RUNNYMEDE

Conservatism and Community Cohesion

A Perspective by Dominic Grieve QC MP
with responses from Professors **Lord Bhikhu Parekh**, University of Westminster, **Montserrat Guibernau**, Queen Mary University of London, **Ludi Simpson**, Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research, University of Manchester and **Shamit Saggar,** University of Sussex

About Runnymede

Runnymede is an independent policy research organization focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded as a Charitable Educational Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in close collaboration with eminent thinkers and policy makers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. We believe that the way ahead lies in building effective partnerships, and we are continually developing these with the voluntary sector, the government, local authorities and companies in the UK and Europe. We stimulate debate and suggest forward-looking strategies in areas of public policy such as education, the criminal justice system, employment and citizenship.

Since 1968, the date of Runnymede's foundation, we have worked to establish and maintain a positive image of what it means to live affirmatively within a society that is both multi-ethnic and culturally diverse. Runnymede continues to speak with a thoughtful and independent public voice on these issues today.

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Foreword

Race equality is a core value that transcends political boundaries. No mainstream UK political party seeks to operate racist policies, and all would agree that racists hold an illogical, immoral, and untenable position. This does not mean that the priority given or policy developed to tackle race inequality is not highly political. Political decision-making is crucial to creating a successful multi-ethnic Britain. Political decisions matter in areas as diverse as legislation to protect against discrimination and promote equality, the regulation of practice in public, private and voluntary sectors, the funding of voluntary sector organizations, redistribution through taxation and spending, enabling good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, security and counteracting terrorism, and responding to race inequalities in education, health, criminal justice, housing, employment and representation. While there is broad consensus among mainstream parties that racism is unacceptable, political parties take very different positions on the role of government and the state in the necessary steps to eliminate it.

Runnymede has initiated this series of papers in order to enable senior representatives of mainstream political parties to set out their views on what action is necessary to tackle race inequality and create a cohesive ethnically diverse society at ease with itself. Political parties and their representatives give voice to particular world views – they work from ideology and principle to develop legislation, policy and practice to shape our society. These world views or political traditions act as motivations for their actions, shape the debate internally within parties, and inform their interaction with other parties to political debate.

Our febrile political discussions do not often provide enough space for reflection on the relationship between core principles and political decision-making. This is likely to be even more the case during election campaigns, such as that we are due to enter in 2010. Runnymede is keen to create the space for senior politicians to reflect on what their political tradition has to offer contemporary debates on race equality and good race relations. We believe this to be particularly important given that so much of modern politics is subject to Macmillan's famous dictum; 'Events, dear boy, events'. The mixture of cool and collected thinking, political bargaining, 'kite-flying', focus groups, and triangulation that goes into producing manifestos is often quickly superseded by the need to respond to events. At these points it is crucial to understand the core principles that will underlie the likely decisions to be made.

Whichever political party finds itself in government after the general election, it is important that organizations that are focused on race equality engage with political representatives of all hues. This already often occurs at a local level, but at national level there is a requirement that our political debate recognizes that all have a role to play in delivering a successful multi-ethnic society.

In this paper, Dominic Grieve QC, the Conservative Shadow Spokesman for Justice, sets out a Conservative vision of community cohesion and relates this to proposals for reform of human rights legislation. In the spirit of open debate, the author was keen to hear responses from expert academics in the field. We are grateful to Professors Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Montserrat Guibernau, Ludi Simpson and Shamit Saggar for their contributions to this paper and to the ongoing discussion. We have invited senior politicians from the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Scottish National Party to engage in a similar way, and we will be publishing their responses in the coming months.

A healthy political debate about race demands that all political traditions create the space for reflection and decision-making that will provide improved outcomes for all in our ethnically diverse society. We hope that this contribution, alongside our hosting of the re-constituted All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community, regular parliamentary briefings, and regional events bringing together local MPs and community organizations will play a significant part in creating debate and improving intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain.

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Conservatism and Community Cohesion

Dominic Grieve QC MP

The debate on the growth of ethnic and cultural diversity in Britain, and the identity politics that flows from it, challenges our thinking on our nation's social fabric and its character. It is a difficult topic but it cannot be ignored. The issue of achieving successful co-existence between people of diverse backgrounds is one of which we are constantly made aware. We are experiencing globalization through large scale movements of peoples encouraged by both population growth, deteriorating economic and environmental conditions in some countries, and by the potential offered by technological advances. As a result there are more of us living in the same defined geographical space with differing political ideals, religious beliefs, perceptions of the past and the cultural differences that flow from these. I do not subscribe to the theory of a clash of civilizations but there is undoubtedly a challenge and it is a politician's job to address this on behalf of those who entrust us with the country's governance.

Community cohesion is a display of the values of a country and so has a significant political dimension to it. Politicians may differ as to how best societal cohesion can be achieved but no mainstream politician would disagree about the need for it to be a central objective of government. Ensuring the peace of the nation, both from external and internal threat, is after all one of our primary responsibilities. A fragmented, dysfunctional or fearful society is clearly one open to divisions which can be exploited by those wanting to stir up violence, or promote political or religious extremism. To allow conditions to develop which would permit such a threat to materialize would be breaking the contract between government and the people who had elected it to safeguard their interests.

Since the 1970s multiculturalism has increasingly become the West's chief tool in its governments' efforts to develop civil society. In this country it soon became part of Labour's vision, being the paradigm through which Labour viewed its policies for race relations and diversity. This is not surprising. On a practical level many Labour politicians with urban seats, which played host to the waves of migrants arriving here in the late 20th

century, had an understanding of the difficulties facing those seeking to integrate long before many Conservatives who did not have to address these issues in the first instance. Moreover the politics of the left were much more compatible with the ideals of multiculturalism and so it was more easily incorporated in a philosophy of socialist ideals.

Multiculturalism in this country found its expression in Runnymede's report The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain. The report published in 2000 was the culmination of two years' work by the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain chaired by Lord Parekh. The report set out to add flesh to the bones of the then government's laudable commitment to creating:

> 'One Nation', a country where 'every colour is a good colour… every member of every part of society is able to fulfil their potential…. racism is unacceptable and counteracted… everyone is treated according to their needs and rights… everyone recognises their responsibilities… racial diversity is celebrated'. (Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain, 2000, p. xv)

Obviously there are points in the Parekh Report with which any sensible politician would agree but it is based on political principles that Conservatives find difficult to reconcile with their own. The Commission translated One Nation aspirations into a far-reaching social commitment recommending that:

> … the concept of equality and diversity must be driven through the government machinery at local and national levels. (pp.106-7)

> and

> … there must be a commitment to go beyond the racism and culture blind strategies of social inclusion currently under way. Programmes such as the New Deal for Communities are essential. They must however have an explicit focus on race equality and cultural diversity (pp. 296-7)

It was welcomed by some, particularly on the left, as a serious critique of the structures of the British State. It suggested that our society was institutionally racist and it offered proposals to recreate the identity of our country on the basis of being a community of

diverse communities. Others at the time saw it as a deconstructionist document that, if implemented, would leave any sense of a common bond in tatters. There was a lot of journalistic apoplexy. As is common in such cases many had only read the executive summary from which it was difficult to escape the conclusion that it was designed to provoke, to shake us out of complacency.

The report was authoritative and it proved to be seminal to Labour's thinking. I may have considerable doubts as to the report's methodology, but I am quite clear that it was an earnest and decent attempt to seek a way forward for the principles of equality and diversity in a complex arena.

Multiculturalism thus became part of the nation's received wisdom at the end of the 20th century and the approach had some value. It has done much to teach us about each other's cultures and to have respect for individual differences. It challenged our attitudes, and way of life. It is easy to forget that even in the 1960s, an era usually characterized as progressive with the arrival of the Beatles, Carnaby Street and Mary Quant, we were inclined to judge identity according to societal standing, religious allegiance, and colour. It was the same era that still featured signs in windows of lodging houses saying – 'no blacks'. Discriminatory attitudes against Irish Catholics and against Jews were commonplace. Profound change was needed and this is what the promoters of multiculturalism as a political theory have sought to achieve.

Multiculturalism was intended to create a more cohesive and friendlier society by facilitating bringing people together to achieve a shared future. But instead the concepts underlying it seem better able to drive people apart by endangering our traditional sense of community based on shared values collectively acquired. There is a dichotomy here. While acknowledging the importance of shared values as a basis on which multiculturalism can flourish, what has actually happened through a corruption of multiculturalism into political correctness is an undervaluing of existing British identity. As is so often the case, the undoing of a policy can be traced through the law of unintended consequences, leading to a worthy ideal becoming corrupted. The infinite complexity of human relations to which the policy was applied and the zeal of bureaucratic implementation produced distortions that were

unforeseen. With multiculturalism a whole industry of political correctness has sprung up on its back until we have reached the point that policy logic has overridden common sense.

Hot cross buns were banned in a school as liable to give offence to Muslims when no Muslim had complained about it. We have witnessed Morris dancers who blacken their faces, traditionally to disguise their identity, being banned from a primary school's multicultural celebration for fear of causing offence. The head teacher of that school commented 'We organized the event to bring a diverse and fragile community together'. Yet instead of explaining the tradition behind the masking she found it easier to ban the Morris men's performance for 'fear of causing offence' (BBC website, 29 June 2009). As Jim Snelling, one of the Morris dancers, said, 'I understand the school's concern but it is a shame they didn't take the opportunity to find out or ask us along to have a discussion about this fairly important part of our culture' (ibid).

We have also seen the Church of England report, What Makes a Good City? (Graham and Lowe, 2009), claiming that the Government has become 'unbalanced' in its approach to faith groups. The report claims that there is a 'great deal of inconsistency in the way individual (Government) Ministers deal with religious groups'. It said, 'Christian groups in particular have suffered irrational prejudice against their funding applications' and that one particular faith group was being favoured over others (Daily Telegraph, 12 July 2009).

More recently, government departments instructed that recommendations for next year's Queen's Birthday honours should be proportional to the ethnic make-up the population rather being made on merit as has always been the intention. (Daily Telegraph, 12 July 2009).

Increasing prescription is robbing us of our ability to decide ourselves what is right and wrong. My colleague Sayeeda Warsi has highlighted in the treatment of forced marriages a disinclination to criticize attitudes which are morally unacceptable to a modern Western tradition. Forced marriages are a violation against women and should not be protected as an 'ethnic' issue – as to do so raises the spectacle of double standards. In Sayeeda's words:

There has been a failure on the part of policy makers to respond to this situation. Some of it has been done in the name of cultural sensitivity and we've just avoided either discussing or dealing with this matter head on.

A deepening concern is the way that government initially turned a Nelsonian eye to the growth of corrupt political and electoral practices for fear of alienating ethnic minority communities. Committed in the name of all parties by a small minority these have become a stain on the reputation of some ethnic minority communities to the detriment of many of their members who abhor such actions. Indeed it was to escape such practices in their countries of origin that brought them or their parents to these shores. The lack of effective action has led to the very position we should be striving to avoid – the denigration of the many by the bad practices of a few. Indeed the reluctance to exercise reasonable judgment and to criticise or challenge negative cultural imports by some immigrants into our country is one of the most troubling consequences of a culture that wishes to avoid offence and accusations of racism.

In its purest sense multiculturalism is a reflection of a society of diverse cultures. But in its corruptive sense it has come to mean a political philosophy that is a mixture of political correctness, grossly exaggerated respect for cultural identity of groups and a tendency to deal with people as if they should be categories for policy purposes in convenient niches of faith, race or colour.

Conservatives must shoulder some of the blame for letting the intention of the Runnymede Report descend into the mire of political correctness. In 2000, the year the report was published, the Conservative Party was in no position to challenge or to offer effective political opposition to the premises that underlay the report. It was three years after one of the most crushing electoral defeats in our history when few were willing to listen to a distinctive Conservative approach to these issues and the Party was not is a good state to develop or market new ideas.

The lack of a credible response from the mainstream right to the current issues of multiculturalism has left a gap that extremist voices were ready to fill. The British National Party has taken advantage of it to suggest

policies not based on a reasoned morality but which play on fear and encourage hatred. By so doing they threaten the very basis of community cohesion that multiculturalism was developed to promote.

It is noteworthy how rapidly the attractions of multiculturalism have waned. One week before I gave the Lord Smith lecture to an audience at Queen Mary's University (on which this essay is based), Hazel Blears MP, the then Communities and Local Government Secretary of State, following the lead of her predecessor, Ruth Kelly MP, became the second senior Labour politician to announce that a change of emphasis was necessary. Blears warned the 'pendulum has swung too far'. She spoke of the rising fear 'that we don't do things because people will be offended', she spoke of political correctness gone mad', and she lamented the tendency to 'over-estimate people's sensitivities' (Lecture to the London School of Economics, 25 February 2009). Her speech appeared to mark the point that the approach of multiculturalism ran into the buffers.

While this has been happening the common values that can unite us have been attacked. Freedom under the law is being remorselessly eroded. The rule of law is the backbone of this country's constitutional arrangements and of civil society. In the last ten years we have seen a willingness by government to by-pass basic legal principles in the name of administrative efficiency and control. By so doing the Government has weakened the rule of law and made it more selective.

We have seen the rise of administrative penalties that are imposed without due process of law, be they ASBOS, or fixed penalties, or the introduction of control orders to restrict the liberty of those unconvicted of any crime.
Basic principles of due process have been undermined with government demanding powers to detain for up to six weeks without charge, changing the burden of proof in some criminal cases to facilitate conviction, and there have been repeated attempts to limit the right to trial by jury. In the last eight years we have seen periods of pre charge detention in terrorist case extended from 7 to 28 days and it would have gone much further if the government had had its way. We were told that this measure was essential, yet it is noteworthy that since 2006 no detention has gone beyond 14 days. There was in 2003 a nearly successful attempt to oust the

jurisdiction of the High Court over administrative decisions by government in asylum cases.

We have seen the arrival of intrusive powers to acquire and retain on national databases information on the law-abiding and to share confidential information, given to the State for one specific purpose, between State and other agencies purportedly in the name of the wider public good.

In the case of the DNA database, this Government has evolved, until checked by the European Court of Human Rights, a doctrine allowing it to retain the DNA of innocent persons who may have been arrested but not charged with an offence thus creating a two tier society of the 'monitored' and the 'free' based on administrative convenience. There have even been signs that the government is trying to wriggle out of the requirements of the judgment.

We have seen centuries old principles that a person's home was inviolable to a bailiff seeking to carry out civil distress of goods overturned with impunity, so that the proud adage that 'an Englishman's home is his castle' will soon be but an historic memory. It has been documented that the State now has over 250 entry powers to a private home.

To our forebears this would have had all the hallmarks of a descent into tyranny. Some of them were prohibited in those ancient laws such as the Bill of Rights 1689, Habeas Corpus in 1674 and by judicial decision in the Five Knights case of 1628. Outside of the civil liberties lobby, however, the response has, until recently, been fairly muted. Yet as I have found when meeting minority groups, these things do matter, particularly if you feel you are on the receiving end of unwelcome State attention. What message for instance does the case of Binyam Mohamed convey in terms of our values when we are faced with accusations that we colluded with the USA in interrogation practices that were outlawed by the English Parliament in the mid 17th century? Equally what message is being sent out when one group perceives that another is getting preferential treatment? What was the reasoning behind allowing the Tamil demonstration to remain in Parliament Square for three weeks in breach of the law that had forbidden such activity and

has been enforced with a heavy hand against others? Why were the police so slow to intervene on the protestors outside the Danish embassy when they were clearly preaching violent hatred against others? Striving to preserve and uphold the principles of the rule of law applied without fear or favour is fundamental to the development of common values and likely to be far more beneficial than any industry of multiculturalism.

Our country has defined itself for many generations as a place where freedom of expression, political and religious, can be practised and indeed the whole trend in our history in the last two hundred years is of the gradual removal of the fetters of censorship on people's views and, to a great extent their behaviour, subject to the protection of others under our criminal law. Sedition is not a word you hear much of now and most would agree that it is high time it were removed from the statute book in exactly the same way as was the law on blasphemy.

The role of the law as an upholder of common values is a major force of social cohesion in an age of rapid changes; it acts as society's bonds, the glue that holds us together. We ought to be emphasizing its value all the time. But we are being subtly given the opposite message – that the price of diversity must be restrictions on freedom and this trend has been encouraged in the name of multiculturalism. We can see this with the example of the law on incitement to religious hatred and again now with the debate as to whether or not there should be a saving clause for freedom of speech in respect of incitement to hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation. As the proposals for religious hatred showed, the issue promoted division between groups, as it attracted the support of those which believed that the proposal could be used to their advantage to stifle criticism of themselves by others.

In the context of protecting society against acts of terrorism there have been new restrictions enacted that led to the arrest of protestors for reading out the names of soldiers killed in Iraq at the Cenotaph and to the risks that will now be run by those who photograph the police. Laws designed to protect this country from terrorism have been perceived to have been used by Government to protect itself from criticism as the case of Mr Wolfgang illustrated. Instead of improving our society this plethora of rule making is damaging us. We

are producing a society where individuals feel disempowered, lack a clear sense of perspective and place ever greater demands on the State which can only be fulfilled by the State obtaining more power at the individual's expense.

For Conservatives it is therefore time to consider how we can set about achieving a better balance between the spirit of the Runnymede report and its results. Whilst we are against racism as morally unacceptable, the notion of a society created on the back of overt State manipulation is a socialist concept that we find as offensive as we believe it to be counter-productive. Under the leadership of David Cameron, with a general election on the horizon and public opinion on multiculturalism moving from scepticism to cynicism, Conservatives must now demonstrate that they have the ability and ideas to address the challenges of a multicultural society and articulate them within the Party's tradition and language.

In trying to provide a reasoned contribution to the multiculturalism debate, there is much in the Conservative tradition which can guide us. While Conservatism is often seen as being instinctively against change, the reality is very different. Conservatism has an unsung and sometimes radical tradition of pragmatically applying its political principles to changing circumstances. We only have to think of the heritage of Disraeli, Wilberforce, Peel and Thatcher each of whom in their own way moved Conservatism out if its comfort zone into a more progressive agenda. There is also our philosophical heritage: a heritage based on the writings of Adam Smith, Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville amongst others. Perhaps de Tocqueville best summed up my starting point by saying:

> Liberty … infuses throughout the body social an activity, a force and an energy which never exists without it, and which bring forth wonders.

There are overwhelming moral reasons why as a society we should not and must not tolerate discrimination on the grounds of race, faith or ethnicity. In the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers of the United States well presented the position with which any politician claiming to be the heir of the 18th-century enlightenment, 19th-century liberalism and 20th-century pragmatism would agree:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

> The need for liberty or freedom to enable individual enterprise, innovation and motivation to flourish is a fundamental Conservative tenet and is well known to be at the heart of Conservative economics. What Conservatives have not yet done is to take that thinking into the social arena of community cohesion.

This is of course an area fraught with difficulties. Society is never static – new challenges are constantly being thrown up. But in the first instance we believe that it is individuals making up society itself who can best provide the solutions through self-control and responsibility. It is through the exercise of everyday contact and the constant exchange of views and opinions that we moderate each other's attitudes and behaviour. Creating that contact, breaking down ghettos of the mind and instilling confidence in our ability to learn from each other are the essentials.

In a recent article Cass Sustein, adviser to President Obama, pointed out the danger of 'group and polarisation'. He wrote 'when people find themselves in groups of like minded types they are especially likely to move to extremes' (Spectator, 4 July 2009). From street gang to Al Qaeda, the danger is that narrow group-thinking leads to unbending, uncompromising reinforcement of ideas. The relevance to the community cohesion debate is apparent. Skewed multiculturalism has forced people to a great extent into thinking of their own type as distinct groups rather than as parts of a whole. Once the identity of that group becomes its primary interest, it then needs to be defended and enhanced whether through special treatment or specific privileges.

A further problem is that people also do not then feel free to modify each other's behaviour if the unpredictable line of political correctness frightens them. The zealous regulation of conduct, the imposition of State-defined orthodoxy on public and private conscience, and the overburdening of law and regulation, have the consequence of undermining that confidence and deterring participation and engagement. Fear itself creates

uncertainty and we are finding the centre of the debate becomes the validity of political correctness itself rather than the appropriateness of a word or action.

When common natural understanding fails, the government, as chosen by the people, does have to intervene to reconcile differences. Within this essentially conservative approach, the role of government is a passive one of protecting common understanding. This is at odds with how the present government sees its role. Of late, it is not common sense that is being used to moderate societal norms but it is the Government that has become the arbiter of what is acceptable and what is not. There is a profound difference in attitude in political terms: on the one hand the Conservative approach of having a free society where people learn to influence each other's behaviours by intermingling and by reasoned argument supported, as a last resort, by the requirements of the rule of law; and on the other hand the Labour Party's approach under which the government through legislation determines a template of how we should behave.

As a Conservative I am all for promoting a tranquil and tolerant society of opportunity but both my instinct and the evidence suggest to me that it will never be achieved by regulation. So we as Conservatives must offer a different view – one that rests on our principles of freedom protected by the rule of law, pluralism in place of individual group rights and freedom of thought and expression.

One of the fundamental contributions to our identity lies in our laws and the freedom to be enjoyed under them. This is why I believe that there is merit in looking to the creation of a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities to help better define European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) prescriptions and ensure that the principles in the ECHR are expressed so as to be seen as being relevant to all people, and not as at present an international obligation that seems on occasion to appear to privilege certain individuals over the rights of the law abiding majority.

Preparing such a Bill would also provide us with an opportunity to engage in a national debate as to what aspects of our legal and constitutional framework constitute core values in the area of civil liberties that could merit better protection than the

Human Rights Act itself currently affords.

For example I believe that the right to trial by jury in indictable cases should be protected as a key feature of our participatory democracy. We may also wish to add to the right to freedom of expression in the ECHR and ensure that principles of equality under the law are spelt out – an important issue in countering the current lobbying for special privileges for different groups.

There are also sound arguments for including the obligations of individuals to the wider community as well. The Ipsos MORI report,: People, Perceptions and Place (2009,), informs us that the perception that people do not treat each other with respect in a given local area is by far the biggest negative driver of cohesion. But parental control is the biggest positive driver of cohesion. Ipsos MORI's report also shows that the proportion of young people in an area seems to be negatively related to both overall satisfaction with that area and of its cohesion – they also show that parents taking enough responsibility for the behaviour of their children can be a positive driver (ibid, pp. 25-6). We should perhaps worry less therefore as to whether division in communities are linked to race and religion and concentrate more on promoting good neighbourliness in its widest sense.

While some rights are properly absolute, there is no reason under the ECHR why the failure to act in a neighbourly and acceptable way should not be taken into account if an individual seeks to invoke rights. If the document we produce is well worded and is perceived to provide protection to rights and freedoms then it will become effective in defining common values so that people in Britain of different backgrounds may feel ownership of it.

Conservatives have a special reverence for understanding the past so that you can understand the present. I have particular concerns about the desire expressed in the Parekh Report of 're-imagining our national story'. History itself has taught us that when a government decides to recast the past to support a particular view then disaster follows.

We might not like all that our ancestors did nor choose to emulate their mores, but what they did and how they did it have informed where we are today. A national character is organic, being

shaped by its past and inter cultural exchanges. Fragmentation of the past means that the anchors of society are weakened, becoming increasingly meaningless.

We thus need to pay attention to how we educate our children in an understanding of the country they live in. Much has been made in recent years of whether or not faith-based education contributes to communities leading parallel lives. My own impression, however, is that this matters far less than the absence of a proper teaching of history and civics. In most cases, as I keep on discovering when I address 6th forms it is plainly not taught at all.

We need to ensure that new British citizens have an understanding of how our country has evolved, just as it is essential that the settled population has an understanding of the history that has shaped the lives of immigrants and the issues which informed their personal or family decision to come here. It is these values, honed by history, that have created our legal and constitutional arrangements. To the present government this historic sense of Britishness has been attacked as incompatible with modernity. There was even the 'Cool Britannia' experiment when everything from the tails of British planes to our constitutional arrangements were subjected to revision and revamping to make them compatible with Labour's attempt to recast the nation-state as a new entity.

In schools, the dumbing down of history has resulted in a system where the teaching of a narrative of British history has all but vanished. Instead of children being taught to take interest in and have respect for past events and individuals who have shaped their lives, they are encouraged to be contemptuous of people who in the past did not live up to the then unknown values of modern Britain.

Our nation's identity goes back a long way to the often painful process by which our country has been transformed in six centuries from a royal autocracy reinforced by compulsory religious orthodoxy and tempered only by the common law, by custom and the occasional recalcitrance of parliament to bend to the royal will and in extremis a notable willingness to rebel, to the pluralist democracy we take for granted today. From the Saxon moot court, through Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and onwards, freedom and equality under the law has been central to

what English and with it British identity has been all about. Its development may have been haphazard and at times the product of accident rather than design but develop it did.

It is a remarkable story and we are fortunate that others before us chose, often in difficult circumstances, and not without sometimes serious conflict to protect and expand rights and freedoms when it must have been very tempting not to do so. The religious settlements hammered out between the 16th and 19th centuries which gave us complete religious freedom required much forbearance. From forbearance has come tolerance

This, I suggest, more than any other single thing, is what has made our country so attractive to immigrants: the chance of enjoying the freedom to lead one's life without arbitrary State interference in an environment that places the greatest stress on the right of individuals to security of person and property.

I am convinced that negation of our past has hindered more recent immigrants to this country developing a sense of belonging. Faced with a society that seems to be suffering an identity crisis, should we be surprised that they find a common identity with their fellow countrymen hard to identify? Creating a sense of belonging will not be achieved either by denying or suppressing the identity of newcomers. Indeed the varied stories of newcomers and their history of their countries of origins and the circumstances in which they or their forebears made the choice to come to Britain are all part of our shared historical narrative. I believe that the things which unite us in a common bond and can bring us together and command respect across race and religion are there, but are all too often hidden beneath the surface. I am struck as to how often I have been told by groups of alienated young British Muslims that they live in a society without any values at all.

I do not find this surprising. It seems to me that the more confident people are in their own identities the easier they find it to engage with the identities of others who have different cultural roots. Lack of understanding of origin and identity is the breeding ground in all of irrational fear of others and from them spring extremism and intolerance. 'Britishness' as an identity that can encompass all people of goodwill choosing to live in this country

and which can contribute to social cohesion has been replaced with a citizenship definition that is chiefly seen as the portal for the consumption of State services and for demanding special privileges funded at the State's expense. So the 'Britishness' of the 'shared imagination and emotion' that Amartya Sen has shown can play a key role in minimizing difference and creating at best a comfortable and sustaining environment for all citizens, is lacking.

Finally, we must ensure at all times that our society remains open and accessible so that all citizens, whether the settled or more newly arrived, can contribute to national life. I supported the efforts that are being made to encourage greater participation in our civic life by all eligible citizens. If our democratic system is to work to its full potential then all the people of this country have to be able to believe that it works for them. In concluding I would not wish to leave an impression of pessimism about the future because I am on the contrary optimistic that the problems we are experiencing in creating cohesion are readily solvable. Indeed I am mindful that Ipsos-MORI's recent Place Survey tells us that 80 per cent of people are satisfied with their local area as a place to live. A report for London Councils showed that 85 per cent of Londoners say their local area is a place where people of different backgrounds get on well together (London Councils: Survey of Londoners 2007/ 2008). All the signs are today that where people do not co-operate together for the common good it is because there is a breakdown of neighbourly society. We need to make every effort to resuscitate it. We recognize that solutions must involve a higher degree of local involvement as it is those who have first hand knowledge of the local landscape, with all its high and low spots, who are best able to construct the right response.

When one considers the extent and rapidity of the changes to which we have been subject, and some of the prophecies of doom, particularly in the media, that have come with it, what is most striking is our resilience as a society in absorbing and managing that change, whatever our shortcomings. Far from being an unhealthy sign, I see the debate generated over multiculturalism as an indicator of a country that is accepting of pluralism and doing exactly what is needed. But we will only succeed in developing a community

of values and a shared understanding of national identity if we allow all people the freedom to discover and to coalesce around their shared aspirations, arguing out areas of disagreement.

We should also have the self confidence to conclude that we have reached a point in respect of the evolution of community cohesion in Britain where there is sufficient commonality of aspiration between people of all backgrounds to enable us to shift the emphasis away from targeted privileges that favour one group over another, to creating opportunities for all. There is clear evidence that they create division and undermine the objectives for which we should be striving. Some confidence building measures may still be needed but the sooner we can move away from State dispensed favours to particular ethnic or religious groups the better. I have tried to set out a framework based on a Conservative vision: a vision based on limited State interference in our freedom, the role of the past in shaping our present identities, the strength that lies in the common sense of individuals living out their lives in common and strict limits on State prescription and interference. The imposition of State devised models will fail and the biggest challenge for politicians and academics alike is to recognize that this is the case.

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A Response to Dominic Grieve

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I was a discussant when Mr Dominic Grieve delivered his paper as a lecture at Queen Mary College. He said in response that the occasion reminded him of receiving professorial comments in an Oxford tutorial, and that he agreed with some of my comments and disagreed with others. Although his revised paper addresses some of my concerns, I remain unconvinced by parts of it. I only hope that the following comments do not sound too professorial!

Dominic Grieve does two things in his paper. First, he attacks multiculturalism. He thinks that it leads to political correctness, stifles uninhibited criticism of minority communities, creates cultural ghettos, and heavily relies on an interventionist and authoritarian State to ensure group equality and protect group identities.

Second, he thinks that social cohesion and national unity, important desiderata in any society including ours, require a British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, shared common values, teaching national history, and trusting the good sense of the members of different communities rather than the State to negotiate their relations. I shall take in each turn.

While some of the things that Mr Grieve says at both levels are unproblematic and well said, difficulties remain. His critique of multiculturalism is one-sided. Like any new idea, multiculturalism is open to misinterpretation and misuse, but the response to that should not be to reject it but rather to tease out and assess its inspiring principles and show how it is best understood. Multiculturalism has sometimes been taken to mean that every culture is morally self-contained and cannot be judged and criticized from outside, and that is it self-authenticating and must be respected. This is clearly untenable and Mr Grieve is right to highlight its absurdity. The point however is that this is an extreme view and few within the minority communities hold it. They have long been used to the internal and external criticism of their ways of thought and life, and have built up a rich tradition of critical discourse. In Britain, they have freely accepted that some of their practices such as polygamy, forced marriages, and female circumcision are morally unacceptable and need to change. There was little or no protest when the law banned these practices. The question of free speech has proved contentious. While some minority spokesmen favour greater restraint on it when religion is involved, others take a different view. This debate however is not limited to them, and is shared with many in the wider society who believe that the liberal tendency to absolutize or privilege free speech needs to be rethought.

Multiculturalism stands for a very different view to what Dominic Grieve holds. It is based on two basic beliefs. First, culture matters to people as an important source of their values and ideals, the basis of family cohesion, and the source of continuity. It therefore deserves respect and should not be undermined in a zeal for assimilationist integration.

Second, no culture is self-contained and self-authenticating. It has its strengths, and limitations, treasures and blind spots, and needs to engage in a critical dialogue with others. A multicultural society is one where cultures interact and learn from each other rather than one composed of sealed ghettos.

As a doctrine based on these two beliefs, multiculturalism both respects cultural differences and seeks to create the social and economic conditions in which cultures feel relaxed and curious enough to explore their differences and commonalities, and in the process both enrich themselves and help create a rich common culture. Judged by this standard, multiculturalism in Britain is pretty poorly developed. Far from having tried and failed, we have not tried hard enough. We have no doubt welcomed a variety of cuisines, music, the arts, etc., but not a variety of values, visions of the good life, forms of family, and structures of interpersonal relations. If we stopped pathologizing minority cultures and encouraged them to bring to our national life what is valuable in their history and traditions, we would not only create a richer Britain but also remove their diffidence and inward looking tendencies. Dominic Grieve condemns political correctness and the concomitant tendency to inhibit criticism. Political correctness is an ambiguous expression. It could mean not saying things that offend others,

but it could also mean not demeaning others and subjecting them to negative and hostile stereotypes. We no longer use the word 'Nigger' because we know its history and appreciate its racially aggressive and intimidating connotation. Should we allow it? I can't believe that Dominic Grieve thinks so. If a culture is insensitive to the repulsive connotations and overtones of certain expressions, minorities are right to correct it. This is a matter of basic political decency and mutual respect, and such limits as it imposes on free speech are fully legitimate.

Many of the examples of so-called political correctness are often misrepresented by the media. A teacher was reported to have complained to the parents of a five year-old girl because she was talking a good deal about Christianity. The media reported this is a case of anti-Christian bias. In fact the young girl had been in the habit of telling her non-Christian friends that since they were not Christians they would go to hell, and describing the scenes of hell fire in some detail. Naturally she had picked it up from her parents. The teacher was right to protect the deeply distressed non-Christian girls. Stories about secular stamps at Christmas, hot cross buns, etc. were similarly distorted in the media. It is also worth noting that in some of these cases, minorities especially the Muslims had raised no objection. Some secularists feared that they might, and on their own banned the relevant practices. Sometimes they were well meaning. On other occasions they had their own agenda and used the largely imaginary Muslim grievances to promote it.

Let me now turn to Dominic Grieve's prescription. He talks about the British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities as an alternative to the current incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights. Since he does not spell it out in length, it is difficult to comment on his proposal. Although the new Bill might be more nuanced and balanced than the one that is currently operative, there is a real danger that it could also be regressive and biased towards the anxieties of the 'law abiding majority' and against individuals' liberties, especially those of immigrants and asylum seekers.

Dominic Grieve talks of common values and mentions equality, democracy, rule of law etc. No one disagrees with these, not even the minorities.

The difficulty is twofold. First, these common values exclude respect for diversity, accommodation of legitimate differences, and institutionalized space for negotiating differences. Second, and more important, common values remain rhetorical unless they are institutionalized, lead to appropriate public policies, and become a lived experience for all our citizens. If they do not, no amount of official preaching will create social cohesion. Equality, democracy, etc. become lived experience for minorities when the latter are not subjected to discrimination, disadvantage, negative stereotypes etc. and enjoy equality of opportunity, access to necessary public resources, and so on. This is where the State comes in at both national and local levels. Dominic Grieve cannot be serious in his commitment to common values if he denies the State's legitimate role in realizing them. The State, of course, should not be bureaucratic or excessively interventionist, but the answer to that lies not in denying its role but rather in democratizing it.

Finally, Dominic Grieve stresses the teaching of history, especially the British. I agree entirely. The past shapes the present and the future, and is never wholly past or dead. It also provides a perspective on the present, and articulates our sense of collective identity. The past however is a cluster of countless related and unrelated events. They need to be ordered, interpreted and digested into a coherent story, and that is the domain of history.

How do we construct and teach British history? It can't be entirely celebratory or dismissive, and needs to be balanced. It can't be exclusive either, and needs to tell the story of all groups who are or have been part of British society in a manner that does justice to their experiences. On a fairly standard view of British history, it is a story of a highly talented, disciplined and civilized people who invented liberty and democracy, spread it to the rest of the world more or less in a spirit of altruism, defended them against the Nazis, and saved both Europe and the world from new barbarism. On another view, best expressed by Christopher Hill, a very different picture emerges and it is striking that Dominic Grieve's British history has no place for it. As Hill puts it:

> *We have a great deal to be ashamed of in our history. We promoted and profited by the slave trade; we plundered India and Africa…. we forced*

the opium trade on China, attempted to suppress the American, French and Russian revolutions, and were guilty of centuries of oppression of the Irish people. I do not want a school history which boasts about our victories over lesser breeds - Spaniards, Frenchmen, Germans, Russians, Argentinians - nor over helpless colonial peoples.

Both views capture important aspects of British past. Students exposed to only one of them are not only taught half-truths, and by implication half and even total lies, but are also ill-equipped to live in peace with their fellow citizens. This is what the Runnymede Report (Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain, 2000) had in mind when, in spite of the anticipated furore, it emphasized the need to 'reimagine our national story' as the basis for a new national imagination and a shared sense of belonging.

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A Response

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In his paper Dominic Grieve denounces multiculturalism as a divisive doctrine corrupted by political correctness; he also reflects on insufficient emphasis placed in fostering a common British national identity and sets up a strategy to advance social cohesion from a conservative perspective. For him, this involves a renewed emphasis on liberty in detriment of what he regards as an overarching and controlling State.

Multiculturalism implies tolerance of diversity, equal dignity and equal rights for individuals belonging to different groups living within a single nation-state. After recognizing the value of multiculturalism as a doctrine defending the principles of equality and diversity, Grieve reflects upon the consequences of its particular implementation in Britain. In his view:

> multiculturalism was intended to create a more cohesive and friendlier society by facilitating bringing people together to achieve a shared future. But instead the concepts underlying it seem better able to drive people apart by endangering our traditional sense of community based on shared values collectively acquired.

In my view, the biggest challenge yet to be faced by Western nations concerns how to maintain social cohesion in the light of the realization that, within their borders, some ethnic minorities have created urban enclaves ruled by their own laws, culture and religion - that is, they have formed ghettos completely alien to mainstream society, its national identity, culture and values.

In Britain, this turned out to be a particularly poignant question after it was revealed that the perpetrators of the London bombings were British citizens, who obviously did not feel for their fellow citizens or share any loyalty towards the nation within which they were brought up and educated. They were people whose national identity had either remained elsewhere or had been replaced by some kind of religious identity, which permitted the association of their actions with martyrdom.

Suddenly, claims to preserve national identity have come to the fore, accompanied by a renewed and unprecedented insistence on the integration of ethnic communities. Beyond this, the most fundamental issue, not only for Britain but also for the United States of America and other Western countries, is how to maintain social cohesion by generating a minimal sense of shared identity among a diverse citizenry including some sectors of the population who clearly despise Western culture, laws, principles and way of life. This is a very difficult task; however a first step may consist of analysing the origins of the current situation.

In my view, two main reasons may be identified:

1. A blind promotion of difference. The necessary and just fight against racism and ethnic discrimination defended by multiculturalism, in some instances, has led to the often-blind promotion of difference resulting in the endorsement of a number of values and practices in conflict or outright opposition with those of liberal democracy.

   Respect for cultural diversity and the belief that all cultures possess some valuable components does not involve a blind endorsement of those traditions and values, which stand against the principles governing liberal democratic societies. Liberal democracies should not tolerate – promote or fund – alternative cultures which do not respect the principles of democracy, equal rights and freedom. The limit of toleration should be placed right at the point where an aspect of a specific culture undermines the very principles of the democratic society that allows it to exist and develop within its borders.

2. Uncertainty about British identity. Respect and recognition of ethnic and cultural differences has not been matched by the promotion of a set of British values able to foster multiple identities among a British citizenry of diverse origin, culture and ethnicity. Thus, while the culture and values associated with some ethnic communities have attained visibility and recognition – and this is a fair and desirable outcome – the culture and values of Britishness remain blurred and often mixed up with those of Englishness. An overall British identity stays fuzzy. There is uncertainty about

the content of British identity, its values and principles. So far, attempts to promote some kind of constitutional patriotism primarily based upon universal principles have remained largely unsuccessful.

On national identity. British identity is not constrained to a firm believe in liberty, freedom, the rule of law and pluralism, although sharing them would undoubtedly represent a huge step for British society. The process of identification with the elements of a specific culture implies a strong emotional investment. Two major inferences deriving from this possess a particular significance when considering national identity:

First, a shared culture favours the creation of solidarity bonds among the members of a given community by allowing them to recognize each other as fellow national and imagine their community as separate and distinct from others.

Second, individuals socialized within a distinct culture tend to internalize its symbols, values, beliefs and customs as forming a part of themselves. Peoples with strong ethnic identities should be able to espouse multiple identities – Pakistani and British, Muslim and British, Chinese and British, etc. – made compatible by the non-negotiable respect for human rights and liberal democratic values. The overall consolidation of a British identity requires sharing a common culture, language, history, attachment to a particular territory and project for the future so that all citizens come to regard themselves as a people made up of different communities but willing to live and work together.

Of course, it is not necessary to share all these attributes to the full but, for a sense of common identity to emerge, at least some of these elements need to be shared. Multiple identities can only be successfully maintained within a liberal democratic society respecting and encouraging difference while maintaining a sense of commonality among its citizens.

I do not believe that immigrants should be expected to immediately adopt the culture and ways of life of their new society; this is a process generally realized in subsequent generations and which, in my view, should not result in complete assimilation. It is important for people's sense of self-esteem to

maintain and feel a particular attachment to their origins as a crucial part of their own individual identity. I defend the right of immigrants to preserve their own culture, but I also wish to stress their duty to accept the values entrenched in the political culture and institutions of the host society, to learn its language and traditions. To be sure, immigrants should be welcome into the host society, be granted social and economic rights, and in due course acquire political rights. They should not be exploited and marginalized.

Social mobility as a tool. Grieve's view of conservatism leads him to denounce the erosion of liberties and condemn what he regards as an excessive State prescription and interference in the life of its citizens. I subscribe to Grieve's emphasis on freedom and liberty; however, in order to promote civic cohesion, social mobility has to work because precisely this mechanism guarantees the emergence of an egalitarian society. Social mobility allows merit to overrun social and ethnic differences and this has to be fostered by the State, business and civic society alike. But, to develop, social mobility demands equal opportunities in terms of education, health and some other crucial social services. When differences in wealth within a single society exceed the bounds of what is reasonable or expected, social cohesion and a sense of common identity and purpose among citizens becomes difficult or even impossible to attain.

Individual freedom. By offering individuals a specific value system, a way of life and traditions, national identity bestows meaning upon specific social practices and situates the individual on a vantage point from which to relate, understand and value those of others. This is why national identity makes individual freedom meaningful.

National identity offers a moral anchor to individuals by means of the specific corpus of knowledge and values it embodies. This represents the context within which individuals make choices and foster solidarity bonds with fellow-nationals. Trust and mutual respect are likely to emerge among people socialized within a shared culture including a value system. In this regard, learning to be an active member of a national community ruled by liberal principles prepares the individual for active membership of the world community by providing the requisite grounding and motivation

for social justice commitments among citizens. To my concern, one of the major weaknesses of the liberal approach is its emphasis on individual rights and its disregard for collective rights. I consider that individual rights cannot be fully enjoyed if they are not conceived in a context of respect for collective rights. Thus, for an individual to be able to develop all his or her potential, he or she cannot be considered in isolation but as a member of one or more groups. Two sets of different rights which complement each other need to be taken into account: those concerning the individual as a free agent, and those related to the social dimension of individuals who live within specific communities. In late modernity, these communities tend to be nations.

After years of developing and promoting individual rights, we are now confronted with the socio-political need to counteract an exceedingly individualistic society threatened by a fragmentation resulting from a growing lack of civic coherence.

Comment

Professor Ludi Simpson
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It is refreshing to have issues arising from Britain's growing ethnic diversity treated as political matters rather than simply managerial ones. However, in claiming that multiculturalism became dangerously corrupted and that a colour-blind rule of law can bind a British identity, discussion is kept in an ideological atmosphere isolated from the evidence. The evidence is abundant, not so negative, and not so colour-blind.

Far from a fragmented, dysfunctional or fearful society, Britons of all shades are conditioned and motivated by common circumstances and aspirations. There are growing mixed-ethnicity friendship groups: for most ethnic minority young people, roughly half or more than half of our friends are White. There are no ghettos in Britain: all inner city neighbourhoods have White families and are ethnically diverse areas, from which minority Britons generally leave as frequently as White Britons. Research shows not only that young people of all backgrounds desire mixed areas and a better environment but that housing and employment choices are making greater mixing a reality. The chasms between entire cultural blocs supposedly created by multiculturalism don't exist.

Surveys repeatedly show that fear of dysfunction based on ethnic or religious divides is strongest amongst White people in Britain, and particularly among those who do not come into contact with Black, Asian or other minority Britons. Reality is less threatening than the common public image of cultural divides would have us believe.

In this context, a refusal to categorize individuals as if their interests and attitudes were determined by their ethnic or religious background is welcome. It does not follow that all is well in the UK garden. On average, minority Britons have to work harder and gain more qualifications to get the same opportunities in the labour market as their White peers. This isn't about where minority Britons live or how long we have lived in the UK: the disadvantage faced by minority Britons in employment continues for the generations born in the UK, and for those who live in the suburbs when compared to our neighbours.

So adherence to the rule of a colour-blind law is not enough if behaviour is colour-coded, as it appears to be in too many cases. The majority of letting agencies and employment agencies are willing to help their clients to avoid minority tenants or employees, according to research in 2009 (BBC, 2009). Laws dealing firmly with discrimination are necessary for the time being.

Good neighbourliness is a necessary part of community life. The evidence is clear that many city suburbs on the edge of diverse urban neighbourhoods are areas of relatively fast change in ethnic composition. Straightforward demography shows that more suburbs will continue to become ethnically diverse in the next decade or two. Residents of these now-White suburbs are often uneasy about change and often targeted by divisive ideologues who encourage fear. Such targeting is neither 'White' nor 'English' but political, and can be countered politically and socially. Local social investment in induction of new residents, school twinnings, and the like can support community development and good neighbourliness while dealing firmly with harassment of whatever motivation.

More generally, the name of the game is to name clearly the issues within the 'community cohesion' agenda, and few of them are best described culturally. Thus young people's friendship groups are not the problem, but anti-social behaviour might be. Wearing of the niqab or veil is rarely a problem, but women's rights to take part in the decisions that change their lives might be. Ghettos don't exist in Britain and aspirations of where to live are not a problem, but access to good quality housing certainly is. Similarly, it is lack of good schools in every town that is the problem rather than school segregation, which is much less created by ethnicity than by class.

Unfortunately many politicians and many journalists judge themselves by short-term success in the publicity arena. In that publicity arena it is often easier to appeal to popular fears which take the heat off the more intractable but real issues. Thus concerns about ghettos, segregation, and the corruption of multiculturalism have become parts of a litany that can be recited without reference to reality.

Whatever government is in power this year and next, there is a wealth of good research to draw upon. It can be used to help community cohesion policies work against divisive politics and to firmly deal with discrimination. Or the research, the divisive politics and the discrimination can all be ignored.

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Will a Conservative vision for community cohesion work?

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Dominic Grieve's essay on Conservativism and Cohesion points to the limits of identity politics in contemporary Britain. His insights are based on a long period of observation and reflection. Fortunately, he is sensitive to the charge that the modern Conservatives remain hostile to multi-ethnic society, and wisely points to similar concerns on the left. Above all, Grieve is left wondering what is there that unites us as a diverse society. And the critical, related question he airs is something of a choice: how far will his party's scepticism merely breed untrammelled cynicism, as opposed to creating the vital elements of a fresh and credible strategy to govern for all.

In this brief article, I look at each of these questions. I begin by briefly recapping on the Tory party's mixed track record on issues of immigration and ethnic diversity. I then describe the opportunity to build on One Nation traditions to reshape politics and public policy beyond the strait-jacket of ethnic identity. Finally, I end with a discussion of priorities in an area where few are articulated.

Shaking off Powellism. A prominent public servant remarked in the 1960s that Britain had lost an empire and acquired a multi-racial population in a fit of absent-mindedness. This reminds us that Britain's half century of experience of race relations has been, above all else, about pragmatic incrementalism. By comparison with French or German habits, we have not been guided by large theoretical generalizations about the capacity of different groups to live together as mutually respecting equals.

More than a generation ago, the issues of Commonwealth immigration rewarded the Conservatives and punished Labour. This was the race card at work. Immigration's saliency had combined with clear inter-party differences and sharply skewed public opinion in favour of the Tories. In the surprise result of June 1970, one estimate was that a 2 per cent swing was attributed to this factor. In May 1979 deep public hostility to immigration assisted Mrs Thatcher to victory. The period since has seen a tension between

Conservatives succumbing to the idea of winning votes cheaply on this issue on one hand, and on the other seeking ways to appeal to, and govern for, all on the other. It has been a bumpy internal battle among Conservatives. The leadership of Mr Cameron is a late, though not lost, opportunity to rebalance things within and beyond the party.

New Labour's dogged insistence that it will not haemorrhage support on this issue created centre-right realism on law and order, drug abuse, anti-social behaviour, and similar concerns. It was, after all, Jack Straw in 1995, as Shadow Home Secretary, who declared that 'We shall not let so much as a cigarette paper separate the public's perception of our policies towards migration with those of our opponents'.

Despite that, the reality today is that the electorate have questions on two fronts. Firstly, they report unhappiness about liberal policy on immigration. The Tories can and will fill this void, although there remains a small chance that their critics will complain about foul play. Secondly, there is a much larger battle line over the management and implementation of policy. It is here that the Conservatives have the real edge in capitalizing on voters' worries about lax practices.

One further point to remember is that the Conservatives are now close to making a genuine breakthrough among minority voters for two compelling reasons. The first is that the party has made proactive efforts to isolate its Powellite fringe. Secondly, long periods of Labour in office may be rare but these are often associated with big realignments. The Tories' capacity to gather minority voters, like skilled workers in the past, is a big test of this.

Beyond identity politics. The journalist, Andrew Marr, put it best in 1992 when he described John Major as the first PM in history who, for generational reasons alone, was half comfortable in a multicultural society. Indeed, as a child and young man in Brixton, Major's generation would have been swept along by the demographic changes of that era. He and his contemporaries may not have wholly supported such changes but, crucially, these would not have stuck in the throat.

The muddling through and pragmatic response has continued into subsequent generations. They have also been subject to many other cross-cutting influences, including growing internationalism, the emergence of a fairness agenda, the widespread presence of women in the workplace, an emphasis upon lifestyle factors, the rise of networked relationships, and the decline of hierarchy and deference. Britain, in other words, no longer looks like a society in which older, Conservative social authoritarian ideas might resonate, let alone work.

There are other changes to consider. The most important is fairness and equality as a democratic norm in Britain. It is arguably embedded in wider sentiment regarding opportunity and mobility. The Australians like to recognize this as part of their 'fair go' society. It may be off-message to try to resurrect traditional British ideals about fair play. Timothy Garton-Ash (2009) has written of the potential rebirth of liberal Britain. Heady stuff. Nevertheless, this evidence is the opposite of old wisdoms about the universal unpopularity of minorities and their political interests.

The main disputes are essentially around what kinds of inequality and unfairness can be targeted for attention and, more crucially, how this might be done by Conservatives in office.

The specific challenge that cannot be avoided is to flesh out a strategy to address settled, ethnic disadvantage. It is not easy to address the position of black Caribbean descended communities in Birmingham, or Asian Pakistani communities in northern England, without tackling the ethnic basis of disadvantage. A rethink on current ways to bear down on discrimination is therefore timely. The emphasis should move to preventative measures that reward those who excel and take a more punitive approach to the small number who discriminate habitually. The idea must be to shift middle opinion in the direction of leaders and to isolate laggards, if necessary by using tougher sanctions.

However, this is only one part of an intelligent strategy. The other part concentrates on barriers to change and success that are embedded in poor skills and qualifications, as well as in circumstantial factors such as housing and transport. These barriers require sophisticated responses that are about targeting geographic areas, and not just groups.

Grieve is undoubtedly right in regretting that one dimensional identity dominates community cohesion. With this has come a hollowing out of a credible Britishness, whereby newcomers find it hard to navigate their way through the essence of national belonging. And civic ideas of citizenship have not yet created true bonds between diverse communities.

The case of British Muslim communities demonstrates the enormity of the problem. On one hand, ministerial priorities have been led by a wish to foster Muslim leaders to participate in national debates about common belonging and responsibilities. On the other hand, this space has been filled by the political airing of a sectional-religious grievance, known in short hand as the Islamophobia lobby. This lobby has much it wishes to see placed higher up the agenda of government, but its weakness has been an unwillingness to consider questions of the public (and just group) interest and a failure to consider the reputational harm created by a sense of a group carve out.

Even where minority communities are not associated with extremism, contested identity dominates. A small number of excesses have fuelled a suspicion in middle England that national identity has been watered down in the name of multiculturalism. So one kind of identity, the complaint goes, has been promoted at the expenses of another kind. The difficulty with addressing these identity fears – from all sides – is the zero-sum framework in which prejudices and worries are expressed. Where Black History Month is promoted, an opportunity has been missed to sponsor Black British history or, better still, the chance at a more informed British history.

Shaping priorities for action. It is not enough to occupy a fringe, spectator position. A strategy for governing for all is not about those who are content to moan and resign themselves to living in a country that they claim no longer to recognize. But that is mainly the result of a lack of engagement, especially in rural and suburban areas. This has led to a culture of denial among many Tories and, with it, little appetite to understand and get involved in demographic and cultural changes and integration unassisted by government. For example, currently the M4 and M11 employment corridors are associated with significant influxes.

A significant slice of this movement includes minorities, notably the well educated and aspirant, who are, not surprisingly, trading economic mobility against community identity.

The strongest message is that government will have to get used to playing a selective and smaller part in community cohesion. This will come as a shock to many. That does not mean that cohesion does not have great importance but rather that the tools for achieving success lie in many hands beyond Westminster and Whitehall.

It is worth saying something about genuine priorities. The first of these will be to offer a plausible response to settled disadvantage. This requires both group-specific and area-specific measures so that one does not fight against the other. The dangers of disengaging from these places will mean that grievance and oppositional cultures will multiply further. Secondly, Conservatives will have to pursue a more nuanced approach to preventing extremism of all kinds. For Little Englanders, the task will hang heavily on sponsoring new opportunities that bring about greater interaction across ethnic lines. For Islamists, meanwhile, the pressure will be on highlighting the moral oxygen for violence created by fence-sitters. The reputational damage to British Muslims is simply too great otherwise.

Finally, Conservatives are rightly uneasy about pursuing unfairness and disadvantage on ethnic group grounds alone. This distorts both reality and outcomes. However, there are many in our society who are poorly equipped to navigate markets and public services by themselves. They come from all communities but may be over-represented in some groups and places. The task is to think of innovative ways to assist those most at risk, and this is where existing regulators and public agencies can most help. Many such bodies have been established to deliver fairer and better outcomes for citizens and consumers generally.

This is certainly helpful to a Conservative vision for community cohesion but one that requires some reformulation to focus on those least likely to manage their own interests. This approach also chimes with an organic Conservative perspective that wishes to pursue less intervention but is not so detached as to ignore ingrained inequality. This is a balance that works with the simple idea that,

wherever possible and in the absence of failure, government should occupy a benign role to allow people to settle their own relationships.

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