



European
University
Institute

ROBERT
SCHUMAN
CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED
STUDIES

ACCEPT
PLURALISM



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
European Research Area



Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

NEW KNOWLEDGE about The United Kingdom

This briefing note presents NEW KNOWLEDGE about the UK.
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

June 2013 – Issue 2013/16

ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE UK

The British Isles have seen a number of significant episodes of migration. Increasing levels of cultural diversity in the 20th century were in particular the result of persons arriving from the Empire/Commonwealth, who enjoyed free right of entry and residence till 1962. Despite this migration taking place primarily during the period 1950-1970, with significant family reunification going on until about the mid 1980s, these groups and their descendents are not unproblematically welcomed as co-nationals. Their acceptance in British society is still a live socio-political issue. It raises difficult challenges around how much acceptance should be granted as well as regarding the very meaning of toleration or of related concepts, such as acceptance, recognition and respect.

References to tolerance in British political debate contain an interesting tension between the present and the past. In line with considerable pride about the historical emergence of religious liberty on the British Isles, toleration is often prioritized as a core value of 'Britishness'. Recently, Prime Minister David Cameron reaffirmed this tradition while also suggesting that excesses had to be addressed: 'Hands-off tolerance has only served to reinforce the sense that not enough is shared'. Tolerance, he suggested, needs to become more active, muscular and hands-on.

In addition to cultural practices and political choices, it is important to consider symbolic negotiations of identity and difference and their significance for whether Britain can claim to be hospitable to the post-immigration diversity that it empirically contains. Such issues are complicated, yet by all accounts also facilitated, by the nested identifications that exist alongside Britishness and by the potential for its hyphenation with other identity markers. The identity politics of ethnic minority groups, whose sense of British identity – surveys show – often exceeds that of the majority, occurs against the background of ongoing transformations of such conceptions for all groups in society.

In this changing environment of uncertainty about identities and about how much and what kind of tolerance should be granted to minority claims, the ACCEPT PLURALISM project investigated in particular two important areas of debate: **education and political life**

- We examined **Muslim requests for educational accommodation;**
- We studied the **way in which Black history and the history of the slave trade is presented in secondary education;**
- Finally, we investigated the **participation of British Muslims in electoral politics.**

Evaluation of discourses and practices in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
Muslim requests for educational accommodation	Strengthened equality framework; however, limited reach of religious equality provisions	Requests by local actors usually granted on a case-by-case basis	Acknowledgment of ethnic diversity; however anxiety about 'too much diversity' and 'segregation', fundamentalism' and state funding of religion
Consideration of Black History in state schools	Some acknowledgment of the legacy of slavery in citizenship and history curricula	Scattered practices often depending on school's/teacher's initiatives	Progressive discourse, occasionally criticized for being self-congratulatory and complacent
Muslim/ethnic minority participation in electoral politics	Equality of participation safeguarded by law	Increasing levels of participation and representation; equal representation not fully achieved	Negative reference to 'identity politics' and to ethnic/religious identities when they play a political role

MUSLIM REQUESTS FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCOMMODATION

According to the 2011 Census, Muslims account for 4.8 per cent of the population of England and Wales, with significantly higher concentrations in many urban areas. The presence of significant numbers of Muslim pupils in British schools brings into focus disagreement over how religious identity claims and needs should be accommodated. Such disagreement was visible in 2007, in response to a booklet – *Towards greater understanding* – issued by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The booklet provided a collection of various best practices of how schools could meet the demands for religious accommodation from Muslim pupils and their parents. It caused considerable controversy and invited objection from various quarters.

The MCB, along with some parents and educationalists, suggests that certainty of culture and religion underpins educational attainment. Culture, religion and school should work together to instil values and aspirations which steer children towards educational success and protect them from influences that undermine this. If children develop a sense of cultural self-confidence, they will behave to a higher standard. Various critics responded that such requests – and the way in which they were made – might fuel resentment on the part of non-Muslim pupils. It was suggested that the guidance was divisive, posed a threat for how conservative notions of religious observance would be generalized and schools 'forced into acceptance and implementation by undue pressure being put on them by hard-line organisations such as the MCB'.

Evaluating this debate, we argue that such debates about important questions generally do not, and should not, lead to radical disagreement of the respect that is due to religious choices. The principles of British public education, as they have been historically developed, are consistent with this idea of respect. This respect is not necessarily respect *for particular religions*. It is underpinned by liberal standards of freedom of choice and religious freedoms and appreciation of the value of educational benefits of religion for the individuals and society at large.

BLACK HISTORY AND SLAVERY IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

In 2007, the City of Bristol organized a number of events and supported community initiatives to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

Representations of the local and national past became the focus of debates. The commemoration was not without trouble in a city that was marked by public memorials for its slave-trading ‘merchant venturers’. The question of how slavery should be ‘commemorated’, and more generally how ‘Black History’ should be taught and inform curricular priorities, thus provides insights into what toleration and acceptance mean in the context of symbolic re-negotiations of British national story.

Historical understandings may seem immutable, and the extent to which the legacy of colonial oppression and its significance for the presence of Black people in Bristol had been left unacknowledged is an example. The rupture of such understandings, their expansion or the simple sense that history is ‘up for grabs’ may be experienced as a form of empowerment and recognition.

The official impetus of the commemoration in Bristol and nationally can be seen to go some way beyond toleration and towards the acknowledgment that majority and minority understandings of history belong together or should be fused. Yet such insights remain controversial. When claims for public recognition and equal respect are rejected, the fallback position may not be toleration but intolerance and an outright rejection of more minimal positions of forbearance. This could be characterised as the ‘enough already’ position that was also present in the response by some to the commemoration in Bristol: concessions that in the past were seen to have gone too far are said to require a muscular assertion of majority claims and – since the two are seen to be linked – the rejection of minority perspectives.

MUSLIM & ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Immigrants to the United Kingdom, coming predominantly from Commonwealth countries, benefited from significant political rights upon arrival. Institutional obstacles and negative attitudes meant that formal routes into mainstream politics were less open. Beginning in the 1950s, initial mobilizations on an ethnic minority-basis were largely in response to local experiences of racial discrimination. The current competition among the three mainstream parties, Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, for ethnic minority votes is a comparatively newer phenomenon, since the Labour Party has historically been the main vehicle for post-immigration groups into formal British politics.

Despite new attention to ethnic minority voters as a result of this competition, there remain a number of questions over equitable representation and access. Political activists that highlight ethnic or religious identities tend to be portrayed as particularist, divisive or sectarian. The implication was, and to some extent still is, that in order to *be* representative and to address collective concerns, minority politicians and activists needed to make additional efforts. There is suspicion over their political agency such as when it focuses on minority concerns or proceeds on the basis of minority identities. While such conceptions have grown weaker over the last few decades, they remain in place in an environment where political representation and participation is evidently more challenging for minorities than it is for majority citizens.

Our study of the ways in which a number of Muslim advocacy organisations mobilized Muslim voters mobilised during the 2010 General Election show traces of this experience. Campaigns took place against the background of a wider picture of British ethnic minority politics where equitable representation and participation of ethnic minority citizens, despite some progress in recent years, has not been fully achieved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite some toxicity in the public debate about ethnic minority and, in particular, about Muslim claims for tolerance and respect, it is individual and institutional choices – not heated rhetoric –

that account for outcomes, multiculturalist or otherwise. The use of populist rhetoric in political debate obscures rather than illuminates important issues regarding the future of minority accommodation in Britain.

The portrayal of Muslim political advocacy as ‘sectarian’ and incompatible with an orientation towards the common good needs to be questioned. It is important that in particular the media seeks to include Muslim voices and Muslim actors in their reportage, so as to encourage a more accurate portrayal of the dynamic features of Muslim participation in mainstream politics.

The popular perception of Muslim political actors as ‘toxic’ is a form of stigmatisation that would be unacceptable if applied to other minorities. For mainstream politicians to go with such characterisations is damaging to inclusive politics. All political parties should develop better relationships with Muslim organizations, to reach out and encourage participation in a manner that would facilitate a conduit for the mainstream presence of Muslim actors

FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

Comprehensive Report: Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in the United Kingdom

By Jan Dobbernack, Tariq Modood & Nasar Meer (University of Bristol)

Download your copy from:

http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/23256/ACCEPT_WP5_2012-20_Country-synthesis-report_UK.pdf?sequence=3

Other relevant publications include:

2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

PROJECT IDENTITY

Acronym	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Authors	Tariq Modood and Jan Dobbernack (University of Bristol)
Web site	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding scheme	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution	2,600,230 Euro
Consortium	17 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies),
Scientific Coordinator	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Directorate General for Research and Innovation, European Commission