

Multiculturalism isn't a dirty word

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British politicians once frequently used the term 'multiculturalism' in speeches about immigration, integration or extremism. Yet now the term is noticeable through its absence. [Varun Uberoi](#) shows why different understandings of multiculturalism are uncontroversial and why the term need not be avoided by British politicians.



The word 'multiculturalism' has been noticeably absent. In discussions about immigration, integration and extremism, politicians do not use the word, and they once did. Thus in David Cameron's [recent speech about extremism](#), he said twice that Britain was a 'successful multiracial and multi-faith democracy', but he didn't use the term 'multicultural' once. This is seemingly because saying that Britain is a successful multicultural democracy might look like Cameron was inadvertently endorsing 'multiculturalism'. Such caution is to be expected with a term that is so often criticised. But it does not follow that such caution is necessary as it depends on what multiculturalism means.

If, for example, multiculturalism is understood as a multicultural society then this seems both unavoidable and uncontroversial. This because even if all relatively recent immigrants and their descendants left Britain, there would be regional and socio-economic cultural differences. And even politicians who want to reduce immigration are keen to say that they welcome the fact that Britain is more culturally diverse than it once was. Likewise, if multiculturalism is understood as a vision of a multicultural society in which its members cherish and learn from their cultural differences, it is difficult to think of a senior politician who might object to this, at least publicly.

However, multiculturalism is controversial when it is understood as a policy of multiculturalism. Typically, such policies aim to reduce the inequalities and exclusion that cultural minorities face thus such policies prohibit discrimination, promote race equality and intercultural dialogue. Such policies are said to cause segregation and to undermine 'Britishness' but it is unclear why they would or what sort of government would abandon such policies.



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Scholars show how higher birth-rates and lower death rates among some groups, poverty and other drivers foster segregation, but not that policies of multiculturalism do so. Likewise, it is unclear why such policies are undermining Britain's identity or people's British identities and how we would tell if they are, as devolution, globalisation and supra-national institutions may be doing so instead. If we value evidence based policy-making, then we cannot

ignore that the alleged negative effects of policies of multiculturalism are hard to prove.

Finally, multiculturalism is often said to be an idea that legitimises separatism and culturally different people living separately to one another, and not interacting or befriending one another. This, I think, is what many really fear, but so do most multiculturalists as they stress the value of intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning which cannot happen if such separatism exists.

Thus multiculturalists don't advocate a multiculturalism that endorses separatism as instead they advocate the other ways of thinking about multiculturalism noted above. They also reject such separation and discuss ways of increasing unity in culturally diverse societies, and the importance of national identities too. Indeed, as multiculturalists do not endorse separatism, and the policies of multiculturalism discussed above do not either, and there is no evidence that these policies foster separatism, it is unclear why multiculturalism is legitimising separatism.

This understanding of multiculturalism thus seems to function like a stereo-type as it appears intuitively plausible and is widely believed, but it is a pejorative and inaccurate reflection of something it vaguely relates to. Indeed, this sort of multiculturalism also seems like a suspiciously easy target of criticism compared to the other understandings of multiculturalism above, as not even multiculturalists would defend it.

British politicians want to remain popular so they don't want to mention multiculturalism. But avoiding this term makes it look like they are hiding from understandings of multiculturalism that they cannot object to. And thus politicians have at least two options. First, politicians might call multiculturalist ideas something less controversial like 'inter-culturalism', as some now do. But this strategy assumes such 'rebranding' will go undetected and it is unclear why this assumption is plausible. Indeed, if this strategy is detected, advocates of multiculturalist ideas will seem dishonest and their critics will be emboldened as they will have won a victory.

But a second response is politicians can simply be clear about what they find acceptable and what they don't. Politicians can note that multiculturalism is like class, race, equality, freedom and justice in that it can be understood in a range of plausible ways. And it is strange to oppose multiculturalism when it denotes a multicultural society, a vision of such a society cherishing and learning from its differences or policies that aim to reduce the inequality and exclusion that minorities often face. It is not uncommon to define a term before using it, and this is all that needs to occur with multiculturalism.

About the Author

Varun Uberoi is a Senior Lecturer in Political Theory and Public Policy at Brunel University and his latest book, *Multiculturalism Rethought*, is co-edited with Tariq Modood and published by Edinburgh University Press. Dr Uberoi will be discussing this book at the Edinburgh book festival on the 22nd of August 2015.

