

Multiculturalism should be about bringing communities and individuals into relations of respect.

Is multiculturalism dead? Some commentators, including David Cameron have proclaimed that it is, and that we need a more 'muscular liberalism' in our society. However, [Tariq Modood](#) argues that multiculturalism is a fact of our society. Our challenge now is to ensure that we emphasise what we have in common, in order to remake a new, ongoing 'We' out of all the communities that make up the country.



Prime Minister Cameron's declaration, '[multiculturalism is dead](#)' has a long pedigree and by no means confined to the Right. Multiculturalism has always had its left as well as right wing critics, but the obituaries probably began in 1989 with Fay Weldon: 'Our attempt at multiculturalism has failed. The Rushdie Affair demonstrates it'. Whatever our views on the novel, *The Satanic Verses* crisis made clear that the minority-majority fault line was not going to be simply about colour-racism; and that multiculturalism could not be confined to 'steelbands, saris and samosas'. For some liberals that meant the end of their support as angry Muslims muscled in on something that was only meant for secular 'transgressives' like gays and black youth. Earlier street disturbances were hailed as 'right on' politics but a passionate religious identity was too 'multicultural' for many liberals.

Yet, actually political multiculturalism flourished as Labour came to accept ethno-religious communitarianism as it had previously accepted other assertive identity movements. Muslim faith schools, religious discrimination legislation, incitement to religious hatred, bringing Muslims into the networks of governance, including a religion question in the Census – all of these have happened well after the original 'death of multiculturalism', and some of them after 9/11 and 7/7 – two other events that were meant to have killed off multiculturalism. One of the very last acts of New Labour was the passing of the [Equality Act](#), which for the first time put the claims of the religion and belief strand on the same level as race. Initially having religious equality legislation because of an EU directive, Labour left office with legislation that went well beyond anything found in Europe (on race as well as a religion).

One of the reasons that multiculturalism does not seem to die despite having its last rites continually read out by successive government Ministers, like David Blunkett, Ruth Kelly and Hazel Blears, is that when you think about it there are very few policies at stake. This is clear from David Cameron's speech, which despite its emphatic rhetoric has very little policy content. Many people worry about residential segregation and inward looking communities. But these are not the result of policies and population distribution that could only be achieved by, to coin a phrase, [muscular illiberalism](#). Residential concentrations have resulted more from poverty, fear of racism, natural growth and 'white flight' than self-ghettoisation. Research shows that all minorities – including Muslims – want to live in mixed neighbourhoods and ghettos are created by those who move out. This is not 'state multiculturalism' and could only be reversed by state racial and religious quotas on where people could live. Unless by 'muscular liberalism' Cameron means that groups such as Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims are not to be included in the delegation of public responsibilities and resources that are the central idea of the Big Society.

It is individual or institutional choices, then, that create outcomes, multiculturalist or otherwise. Schools that choose their pupils, like faith schools, are less ethnically mixed than where pupils are allocated places by local authorities. The expansion of faith schools and indeed the [Big Society](#) concept in general in so far as it hands over resources and decision-making to neighbourhoods, communities, charities and organised religion should see the development not the decline of ethno-religious communitarianism.

Unlike Cameron, I call such state-community partnerships 'multiculturalism' and I am in favour of them, with certain conditions. One is that it must be within a context of robust individual rights. John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle': one person's freedom – whether in the name of multiculturalism or anti-multiculturalism – has to be limited when it is clear that others are being harmed. Muslim men demanding conformity from their womenfolk (eg., the wearing of modest dress) is one example where individual rights may be squashed. Legislatures forbidding Muslim women from wearing modest clothes of their choice is an even more egregious example.

Yet, society cannot be reduced to individuals and so integration must be about bringing new communities, and not just new individuals, into relations of equal respect. This means challenging racism and Islamophobia and so on, not by denying that there are groups in society but developing positive group identities and adapting customs and institutions that enable that.

Equally importantly, we have to talk up what we have in common. We cannot take for granted what we have in common but work hard to ensure all varieties of citizens see themselves in our shared conceptions of citizenship. Such citizenships are imaginatively shaped by our sense of country, about who we are, where we are coming from and where we are going – by our ‘national story’. An out of date story alienates the new post-immigration communities, who want to be written into the story – backwards as well as forward. So, multiculturalism is incomplete and one-sided without a continual remaking of national identity.

This is an aspect of multiculturalism that has been understated and so the inattentive assume that multiculturalism is all about emphasising difference and separatism. In fact its about creating a new, ongoing ‘We’ out of all the little, medium-sized and large platoons that make up the country.

In Britain we have made some progress on a number of fronts. In terms of everyday inter-racial and inter-ethnic mixing, cities like London are quite remarkable. Yet we have also made progress in relation to the communitarian and the national identity fronts. If this does not seem so in relation to the latter its because of Britain’s elusive, understated and misstated national identity. That goes back to the exigencies and contingencies of the Union and of running an Empire and certainly predates multiculturalism. Even today, [ethnic minorities are more likely to say they are British than white people](#). It is more white reticence than minority separatism that is an obstacle to an inclusive national identity and without overcoming this multicultural nation-building will be difficult.

Tariq Modood was a member of the [‘Future of Multiculturalism’](#) panel debate organised by Theos and hosted by the LSE Religion and Politics Forum on 20th October, 2001. On 1 November, 2011 he gives the Annual Lecture of the Centre for the Study of Migration, Queen Mary, University of London, entitled [‘Multiculturalism and Integration: struggling with confusions’](#). His work can be viewed [here](#).