



Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Candace Allen, Ted Cantle, Dreda Say Mitchell
Multiculturalism: A failed experiment?

Commonality is all very well but it must must work both ways: three responses to Ted Cantle's re-evaluation of nationality, citizenship, and community.

Ted Cantle: I'm not going to repeat my paper, but I do want to stress the need to move on from where we are on multiculturalism and develop a more sophisticated model. I know this is more complex and challenging but that's the society we are in. We used to think of diversity in terms of four or five principal groups. Now we have 300 languages in London schools and we see a huge amount of globalisation going on. We have to think about diversity in a totally different way; a more complex approach but I think ultimately far more rewarding. Let's not just throw out the concept of multiculturalism; let's update it and move to a more sophisticated and developed approach.

I've been involved with urban regeneration and race issues for about 35 years. In 2001, I went back to review some of the riots that had taken place in the northern towns and looked across the country at London, Birmingham, Leicester, and elsewhere to try to see what had gone right and wrong. I was actually quite surprised to find that things hadn't changed as much as everybody had thought. Since then of course things have moved on a bit and I think there is now a recognition that we need to review our multicultural model. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has been a main proponent of that and, more recently, Trevor Philips [of the Commission for Racial Equality] has come up with the idea of scrapping multiculturalism. I don't agree with that. I don't think we see or should see the British model of multiculturalism as a failure. There is a huge amount of work we need to build on. Our multicultural model is still held up in Europe, at least, as quite a good, progressive model. We mustn't lose sight of it. I don't want to scrap multiculturalism, I want to move it on to where we can continue to preserve and respect difference, continue to promote cultural diversity but have a much clearer sense of promoting commonality between different communities.

The problem is, we don't really know how to do that. We have seen some examples, at the community level, of promoting this common vision — in Blackburn, in Luton, in London after 7/7, in Scotland — but we don't know if this is effective or not; if this attempt at developing a common vision really works. We need to stop resting on some of the mantras we've had in the past and find a much more sophisticated understanding of integration and multiculturalism.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: I don't like this subject at all. Partly because there's such eagerness to talk about multiculturalism as though it's some sort of

creature that lives, rather than something that lives and must die. There are processes, there is a long history, a long struggle, which really began in about the sixteenth century, the first age of globalisation, when Black and Asian — let's call them Black and Asian, they weren't called that then — came here and have fought ever since to get their entitlements. And one of the ways the struggle developed was in a particular context we call multiculturalism. I don't like the idea of asking, "Is multiculturalism dead?" It's a bit like asking, "Is democracy dead?" just because fewer and fewer people vote. It isn't an adult question. But what we can talk about is whether, ever since that time, for centuries, some of the ways, the solutions we have sought to gain that entitlement, worked or didn't; or worked for a time and no longer work; and whether what used to work has now become a problem rather than a solution. I'd rather talk about it in that way. Because if you start talking about whether multiculturalism is alive or dead it doesn't mean anything to me at all. These are processes, a part of our history.

There are two multiculturalisms in Britain and we need to clarify that. There is a reality of multiracialism and multiculturalism and, unless the gas ovens are being lit, that cannot be killed. That's the reality, it's the reality in this room. We live together in London, in Birmingham, all around this country, people from various places who have claimed their place here. That is multiculturalism of a certain definition that is irredeemable, irreversible. And to talk about its death seems quite sinister.

But there is another multiculturalism, of course, which is the political and policy response and what anti-racists fought for and have been fighting for, myself included. A few years ago I wrote what I think is the first publication called *After Multiculturalism*. It questioned the state response to our clamour, centuries old, for our entitlement. And I concluded, after researching London in particular — and young people in London especially — that the multicultural response had become the problem and was no longer a viable solution. And that it suited the state very well indeed that we were using this model. Because what I could see was that multiculturalism had led to three serious problems.

One: that it had allowed the state never to accept the changes that started off in the sixteenth century, they kept us at bay, they gave us ghettos, they regenerated those ghettos, they gave us grants in those ghettos, they gave us beautiful marbles but we were still ghettoised. And they didn't have to change. None of the institutions had to change, none of them has: the top 10 per cent of every institution in this country remains wholly white. So it suited the state. And we were children of the Empire, easily malleable perhaps, we let them do it and we should not have done.

Two: This — the matter of entitlements — is a very important issue today but it alarms me that we only talk about it in one direction. Let me explain what I mean. The deliberate failure to give people their entitlements has led to people within groups turning on each other and beginning to have a view of themselves that is dislocated from the struggles of others. It's as if there is just this one very small cake available and the only reason for your politics is to fight for your tribe and to fight for your locality and never to fight for others. And the in-fighting, the disabling if you like of the really quite dynamic anti-racist struggle — and there are some people in this room who know what I'm talking about, we've been fighting a long time together — has been disabled by this multicultural solution. We now are supposed to be Muslim and Sikh and Hindu — no, not quite Muslim because I am now supposed to think

of myself as a Shia Muslim, not a Sunni because the two are now splitting up. I'm not Black. I'm not Asian. I'm not a radical. I'm not supposed to be leftwing. I have to be in the narrowest most constrictive airless tribe in order to fit into the multicultural model. I refuse to do that.

Three: The third problem that is emerging, the only real challenge, is how we, each of us individually or as states or nations or localities, are going to embrace, relate to, empathise with, understand people who are utterly unlike ourselves and to whom we owe nothing. It's easy to feel for your own family, your own class, your own street, your own village; it's the easiest thing in the world. How do you relate to a refugee from Kurdistan, who might have values you despise? But it is only if you relate to that person and find a way of finding commonalities that we're going to stop the kind of terror that we see before us — and I don't mean the bombs, I mean the fragmentation of the world. When people say multiculturalism is dead and why don't we seek commonalities — we meaning Black people — I'm very happy with that analysis, it's a good question because within our ghettos we've become self-satisfied, we don't want to be criticised, we don't want writers to look at us with a naked eye and say what's wrong with how we are.

Yesterday, Diane Abbott had a really vicious go at me because I'd criticised her in a column, and she said: "Well, I'm not the kind of person who ever criticises Black or Asian women." What kind of a remark is that? Am I supposed never to criticise a Black or Asian woman? What kind of politics, what kind of independent, what kind of journalist would I be if I decided that if there was a Black or Asian woman who'd been doing wrong, somehow I had to protect her. It's rubbish. Multiculturalism has led to that kind of mentality.

But what about the other side? Are white people not supposed to play this game, to work as hard as we're meant to? To belong and to do what is necessary to give us our entitlement? According to a recent survey in the *Economist*, fewer and fewer white people call themselves British now. I was in Scotland during the Edinburgh Festival and in an audience of 400 people only three people said they were British. I don't see any panic, I don't see any politicians running round saying, "We must make the Scots feel more British"; and you could touch the hatred of the English. So it seems to me there are double standards wherever you look and if we are going to achieve the commonalities and an equal status where we may all be criticised, where we may all be called to account within a single framework of human rights and freedoms, then surely white Britain has got to be called upon to do its bit. And I don't see much call coming from politicians and others in our media asking white people why they will not accept that their country has changed. It's a question I ask myself all the time. I couldn't be more integrated, for better or worse, but not a week goes by, without vile emails or letters saying: "You may call yourself British but don't ever think you're one of us." Yes, let's talk about this subject, but let's also talk about this other side because I think white Britain has got away with this for long enough.

Dreda Say Mitchell: I grew up in the East End of London on a housing estate and one of the things that occurred to me when I heard people talk about multiculturalism was that I was not getting an idea of what the grassroots think. So I'll illustrate what I say today with stories from my own experience and from people I know.

I work as an education adviser in Islington and about four months ago, I walked into a school where I'd made an appointment to see the head teacher.

This is a fantastic school, it celebrates Black History Month, and you know who comes to this school when you walk in because you see the welcome posters and there's a variety of staff there from different ethnic groups. As I walked into this school a member of staff walked up to me and asked me if I was looking for the kitchen. I thought to myself, hang on, this is a school that does all the things multiculturalism says it should do: it celebrates culture and it celebrates not just the cultures of the children in that school, but a variety of cultures. And I thought, forget the shock element, what's this actually saying to me? And it started to say to me very strongly that multiculturalism hasn't really worked. And the questions that started flashing to me were: has multiculturalism worked in the sense of addressing racism in this country and how racism operates in this country? Does multiculturalism give us an understanding of our communities in this country? Does multiculturalism give us an understanding of diversity or how we as a society interact with each other? And I think the first question I wanted to ask myself was whose multiculturalism is this anyway? Who has devised this?

I started to talk to people at the grassroots and I asked one person I talked to, a friend of mine, who's a working single mum with three kids, "What does multiculturalism mean to you?" And she said, "You know what, my lip has gone down straightaway." Which meant, "I'm not engaged with this. You know what? I've got this image of a few people sitting around in a room, the blokes are all wearing smoking jackets, there's a couple of people who are self-selected representatives of so-called communities, and they're all devising a policy that's about us, there's no engagement with us." Immediately, there's this sense that multiculturalism is a top-down model, something that's done to people, not something they were made to engage with. There are communities and groups of people who haven't subscribed to it, it doesn't mean anything to them. And if I think back to my own experience when I was going to school, we celebrated lots of festivals, lots of different cultures, but what was at the back of my Mum and Dad's mind, particularly since they were migrants to this country, was: "Is my daughter going to get a good education? I'm not really bothered about the rest; I'll let them get on with the rest." But I remember my Mum used to go "hmnn" and kiss her teeth because what she really wanted was an education.

Multiculturalism has diverted us away from thinking about what some of the big issues are. And a big issue for me in this millennium is racism and how racism operates in our society. If I put that in the context of multiculturalism, two words that are chanted through it are toleration and celebration. And I think to myself, so, we have a party with a sari, is that really going to solve anything to do with racism? I don't think so. It's a wishy-washy way of trying to tackle racism anyway. It's a real shame that we've had to have a young black man die [Stephen Lawrence], and his family work with such tenacity, to get us back to thinking about that anti-racist agenda we had in the 1980s. This is not an individual thing, it's not about individual prejudices all the time, what's been thrown into the mix now is this notion of "institutional racism". Institutions that operate with procedures and practices that deny people equal opportunity. Schools now have a statutory duty to make racial equality and the promotion of racial harmony the core of their ethos in all they do. The guidance that's coming from the CRE is not talking about celebrations, about wonderful posters with different languages, it's talking about the children who come to this school: do they attain and achieve the same? If there are huge attainment gaps, what are you doing about it? If different parents' groups, different communities don't have equal access in your school what are you doing about it? And it's the "what are you doing about it" that I'm really pleased we're

talking about in education.

I remember — and this is another story — when I was doing my A-levels I was a real history buff, I loved history. I had a fantastic history teacher and I was 17 and I wandered into the library and I came across a book by CLR James called *The Black Jacobins*. I was astonished to find out there had been a revolution in Haiti. We'd been taught about the French Revolution, the English Civil War, the American Revolution, but how come nobody had talked to me about this? I don't mean talk to me about it as in "Here's a book, read it." I wanted them to thread it through the curriculum they taught us because it's a valid way of children learning and it's a really good piece of history, too. We're really starting to look at an inclusive curriculum now, rather than just starting to think about Black History Month where all the black people and all the black things are wheeled out in October.

A couple of people recently told me — one more story — about taking a child to the library in October and they had all the books out for Black History Month. They came back in November to take those books out and the library told them: "They're locked away, it isn't Black History Month any more!" That's what multiculturalism has done. People's hearts are in the right place but we've been a victim of our own good because it's made people think in a narrow way, just about culture, and we've ghettoised people. So when I work with schools, I say, "Don't think of me as Black History Month. This is not what this is about."

The other issue for me is multiculturalism tells us a lot about our communities? I don't think it does. Its view of culture is very simplistic. Once again, I'll weave in a story. When I was young, people used to bring out the steel pan and look at you, because we're talking about you, it's your culture, and I used to rush home and my Mum would be playing Jim Reeves. And I used to say to my Mum, "But we should be playing the steel pan Mum," and she would say, "What?" The steel pan only comes out for carnival, it's not something you hear in the house. You might hear some risqué calypso songs and reggae, but the steel pan... There was a mismatch between people who were devising multiculturalism and a sense of who these communities are. It's too much of a mantra about black and white all the time. I need to unpick that but it's a gut feeling.

Talking about "communities" doesn't address the diversity within a community. Is the Caribbean community all the same? Another story from my background: being presented with patties. In Grenada that's not the national dish, it's a Jamaican dish; it's that mismatch again. And when I think about communities, there's a lot of other things we need to throw in the mix like gender and class. We concentrate on ethnicity so much we're not thinking about class. I remember going to my sister who lives on a council estate and she had her friends around and her friends were from a variety of ethnic groups all living in the same block. Then somebody knocked on the door and said the stairs were on fire again. And I thought all those women from all those different ethnic groups are subject to the same stresses of living on this council estate, they're all working-class but we don't chuck that into the mix.

I suppose that threads through the whole thing about commonality: I don't think we have to wait for commonality to happen, it's already happening in our younger generation. Look at the statistics on how many men of Caribbean heritage now have white partners: people aren't waiting for multiculturalists or some policy-maker to tell them to fuse, they're already doing it. Look at the

music, look at the way our young people talk. Multiculturalism is an outdated mode because it hasn't moved on. People have moved on and communities are not waiting for policy-makers to move them on. But we do need to deal with racism, particularly at the institutional level, because it's not being done at the moment and multiculturalism isn't going to do that.

Candace Allen: My reaction to the title of this panel was the same as Yasmin's: how can it be a "failed experiment" if it's a reality? Multiculturalism is a fact of living and not just a fact of modern living. It's a fact of civilisation dating back millennia. Although I've been here for about 11 years, my interaction with the British political and social scene has been somewhat limited, so I'm looking at it very much with American eyes. One of the differences between the US and the UK, aside from the fact that the invaders, the European invaders came into the western hemisphere in 1492, when there were already civilisations there beforehand, was that there was space, space for people to go, space for these alien dramas to take place. Space here is more limited and that space is completely interwoven with class. As I learn more about British history — beyond what one learns in an American junior high and high school — I see that the whole notion of an aristocratic class comes from a completely wholesale gift of vast quantities of space, vast quantities of land to one group of people who never seem to be questioned about it. For centuries, people have been scrambling about trying to get their cut of it. And that continues.

Multiculturalism as I understand it is a social practice here that is a result of things that happened in the 1970s and 1980s. In the US, we're mutts and most people in the early twenty-first century and certainly from the 1970s on in the twentieth century have come to an understanding that the US culture is mixed, a combination of many different cultures, not just African but also many different European cultures and increasingly Asian cultures. But what did that mean in the face of Hurricane Katrina? As a friend of mine put it when I was talking to her about it, our white people walk as if they've heard the drum. American white people tend to move differently from Europeans. They are in themselves generally mongrelised, racially and certainly in terms of their cultural outlook — what they listen to, what they eat. But this huge surprise of Katrina was no surprise to most people who thought and had eyes that looked behind the mass media and the presentation. They were not surprised at all about Katrina. And part of what it seems to me that's going on in Birmingham and in Paris, is people who are saying, "Fuck culture. We live our culture. What we're talking about is economic: the inability to live a life with some kind of accomplishment, meaning." You can call it inclusiveness but basically you're talking about opportunity.

Here in Britain, one of the things that is never really discussed, and Yasmin also talked about this, is what is the definition of being British? In this way the US has a leg-up in terms of cultural integration. Once they got rid of — or we got rid of — that unfortunate problem of the Native Americans, there was a welcome mat: everybody was included; of course, it helped a lot if you were white. But African-Americans, particularly those who actually go to Africa and come back, are very aware that they are American, not that they are invaders, interlopers, or whatever. Then something like Katrina happens and people feel they're not being treated like Americans. But the shock, the profound shock, wasn't as it might be here, where people don't feel they're British, whatever the hell that is. These folk knew they were American so how could the government treat them as though they were in some Third World country, regardless of the difficulties under which they lived?

When you talk about multiculturalism, as Dreda said, there tends to be a very narrow definition. We talk about food, we talk about music, and not really contemporary music. Contemporary is something very different. The young people, the young men in particular, who are out in the streets of Paris and who are warring with one another in Birmingham, are completely imbued with contemporary culture and, unfortunately, a lot of that culture involves gangster rap and immediate gratification. Because there doesn't seem to be an educational line that's going to take them through to anything that they feel is worth accomplishing. They don't want to sit in their mosques and their temples and their churches and say, "We have this wonderful identity." People want to get on; they want the materials and style of contemporary living. You can talk about wanting to mediate that consumerism with something that's a bit more spiritual, but the reality is that a lot of what this violence is about is about wanting to acquire the stuff of the global culture whether it came from Africa or Asia or the US. One of the multicultural strains, one of the human strains, that has been well adapted in this world is the urge toward violence.

Youth culture is as much a part of the multicultural landscape as anything else and it's ridiculous to try to ignore this culture of violence with Diwali concerts and Kwanza and so on. This is a part of what needs to be done and it takes centuries to work it through. We don't have centuries because there's less space, more and more people, more and more desire, more and more global communication of what is available and what the reactions to it are. How do we combat it without a notion of what moral conscience is?

Now I seem to be talking more about power than multiculturalism but this is what we're talking about. The fundamental question is about dividing the power: gaining the entitlement. Multiculturalism is not a failed experiment, that's ridiculous, but we have to look at it as a reality to be dealt with in terms of real power and, if not integration or melting-pot, which I think is a real fallacy, then real mutual respect.

Published 2006-11-03

Original in English

Contribution by Index on Censorship

First published in *Index on Censorship* 2/2006

© Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Candace Allen, Ted Cattle, Dreda Say Mitchell/Index on Censorship

© Eurozine