Multiculturalism and Extremism :The Insider-Outsider Debate

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PROMPTED by the need to take a tougher stance against terrorism, British Prime Minister Tony Blair on August 5th outlined a set of 12 measures to reform the country's immigration, asylum, and criminal systems. The proposed action plan includes deporting foreign-born radical preachers and stripping of citizenship naturalised terrorist sympathisers; proscribing radical Islamist organisations as well as closing down their bookstores and places of worship; and holding pre-trial hearings for terrorist suspects to admit sensitive evidence.

By upping the ante in the war on terror, the authorities are hoping to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, by selectively using the right to bestow and withdraw citizenship – as well as to evict foreign-born individuals from their territory – they intend to send a clear message of deterrence. Any naturalised individual, political refugee and immigrant worker or foreign student residing in the United Kingdom aiding, abetting, or participating in acts of terrorism will fall into the government's dragnet.

On the other hand, the new policies will also succeed in containing the short and medium-term threat. By denying the right of return to individuals with possible connections to Al Qaeda and by evicting clerics with established records of "glorifying terrorism," the British government will prevent the welcoming environment of the UK from being abused. Furthermore, the impact and influence of such individuals for radicalising and brainwashing law-abiding British Muslims will also diminish.

Although framed in the context of pre-existing legal provisions, these measures represent a radical shift in Britain's policy on multiculturalism. In effect, they not only call into question who's 'inside' and who's 'outside' British society, but they also raise questions about Britain's long-standing tradition of 'inclusive citizenship'. While there can be little objection to the deportation of individuals on various visas – if evidence indicates they pose a threat to national security – the de-naturalisation of members of British society severely undermines the idea of the UK as a "community of citizens" and a "community of communities", as expressed in the findings of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, more commonly known as The Parekh Report.

Who's 'Us' and Who's 'Them'?

Published in 2000 and named after its Chair Lord Bhikhu Parekh, the report offers both a comprehensive overview of race and ethnic relations in Britain and a significant number of

policy recommendations. In essence, it was responsible for producing a new approach to managing Britain's multicultural composition.

In its findings, the report describes Britain as a country composed of many different groups, interests, and identities. These range from, for example, Home Counties English, Jewish, Liverpudlians, Irish, Chinese, African-Caribbeans, and Indians. They differ from each other as some are large, powerful and long-settled whilst others are smaller, comparatively powerless, and newer. In addition, the groups vary in the amount of international links they maintain and some groups also have group boundaries that are clearer than others.

Significantly, the report rightfully acknowledges that most individuals possess a package of different identities. Following the report, "[m]ore and more people have multiple identities – they are [for example] Welsh Europeans, Pakistani Yorkshirewomen, Glaswegian Muslims, English Jews and black British". These different identities enrich the lives of most but these different identities may also come with conflicting loyalties as "[p]eople have competing attachments to nation, group, subculture, region, city, town, neighbourhood and the wider world".

Problems for the British Government

If the report has correctly described modern-day British society, the British state faces three thorny issues. Firstly, it is odd that the British government has chosen to de-naturalise and expel members of British society from within it ranks who by all accounts should be considered British. If modern-day British society is composed of individuals and groups who possess multiple identities and who have divided loyalties, the stark distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' offers no long-term solution to the terrorist threat faced by Britain. These measures will only drive a wedge between different groups of British society as some are considered more British than others.

Secondly, it is debatable if de-naturalisation and deportation of individuals will be helpful in increasing the security of British citizens. By considering deportation as an option, the British government has drawn a distinction between homegrown and foreign fanatics. This distinction, however, may be false. Due to the globalisation of ideas where information flows freely between borders and appeals to individuals regardless of nationality, the British government has failed to consider the possibility that 'homegrown' fanatics are, to a degree, the creation of both developments within British society and global events. Instead, the British government has assumed the more comfortable notion that foreign fanatics have transported violence from their home countries to Britain and are actively recruiting and brainwashing local Muslims to fight proxy wars.

Thirdly, these new measures resemble the deportation of dissenters and convicts by the British state to the United States, Australia and the West Indies from the late-1700s. If history is to be any guide here, these new measures will no doubt be as unsuccessful in purging Britain of 'undesirables' and their 'undesirable' viewpoints as it was in the past.

Can Multiculturalism Stand Its Ground?

The issues raised here are by no means problems faced only by the British state. The proposed measures have followed the precedence set by other European nations such as Germany, Italy and France. These issues cut to the core of the balancing act that liberal

societies must face in maintaining open and inclusive societies, while also protecting members of their polity from extremist threats.

The problems outlined of course do not suggest that the project of multiculturalism and liberalism have to be abandoned. A strong argument can be made that Britain will be able to eradicate extremist elements within its ranks because of its diversity rather than in spite of it. There is benefit in recognising that its social composition is made up of individuals and groups with multiple identities. This offers the possibility that if the right institutional practices are adopted, there will be enough individuals who will relate to their British-ness over their other multiple competing identities, and for them to then take a stand against those who seek to tear up the British national fabric.

But what are these correct institutional practices? The Parekh Report here may offer a possible solution. The report holds that "shared cultural meanings" along with "the common national story" are necessary steps to bond a nation of individuals into a multicultural social unit. The emphasis here is on social cohesion as a British nation where differences are acknowledged and celebrated and where diversity is not divisive.

The crucial mechanism for accomplishing this is democratic citizenship where an identity as citizen is created through the enthusiastic participation in the democratic process. Consequently, with these shared bonds forged by being a member of the democratic process, members of a polity can feel a sense of membership, solidarity and empathy for fellow citizens whom they may never personally know.

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