

George Alagiah on Britishness

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George Alagiah is a brave man. Amidst a backdrop of screaming headlines on the BNP's Question Time appearance, the BBC news anchor used a POLIS lecture to call for a debate on what it means to be British. It was a very personal and sophisticated argument – we'll have the podcast up soon, but for now, here's a report on the lecture by Hestor Phillips. [You can listen to the podcast [here](#)]

The Problem With Multi-Culturalism and the Magic Of Migration by Hester Phillips

George Alagiah is one of most popular and experience TV journalists. But his own story was the starting point for his lecture on Identity and News. Sri-Lankan born Alagiah described the overwhelming sense of displacement he felt when arriving here via Ghana in 1967.

Laughed at by schoolmates for having what they described as a tan without tan-lines – for his physical and cultural differences – Alagiah said he engaged in “total emersion therapy” in British culture in order to survive.

But years later, when a friend meeting his mother for the first time expressed surprise that she was Asian, the enormity of his “unnatural dislocation” from his past hit home. In his attempt to become British, Alagiah had left vital parts of himself behind.

For Alagiah, this “private tussle that every immigrant goes through – the pull of tradition and heritage on the one hand and assimilation on the other”, lies at the heart of the migrant experience, and it is only by understanding this process at a personal level that debates around immigration will progress.

During the POLIS event, the BBC journalist recounted how, for his 2006 book *A Home From Home*, he'd spent time in London's Tower Hamlets and Bradford researching multiculturalism. He went looking for an immigrant child experiencing in modern Britain the sense of displacement that he himself felt when he arrived here 40 years ago.

But what he found was Joshua – a white British child whose school consisted almost solely of children from just one province of one country.

For Alagiah, Joshua's experience of “walking into a foreign land everyday when he walked through his school gates” was on a par with his own – the result of a multiculturalism that has created cultural enclaves, which dislocate those inside them “not from where they have come but from where they are now”.

By placing too much emphasis on difference and not similarity, Alagiah said British multiculturalism had “in some places delivered something entirely at odds from what was intended”, creating harmful segregation and tension between cultures.

He added that this had led to a growing sense of disempowerment among white working class in deprived areas where segregation is at its most prevalent, but that the British media had been slow in covering this as a story.

“Is the British whole greater than the sum of its parts?” asked Mr Alagiah. “I'm not calling for a mono Britain but a diverse Britain where there is actually some exchange between cultures. Not less immigration but better immigration, different immigration.”

Alagiah called for the term ‘Britishness’ to be wrestled back from the hands of bigots and extremists, so all those who work, live and contribute to the UK can feel proud of the nation in which they live.

“Britishness can be reclaimed not as a political weapon used by thugs on street corners but as a description that encompasses all the values of people who regard this country as theirs and have a stake in its well being,” he said.

“Britishness is about the test of contribution – a colour-blind test about citizenship, not birthright

”Immigration is a test of endurance not loyalty. If bigots could see that, they would see how much we have gained. Instead of where do you belong, we should ask, now that you are here what is it you do for us.”

Despite the limits of multiculturalism, Alagiah was careful to point out how far Britain has come since his arrival, citing figures such as Liberty’s Shami Chakrabarti and the Ugandan born John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, who now play major roles in British life.

“We have moved forward and it’s a huge collective achievement of both immigrants that have come here, but also the good grace of many white men and women,” he said. “They have also walked the distance from the old country to the new.”

This article by Hester Phillips

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