

The End of the Ideology of Multiculturalism in the United Kingdom

JOHN LAUGHLAND

This article deals with a recent and very surprising development in British politics. For many decades, multiculturalism has been a central tenet of political correctness on left and right. Initially a dogma of the Left, the Conservative Party also quickly adopted it. Famously, in 1968, the controversial politician, Enoch Powell, was sacked from the Conservative shadow cabinet by Edward Heath after warning of the dangers of mass immigration in a graphic speech. Ever since then, all major political parties have dealt very gently with the question of immigration, if at all, and they have never questioned either the wisdom of mass immigration or, more particularly, the possibility of integrating such large numbers of new arrivals into British society while continuing to promote the ideology of multiculturalism.

To illustrate the extent to which the ideology of multiculturalism was dominant, it is worth recalling the sad story of Ray Honeyford. A headmaster in Bradford, Honeyford published an article in *The Salisbury Review* in 1984, attacking not immigration as such but instead the ideology of multiculturalism. According to that ideology, new arrivals in Britain should be allowed and even encouraged to retain important parts of their cultural practices while at the same time enjoying the fruits of British citizenship. Ninety-five per cent of the pupils at Honeyford's school were from Asian families, but (unlike Enoch Powell) this was not what he wanted to complain about.

Instead, with a straightforwardly progressive faith in the power and importance of education, Honeyford complained about the fact that Asian pupils were habitually taken out of school by their parents for months at a time, in order to be sent to Pakistan. Their parents wanted these British-born children to be sent 'home' to imbibe Pakistani culture; Honeyford argued that such long interruptions in their schooling were bad for their education, and

that in any case it was wrong of the parents to regard British culture as something to be held at bay if they wanted to live in the country.

For making these remarks, and thereby questioning the totem of multiculturalism, Honeyford unleashed a storm of protest. He was vilified in the newspapers and by the then Muslim mayor of Bradford as a racist; he received death threats and had to live for a while under police protection; he was forced to resign, and he never taught again. This was in spite of the fact that he was particularly concerned about the effect of such multiculturalism on Muslim girls who, he felt, were disadvantaged by being prevented from gaining full access to the British educational system by their parents.

Another example to illustrate the same point: in 1990, the former cabinet minister Norman Tebbit made a characteristically humorous allusion to the problems which, he thought, multiculturalism caused. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, he asked ironically whether Britain's Asian felt loyalty to Britain or to the home country of their parents and grandparents. You could tell the problem, he said, when British Asians supported Pakistan at cricket against England: 'A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?' For this innocuous remark, Tebbit was also vilified and treated as a right-wing extremist.

Multiculturalism was therefore the official ideology of both the Labour and Conservative parties for many decades. It stood in marked contrast, at least in terms of rhetoric, to the attitude theoretically adopted towards immigration in France. Members of the liberal establishment in Britain typically reacted with shock and horror whenever steps were taken in France to maintain the integrity of the Republic, most notably when France banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves in schools in 2004. For the liberal British, such an approach smacked of social authoritarianism and was regarded with incomprehension.

All this has recently changed very suddenly. The official abandonment of multiculturalism as a state ideology came on 24 August 2006, in a speech given by Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. She was speaking on the occasion of the launch of a new 'Commission on Integration and Cohesion', whose purpose, precisely, was to promote integration at the expense of multiculturalism. Kelly is an arch-Blairite member of the Blair government and was previously Secretary of State for Education.

Kelly began by paying the usual lip service to multiculturalism, claiming that 'Britain's diversity' was 'a huge asset' and that immigration had helped the economy. But there was a 'but'. Kelly claimed that 'the landscape is changing' and that new answers were needed for the 'difficult questions'

which were now arising. Among those were the fact that 'global tensions' were now 'reflected on the streets of local communities'. 'Second and third-generation immigrants,' Kelly said, 'face a struggle. Not to adapt to life in the UK – but to reconcile their own values and beliefs with those of their parents and grandparents.' She made the following remarkable statement:

And for some communities in particular, we need to acknowledge that life in Britain has started to feel markedly different since the attacks on 9/11 in New York and on 7/7 in London – even more so since the events of two weeks ago.

'Two weeks ago' referred to an alleged plot to blow up transatlantic airliners in mid-flight using explosives contained in bottles of Lucozade. The discovery of the alleged plot led to mass cancellations of flights on 10 August 2006. The trials of the suspects are expected to start in January 2008. In other words, Kelly was quite explicitly saying that the new 'war on terror', proclaimed by President George W. Bush after 11 September 2001, had created a new situation inside Britain and that the old shibboleth of multiculturalism had to be reviewed as a result. She then went even further than that and said something which no politician outside the extreme right British National Party would have said at any point in the previous thirty years or more: 'There are white Britons who do not feel comfortable with change. They see the shops and restaurants in their town centres changing. They see their neighbourhoods becoming more diverse.'

This was but a more polite version of the story Enoch Powell had told in his 'rivers of blood' speech about a white landlady who felt marginalized from her own community because of the influx of immigrants. It was considered to be the most inflammatory part of his speech, yet here was Kelly expressing essentially the same thoughts. Kelly concluded: 'I believe this is why we have moved from a period of uniform consensus on the value of multiculturalism, to one where we can encourage that debate by questioning whether it is encouraging separateness.'

Multiculturalism, in other words, was the problem not the solution: 'In our attempt to avoid imposing a single British identity and culture, have we ended up with some communities living in isolation of each other, with no common bonds between them?'

It was also, she said, 'not racist to discuss immigration and asylum' – whereas leading lights from the Labour Party typically did precisely vilify as racist people who discussed either issue. Kelly's proposed solution to the problem was to promote 'shared values' and 'a citizenship curriculum for Madrassas'. She said that minority ethnic communities should not receive 'special treatment'.

Kelly referred in her speech to a previous statement by the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, who had questioned whether the nostrums of multiculturalism had done more harm than good. He had argued that it was wrong to present the worst possible interpretation of British history, since this would not foster social cohesion, and he said that certain parts of Britain were becoming ghettos.

Once the dam had been breached, public complaints about the problems associated with immigrants in general and Muslims in particular turned into a flood. The taboo having been broken, it seemed suddenly as if previously impossible subjects could be aired with impunity. Some of the results of this were astonishing, even shocking. The head of the internal security service, MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, said on 9 November 2006 that there was a major terrorist threat in the UK from hundreds of thousands of British Muslim Al-Qaeda sympathizers. This was rapidly picked up by extreme right-wing websites as confirmation of their warnings about 'the enemy within'.

On 22 October 2006, indeed, The *Guardian* had reported new police figures which showed that half of the victims in racial murder cases were white. Whereas the murder of a black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in London in 1999 had been elevated by campaigners and the media into an event of national importance, thereby giving the impression that racially motivated murders were usually of blacks by whites, Peter Fahy, the Chief Constable of Cheshire and a spokesman on race issues for the Association of Chief Police Officers now said:

The political correctness and reluctance to discuss these things absolutely does play a factor. A lot of police officers and other professions feel almost the best thing to do is try and avoid it for fear of being criticized. We probably have all got ourselves into a bit of state about this.

The difficulty in the police service is that the whole thing is being closed down because we are all afraid of discussing any of it in case we say the wrong thing – and that is not healthy.

I will be honest with some of this discussion about the alienation of Muslim people. Police officers would tell you there are a lot of young people out there who feel alienated.

There are a lot of young white working-class lads, particularly on the more difficult estates, who are hugely alienated. Yet very little attention is given to that.

Sometimes we forget that ethnic minorities actually make up quite a small percentage of the population.

Earlier on in October, Jack Straw, the Leader of the House of Commons, had launched a storm of protest when he said that he was in the habit of asking veiled Muslim women to remove their veils when they came to see him in his constituency surgery. He said that it was better for face-to-face contact to be established and he criticized the wearing of the veil as 'a visible statement of separation and difference'. The attack on multiculturalism could hardly have been more explicit.

Straw's remarks caused a huge row, carried out in the national media, yet it was clear that there was massive public support for what he said. The traditional British incomprehension for the French position on the veil vanished and suddenly polls found that huge majorities wanted the same ban in Britain. The row crystallized around a Muslim woman foreign-language teacher who was sacked from her school for refusing to remove the veil during classes. The complaint was that it was impossible for her to teach languages without her pupils being able to see her mouth.

The Prime Minister himself intervened in this row and said he supported the woman's dismissal. He, too, said that the veil was 'a mark of separation' which made non-Muslims feel 'uncomfortable'. Blair added oil to the flames by saying not only that he supported the way the school had handled the issue, but also that the row typified a much larger problem, namely 'how Islam comes to terms with and is comfortable with' the modern world.¹

The argument over the veil coincided with another Blair government initiative at the time (which eventually failed because of strong opposition from the Catholic Church) to force religious state schools to take pupils from other religions. Blair said, 'We would not be having this debate were it not for people's concerns about this question to do with integration and separation of the Muslim community.' In other words, the project to force 'faith schools' to mix pupils of different faiths or none was an attempt to integrate Muslims into British society and to prevent them from segregating themselves too much. This attack on 'faith schools' was an attack on a very old and well-established part of British 'multiculturalism', since religiously denominated state schools have existed in Britain for many centuries, including for religious minorities (especially Catholics) since the nineteenth century.

The change in ideology culminated, on 8 December 2006, in Blair's speech on multiculturalism entitled 'The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values'. The title said it all. It was a wholesale disavowal of the ideology of multiculturalism. Blair of course, like Kelly, said that multiculturalism and cultural diversity were good things. But his message was quite firm that this had limits. Blair did not beat around the bush – the problem lay with Muslims: 'The reason we are having this debate is not generalized extremism. It is a new and virulent form of ideology associated with a minority of our Muslim community.' Blair said that the Muslims must not expect the British

to compromise on their values or on the rule of law, and that any introduction of sharia law or religious courts into British life (as has already happened in parts of the country) was to be firmly rejected.

Blair concluded using language which, hitherto, had existed only on the extreme right. Addressing immigrants, he said, 'Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain, Britain. *So conform to it; or don't come here.* We don't want the hate-mongers, whatever their race, religion or creed.' He concluded saying that immigrants has 'a duty to integrate' and denounced those opposed to such integration as 'racists and extremists'. His words were expressing exactly the same sentiment as had been expressed by Ray Honeyford and Norman Tebbit, only his language was far more brutal.

As both Blair and Kelly made clear, the collapse of the multicultural ideology was the fault of the Muslims. Their remarks came amidst a series of public controversies which underlined non-integration by Muslims, and after the Blair government had decided to introduce rather absurd 'citizenship tests' for new arrivals. This concentration on the specific problems associated with Muslim immigrants helps us to answer the question which inevitably arises in respect of this sudden and dramatic abandonment of the official liberal ideology of multiculturalism, that is, 'Why?'

There are two obvious candidates for explanation. The first is the fact in the rise in immigration. Since the mid-1990s, Britain has witnessed a huge influx of new migrants from all kinds of sources – asylum seekers, ordinary immigrants, migrant workers from the new EU states since 2004 (up to one million of these). The second most obvious explanation for the abandonment of multiculturalism as an ideology lies in the London bombings of 7 July 2005, when British Muslims conspired to blow up the London Underground, killing 52 people. When one puts together these two facts, is it any surprise that multiculturalism has been abandoned?

Yes. As far as the rise in immigration is concerned, this will not do as an explanation for the magnitude of the government's change on multiculturalism. Unlike France, there is no major anti-immigration party which poses an electoral threat to Labour. If there were one, then it would be entirely rational for an incumbent government to start to 'talk tough' on immigration to counter the danger of votes going to the other party. It is true that the British National Party has taken away some white working-class votes from Labour in certain areas but this is a micro-phenomenon, certainly not on the same scale as the loss of Muslim votes which has been massive following the war in Iraq.

Are the London bombings an adequate explanation for four or more decades of multiculturalism? Britain is a country which has dealt with terrorism for many decades in Northern Ireland. Yet when the IRA were letting off bombs in Northern Ireland and on the British mainland, there was no hand-wringing

or self-examination about why 'British-born' people should turn against their own state. Instead, the policy of both Labour and Conservative governments throughout the entire period of the troubles in Northern Ireland was precisely to deny the IRA and its supporters any political legitimacy at all, and instead to deal with Irish terrorism as a purely criminal matter. The same goes for the very small-scale actions associated with certain 'animal liberation' extremists. The scale of Muslim terrorism in Britain is minute in comparison with the scale of Irish: thousands of people were killed over many decades in connection with the troubles in Ulster. Therefore, the appearance of a new form of Muslim terrorism is simply not an adequate explanation for the sudden abandonment of multiculturalism.

Instead, therefore, the following sombre conclusion imposes itself. The abandonment by Blair and his ministers of one of the liberal left's central tenets can only be understood as a cynical ploy to exploit people's fears about mass immigration to bolster support for the 'war on terror'. Exposed as a liar over Iraq, a war with which his name will remain associated in history for many decades to come, Tony Blair seems to have calculated that he can salvage something of his tattered reputation, and garner some support for the ongoing war in Iraq, by demonizing Britain's Muslim population and stating openly that Muslims represent a threat to western values. In other words, I submit, the abandonment of the ideology of multiculturalism is exactly what it appears to be – the abandonment of a tradition of tolerance and the instrumentalization of ethnic and religious differences within society for short-term, cynical foreign policy purposes.

John Laughland is the editor of *Geopolitical Affairs*.

NOTE

- 1 *Guardian*, 17 October 2006.