decade. We have helped an additional quarter of a million people from ethnic minorities move into work over the last few years and the employment rate has risen to 60% in the last three years. But we are aware that more needs to be done."