

Multiculturalism is not a coherent policy that can be abandoned; David Cameron's speech reveals more continuity with Labour's 'British national identity' project than a radical departure from his 'liberal conservatism'

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David Cameron's recent speech in favour of a more 'muscular' liberalism, and rejecting state multiculturalism has drawn much criticism and support from all parts of the political spectrum. [Paul Kelly](#) finds that the rejection of multiculturalism by mainstream politicians has roots that go far back into the Labour government, and that Cameron's speech does not actually represent a significant policy shift.

In a [speech](#) given in Munich on Saturday February 5th David Cameron announced the failure of multiculturalism. Ordinarily this would not have made much of an impact, but it came on the day of the English Defence League's (EDL) [rally](#) in Luton. The prime minister was criticised for giving succour to an organisation that is little more than a bunch of Muslim-hating football hooligans. Conspiratorial interpretations of Cameron's speech see it signalling an endorsement of a the EDL's policy platform, while others believe it was just an example of poor political timing. Is there any more to be gleaned from his pronouncement on the future of multiculturalism?

Credit: World Economic Forum (CC)

Multiculturalism continues to obsess many on the right and it retains a few articulate defenders on the left, particularly Lord Parekh and Professor Tariq Modood, but does it represent a coherent policy agenda that could possibly be terminated? This is doubtful.

The protracted expiry of multiculturalism can be traced back to then-home secretary Jack Straw's ungracious shelving of Lord Parekh's [report](#) on the Future of a Multiethnic Britain in 2000. Since that time, those on the centre left have queued up to reject multiculturalism and announce its imminent demise whilst those on the right have continued to attribute to it all manner of evils.

In fact, multiculturalism was never a single policy agenda with a settled content or set of objectives. Much of what multiculturalists were keen on achieving was in fact accomplished under the last government's equalities agenda, and many of those who might have advocated multiculturalism have been only too happy to sacrifice the multiculturalism 'brand' in order to pursue policies about respect and inclusion under different guises. There are, of course, some brave voices, such as Modood, who [continue to argue](#) that multiculturalism remains a valuable weapon against the 'racism by other means' of Islamophobia and the EDL. Yet Modood's liberal brand of multiculturalism hardly fits the target of Cameron's speech and could very easily fit into Cameron's desired conception of British identity.

In many ways, Cameron is only following a path well-trodden by New Labour in its attempts to create what Gordon Brown would have described as a sense of British

national identity. The national identity project was popularised by Labour's [David Blunkett](#) under the influence of Bernard Crick, whose own views were in their turn influenced by the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott. It was then taken up by other New Labour politicians such as Hazel Blears and Jacqui Smith.

As implied in Cameron's speech much of the concern with national identity is driven by security concerns about disaffected and radicalised Muslim youth. Yet when one looks at strategies and policies designed to deal with radicalisation and to foster integration they look suspiciously like multiculturalism, which its exponents say has always been about inclusion and integration rather than separation and isolation. Britain does not have state multilingualism or 'first nations' and therefore it has never had advocates of the kind of self-government favoured in Canada and some other post colonial societies. Precisely what has failed and what is being abandoned is by no means clear.

So far Cameron's repudiation of multiculturalism is of a piece with his shadowing of the trajectory of Blairism, with its similar rejection of so-called multiculturalism in favour of integration and 'British national identity'. Does this mean that Cameron is also heading in the direction of becoming a hawk on security matters at the expense of his apparent liberalism? The prime minister has made much of his liberal credentials to the annoyance of some of his own party, going so far as to describe himself as a liberal conservative at a [speech](#) in Bath in 2007. For some of his own party there is a suspicion that he is more sympathetic to Orange Book Liberals like Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne than to many in his own party, especially when it comes to civil liberties.

Does Saturday's speech thus mark a reorientation of Cameronism and reveal that his true colours are less orange than some have thought? This is unlikely as the coalition agreement would not withstand a significant U-turn on the equalities agenda inherited from Labour or a return to more draconian stances on civil liberties, regardless of the compromises made over [control orders](#). Similarly, the coalition's scepticism about the role of the state and its Big Society ethos makes progress on cultivating national identity extraordinarily difficult- even if one could settle the more fundamental question of what that identity consists of.

In short, Cameron's repudiation of multiculturalism is unlikely to have major impact and it marks no significant change of policy. It is very likely that we will be hearing more speeches for many years to come announcing the failure of multiculturalism- from both Conservative and Labour politicians.