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Which "multiculturalism" has failed, David Cameron?

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The multiculturalism recently attacked by David Cameron bears little in common with the integration policies pursued by previous British governments, writes Cécile Laborde. What it does resemble is a securitization approach that places citizens under suspicion on the basis of their religion.

Which "multiculturalism" was David Cameron referring to when he delivered his speech in Munich on 5 February? The British prime minister did not claim to contest the fact that British society is multicultural, multi-ethnic and multiracial. Rather, his target was what he called state multiculturalism – the policies implemented by the government in order to "manage" cultural diversity.

Strictly speaking, multicultural policies involve the attribution of special rights to groups defined by their cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic identity, with a view to preserving the latter against the assimilationist impulses of majority groups. Of such differentialist multiculturalism there has been very little in the UK (or indeed in most of western Europe). British policy, with its robust focus on the provision of equal opportunities, extensive anti-racism and anti-discrimination legislation, and universal access to health, education and basic skills, has consistently pursued policies of minority integration into British society.

It is true that UK governments have, more than others, relied on, and enhanced the power of, local community leaders in their search for community cohesion and social peace. It is also true that they have paid lip



service to the need to respect cultural and religious sensibilities, often in clumsy and inappropriate ways (witness the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act). Yet, on the whole, British policy, while alternating between multicultural, difference-sensitive rhetoric and (increasingly) appeals to shared nationality and citizenship tests, has pursued a not wholly unsuccessful course of culturally-sensitive integration. One becomes British not through cultural assimilation or declarations of patriotic loyalty but, rather, through participation with others in the labour market, local schools, neighbourhood life, civil society associations, and local and national politics. When things go well, one becomes British through mixing and mingling and working and arguing with others Brits, of diverse origin.

If this is the multiculturalism that Cameron has in mind, it is innocuous and benign indeed.

Much more disturbing has been the recent emergence of a genuinely differentialist, potentially segregationist multiculturalism at the top of the state. Initially sponsored by New Labour, this multiculturalism has been wholeheartedly espoused and developed by the Coalition government. It is this new “state multiculturalism” that carries the gravest dangers for the integration of minorities and for social cohesion. It has two pillars. The first is the securitisation of Muslims. Never mind that Cameron took care rhetorically to distinguish “good” and “bad” Muslims. When, in the same speech, a general assessment of the successes and failure of policies of integration is so cynically conflated with the imperatives of national security and anti-terrorist policy, the result is that all Muslims are singled out as potential “enemies within”.

Under this security-driven multiculturalism, a class of citizens are reduced to their presumed origins or beliefs, which are suspected of conflicting with “our” values, and therefore justify that they (as under the 2006 Terrorism Act) be subjected to an arbitrary regime of suspicion, surveillance and repression.

The causes of Islamist radicalisation are complex, but it is well-known that resentment towards both Anglo-American foreign policy and the persistence of large social inequalities of opportunity and status contributes to fuel it.

Unfortunately, the second pillar of Cameron’s state multiculturalism is unlikely to address the latter. His “Big Society” agenda involves the



delegation of state functions to “free schools”, faith groups, local communities and businesses, and the partial substitution of privately-funded, locally-run and group-specific schemes for publicly-funded, egalitarian, universal-access public services. Citizens are no longer expected to mingle and mix and work together: rather, they should set up their own little private communities catering for their own, cultivating parochial identities and priorities – be they white middle class, or Muslim, or evangelical, or whatever. And the state will be encouraging, and generously subsidizing, such endeavours.

Ironically, then, both the anti-terrorist agenda and the Big Society agenda, albeit in different ways, involve the attribution by the state of special privileges or burdens to specific communities or groups, defined by reference to their class, identity or religion, with the effect of separating them from wider society. These policies are more radically multiculturalist than any actually targeted in Cameron’s speech. It is under his government that we are likely to take the full measure of the centrifugal and destructive nature of state multiculturalism.