

The opposition between 'Britishness' and multiculturalism is more complex than it seems

While politicians invoking 'Britishness' once construed it in traditional terms, many now frame the notion in terms of inclusivity. [Varun Uberoi](#) and [Tariq Modood](#) survey the landscape of contemporary multiculturalism and argue that important questions remain for those talking of 'Britishness'.



When Labour leader Ed Miliband advocates 'one nation' but is silent about the place of ethnic minorities in it and emphasises the costs of immigration, it may seem like he will, like David Cameron, criticise 'state multiculturalism' and endorse nationhood. Doing so is common. Multiculturalism *allegedly* causes people to focus on minority identities not national ones, prevents the state promoting a national culture or reduces what citizens share to such an extent that they no longer possess one. Multiculturalists reject the latter, and their long-held goal in relation to 'Britishness' has, perhaps counter-intuitively, grown in popularity among leading politicians.



Indeed, multiculturalists argue that cultural diversity is ineliminable without an unacceptable level of coercion and is a source of intercultural learning. But hostility, competition and conflict between cultural groups will make such diversity seem divisive, destabilising and necessary to subdue. A nation's identity thus becomes important as it is the institutions, laws, history, traditions and other features that make the nation what it is; and people's sense of their *nation's identity*, or their *national identities* enables them to feel that regardless of class, region, religion and so on, that they share institutions, laws, a history and traditions and are thus, *inter alia*, a group. This helps them to take collective action, forge collective goals and accept collectively binding decisions.

However, the cultural majority often see the nation as only theirs and this exacerbates the exclusion and discrimination of cultural minorities. Policies of multiculturalism however help to make a nation's identity more inclusive. Hence anti-discrimination measures or legal exemptions for minority religious practices help to reform the nation's laws and institutions and as these features of the nation become more inclusive so, by definition, does its identity. Such laws and institutions over time help to shape people's sense of what the nation is as do education systems, hence multicultural education shows children how different groups comprise the nation, shape its history and nature, and call it 'home'. Where a nation's identity and people's sense of it helps a society to be united enough to welcome and not subdue their differences; policies of multiculturalism help to include cultural minorities in both, and since the 1985 Swann Report multiculturalists have discussed making Britishness more inclusive. But in 2000 politicians rejected the Commission for Multi-Ethnic Britain's suggestion to do so.

The Commission said 'political leaders should...lead the country in re-imagining Britain...and in ensuring the national story is inclusive...' and were attacked in the media. Home secretary, Jack Straw, said he disagreed with part of their report partly because Britishness had already become more inclusive. Conservatives like William Hague also suggested in speeches that Britishness had become more inclusive and like Labour figures he did not mention aiding this process. Unwilling to accept the multiculturalist goal of making Britishness more inclusive when 'state multiculturalism' was relatively uncontroversial, we would not expect politicians to do so when it is so criticised; yet this is what has happened.

Thus in addition to leading a debate about Britishness, the last government introduced measures for those whose British identities were most malleable i.e. children and immigrants who wanted to be citizens. During citizenship ceremonies new citizens pledge allegiance to the political features of Britain that were also equated with being British in a pamphlet that many of them were assessed on. Children now also

learn about 'the changing nature of UK society, including the diversity of ideas, beliefs, cultures, identities, traditions, perspectives and values that are shared'. Equating Britishness with Britain's *political features* and its *diversity*, the Labour government were promoting what we call a civic multicultural national identity.

Civic nationhood seems inclusive because the political features defining a nation are shared regardless of ethnicity; but there was also the multicultural component where Britain is defined by the way it has accommodated difference. Thus John Denham noted, 'While a modern British identity will... draw heavily on the history of the White British majority, we cannot discover Britishness in that history alone; it will have to draw on the histories of all those who now make up our country'. Accommodating minorities means they too should help define Britishness and similar claims are now being made by leading Conservatives. Education secretary, Michael Gove, has discussed Britishness in civic terms, but also in 2009 said "Britishness is about a mongrel identity".

There is again a multicultural component to this Britishness as in opposition Pauline Neville-Jones's review group said 'we need to rebuild Britishness in ways which... allow us to understand the contributions which all traditions, whether primarily ethnic or national, have made and are making to our collective identity'. While criticising 'state multiculturalism', Cameron advocated in the same speech "a... national identity that is *open to everyone*". Where Thatcher and Major discussed preserving traditional forms of Britishness, their successors emphasise the inclusivity of its civic and multicultural components. Those currently running Miliband's policy review and roundtables at the Department for Local Government and Communities on 'integration' must look beyond the anti-multiculturalist rhetoric to note how leading politicians endorse the multiculturalist goal of Britishness being more inclusive; as their doing so raises difficult questions.

Such questions include whether politicians are referring to Britain's identity or people's British identities, as both are important. The former cultivates pride, loyalty, ambivalence or shame; and the latter are identities shared regardless of differences and are thus a source of commonality that can help, as above, make people feel like a group that can take collective action, forge collective goals and so on. Equally, an understudied relationship exists between Britain's identity and people's British identities. Hence debates about 'being British' emerged as familiar features of Britain like Empire and Protestantism were disappearing as changes in Britain's identity seemingly destabilised people's British identities.

So should those promoting Britishness focus on Britain's identity, people's British identities, both or their relationship? Likewise, the political features of civic nationhood cannot exist independent of language, norms and values which are usually those of a dominant cultural group privileged in features of the nation all citizens are supposed to be equal in. When this is minimised and other groups of citizens are also acknowledged in the nation's political features as in Canada or in India, civic nationhood can be inclusive; but the nation can also be defined by a tradition of accommodating difference, or by a cosmopolitan feature in which 'the British' honour their obligations to all humans; hence which inclusive conception of Britishness should be chosen and why? Is it the civic, the multicultural, the cosmopolitan or all three?

But to shape Britishness we can also ask should politicians just encourage debate about it or go as far as using the education system; why is the latter acceptable without a consensus from the former and what if people are uninterested in this debate? Indeed, as some sociological studies suggest many are less interested in Britishness than they once were, is this a reason for policy-makers to emphasise Britishness or to eschew doing so? Finally, Westminster politicians have limited influence over Britain's features outside England and thus control only the English education system. They need the Welsh government, the nationalists governing Scotland and sharing power in Northern Ireland to influence Britain's identity and people's British identities outside England; but is this likely? A multiculturalist goal advancing among politicians supports scholars arguing that rumours of multiculturalism's death in Britain are exaggerated, but this advance also raises questions for politicians like Ed Milliband and David Cameron who discuss Britishness.

The complete article is published in Political Studies, can be read [here](#) and its findings were discussed at an ESRC House of Lords Roundtable on the 8 November 2012

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