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Opening remarks to Leeds Salon debate: Multiculturalism and its Discontents

Monday 5th October 2015

There are 3 Inter-related problems in assessing whether or not multiculturalism (MC) policies have had a negative impact:

- Stuart Hall's 'double meaning' of MC – lived multiculturalism is a separate reality to policy. All western countries becoming more diverse but not all have followed MC policies
- Britain's policy approach to MC has been closely connected to efforts to ensure legal and social equality for minority groups in the face of real racism and racial discrimination. This means that when political figures from across the spectrum criticise MC and blame it for social ills i.e. terrorism they (supposedly) mean MC policies but many people hear them say MC and ethnic diversity generally – this can have a deep and negative impact on both them individually and on social cohesion. MC is directly about people's feeling of equality and worth in society

- Britain IS one of the countries to adopt MC policies but these policies are not easy to identify – many have come from the bottom up as much as top down and top down policies have often been adapted locally. The idea that ‘race relations tsars’ have ordered these policies from above doesn’t fit with the reality of experience. Most of these policies have not been called MC – that was seen as a weak word for many years – and instead they’ve been called ‘anti-racism’ ‘equalities’ work, ‘integration, etc.

I firmly believe that the various MC policies adopted since the 1970s have made a positive contribution to British society. Perspectives that say they are not needed and did more harm than good risk re-writing history and glossing over the very significant and blatant racism of the era. I’m proud that I was an anti-racist activist, such as at Leeds United, and I’m also proud of my professional work around anti-racist education. Policies like ethnic monitoring have helped us to confront inequalities. However, the move towards community cohesion policies after the 2001 riots was partly about an

acknowledgement that those MC policies had a down side as well.

From the 1980s onwards national and local government put significant resources in to separate and specific ethnic communities - separate organisations, facilities and supposed 'needs' – example of Roundhay Road (and much more starkly in Dewsbury, etc.). These policies not only undermined multi-racial equality work but did harden separation and divides between communities. They too often made us think that our experiences were simply a product of our ethnicity. There were also clumsy and simplistic examples of anti-racist education that labelled and closed down young people's views, so I recognise some of Adrian's critique.

Community Cohesion has been controversial but I've produced evidence showing that cohesion still recognises distinct identities. However, what it does is focus much more on common experiences and values, and on having much more contact and dialogue across communities. It also works towards 'cooler' and more complex understandings of identity, including our aim – this is the only sustainable way forward in an increasingly super-diverse society We

have to acknowledge that too often 'parallel lives' are a reality in parts of the north.

MC policies are still vital but they have to adapt and work in support of making an increasingly diverse and fractured society work positively for all.

Paul Thomas