

# Five minutes with Charles Taylor: “In order to make ourselves safe we need to resist stigmatising sections of the population”

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By Democratic Audit UK

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In December, the Canadian philosopher Professor **Charles Taylor** gave a lecture at LSE entitled *Democracy, Diversity, Religion*. During his visit, Democratic Audit’s Sonali Campion spoke to him about democracy’s inbuilt weaknesses, and how European governments need to resist veering towards exclusion in responding to the challenges posed by the Paris attacks and ISIS.



**With the rise of Islamic State, the migrant crisis, and growing support for populist parties across Europe, liberal democracy in Europe is facing multiple challenges. What do you see the role of philosophers like yourself who have thought deeply about some of the central issues in these discussions?**

Our role is to try to explain what the issues are because I think they get obscured by a lack of understanding – of religion in general, for instance, or of the civilisations from which people come, or of the basis of a modern, diverse, democratic society. This lack of understanding gives rise to some of the negative measures taken, which put that society in great danger of very deep divisions. So it’s about bringing that to people’s attention.

**You’ve talked about how democracy in its nature can undermine pluralism – could you talk more about what you mean by these inherent weaknesses?**

Democracies need a very strong sense of common goals, more than autocracies, because they have to call on citizens to show solidarity, to discuss together, so there has to be some sense they are talking about the same thing or trust begins to fall apart. In that sense they need what I call a “political identity”. This is a mixture of key principles, such as democracy and human rights, and something particular to the individual state.

These elements of the political identity can easily be turned into measures of exclusion: “these other people don’t really fit”, “they aren’t part of the ethnic background of this particular national project”, or “they don’t really seem to accept the basic principles of our democracy”. In many cases these are not really founded judgements, but they are

still very powerful because as long as people perceive things in that way it seems right to exclude certain groups, or make special demands of them – for example that they assimilate totally.

So this of course is something that democracies can't very easily cope with because it produces great rifts, even a sense of second-class citizenship, which clashes with the ethic that we include everyone. So people have to be willing to consider redefining their political identity in order to really bring together the degree of diversity that actually exists on the territory.

**In the wake of the Paris attacks, and in the midst of the migrant crisis, how do you think that governments, the media, other institutions, can both make their citizens feel safe and promote inclusion?**

Governments need to appeal to citizens in a way which shows that in order to make ourselves safe we need to resist stigmatising sections of the population. By excluding people – in this present context – you're helping the recruiters for Islamic State, or indeed any other jihadist movement.

I see there are two reactions in the French case. Some people say we've got to have greater vigilance and so on, but there's an alternative view which says we have to bring together the whole nation as it really is, with everybody that belongs to it. There are, for instance, lots and lots and lots of Muslims who are appalled by this, their own lives are made impossible by this, they want to make a go of the French Republic. But they have to be accepted as part of that Republic. The problem is the French recently have been in a mood where they've introduced a number of stigmatising measures. Why outlaw the burka? It doesn't do anyone any harm, but the rationale around this is there's something wrong about it because it's Islamic, and Islamic is kind of dangerous. That is a terrible mistake.

I think that Hollande understands this, certainly some of his advisors, but will they have the courage in the face of Marine Le Pen? Will they have the courage to say the real defence of France is not only vigilance, not only bombing in Syria (I'm not sure about that but it's a separate discussion), but bringing all the French people together. *Il ne faut pas faire la bagarre* [we must not make the fight]. That is right. You mustn't just say "Muslim therefore potential jihadi".

**You mention Marine Le Pen and this rise of the populist right. How does their growing prominence skew the debate?**

It terribly endangers the dynamic. These parties insist that there's no way of including these people, there's no way of making them allies and so on. So others can easily be tempted to go a little bit in that direction to undercut the populist party. But this doesn't work, instead it actually gives the claims greater legitimacy. You have to have the courage to say this approach is not only not the one we want to do for moral reasons, it's also terribly dangerous and ineffective.

**Do you think there are particular examples in Europe that stand out currently for doing the balancing act between protection and freedom better than others?**

I think the UK, with all the criticisms you can make, has been somewhat better on this because immigrant communities have integrated to a greater extent, whether Muslim or otherwise. There's still big problems – when you had this fuss over radicalisation in Birmingham schools, people didn't have the right reflexes to say "well just what exactly is going on here?", they were too quick in buying into the [Trojan Horse story](#).

But while it's far from perfect, it's much better than France because there hasn't been the same degree of stigmatisation. Certain parts of Germany are also really quite good. The Green Party, along with the Social Democrats, in various *lander* have introduced very good legislation, for instance, making sure that immigrant kids to learn German very quickly so when they get into the school system they're up to speed with everyone else, as against what happened before where they didn't have the language skills to keep up and just fell further and further behind. They never really mastered German or their mother tongues, which created a large population of unemployable young people who were very angry. In Germany, Austria, of course there are great examples in

Scandinavia – not Denmark, Denmark has it's own problems with populist politicians. There are much better situations than France. Maybe not as good as as we would like, but more effective at promoting integration.

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**Charles Taylor** is a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University. His recent works include: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, *A Secular Age*, and *Laïcité et Liberté de Conscience* (with Jocelyn Maclure).

