Britishness and Muslim-ness: differentiation, demarcation and discrimination in political discourse

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Abstract

The Britishness agenda found in political speeches, reporting and opinion editorials is here posited as a form of 'new racism', as it emphasises the difference between 'them', Muslims, and 'us', non-Muslim Britons, and uses that difference as a defining demarcation. Twenty-first-century political discourse invested in the Britishness agenda works to eradicate distinctions between British Muslims and non-British Muslims, and even the distinction between those guilty of terrorist atrocities and those who have nothing to do with them. Muslims are framed within this discourse as the problem within multiculturalism, and the problem with multiculturalism. The difficulty of a demand to 'be more British' is laid bare.

2014's *Operation Trojan Horse* laid claim to a series of allegations about a plot by Islamist extremists to take over a number of Birmingham schools (Allen, 2014b). Derived from an anonymous letter that was first published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, it was quickly described as likely to be a hoax by Chris Sims, Chief Constable of West Midlands Police (Pidd & Dodd, 2014). This was not, however, the view of the Conservative-led Coalition Government that was in power at the time. Prompting the biggest such inquiry into the British education system to date, Prime Minister David Cameron also responded to the allegations via a series of speeches that explained how the promotion of Britishness and British values would provide the foundation upon which the Government's 'muscular defence' against extremism would be built (Duggan, 2014). For Cameron, this was necessary because it was our collective 'bashfulness' about promoting Britishness and British values that had provided the seedbed from which those same Islamist extremists had plotted 'to introduce strict Islamic rule in more than 20 schools in Birmingham' (Duggan, 2014). Despite making such claims, a total of four investigations were ongoing and so no concrete evidence of any such a plot ever having taken place was available at the time. While neither the investigation by Birmingham City Council (BBC News, 2014) nor the Education Select Committee found evidence of any sustained plot, the latter did highlight a handful of issues relating to governance (Howse, 2015). Despite the lack of evidence, the allegations have endured and have served to be the catalyst for a slew of newly emergent political discourses and policy interventions that are constructed around the nebulous concepts of Britishness and British values. This was no more evident than when Cameron announced that the best way to tackle both

violent and non-violent forms of Islamist extremism was with 'pride and patriotism' (Prime Minister's Office, 2014).

These emergent discourses did not come about in a social and political vacuum, however. Over the past decade or so, notions of British identity, Britishness and British values have been routinely drawn upon in a variety of ways by political actors across the party political divide. Referred to here as the Britishness agenda, this article argues this to be a political vehicle that employs formal and informal discursive strategies in relation to notions of British identity to differentiate, demarcate and discriminate against Muslims. This is achieved by pitting notions of British and Muslim identity against each other as a means of establishing a dichotomous 'us' and 'them' relationship. In arguing this, this article adopts a threefold approach. First, it considers how national identities are constructed. Focusing on British identity, it argues that a historical and nostalgic understanding of what this might be prevails, one that fails to acknowledge the significant changes that Britain underwent in the latter half of the twentieth century. Second, the context within which the Britishness agenda emerged is considered. It is argued that this was initially a discursive response to what were seen to be the crises of Britain's multiculturalism (Gilroy, 2012; Modood, 2013; Allen, 2014a; Meer & Modood, 2014). Finally, this article argues that the Britishness agenda functions akin to a form of new or cultural racism. In doing so, it focuses on the normality of Muslim difference as being different, problematic and threatening towards Britain, British identity and British values.

British Values and Britishness

Barker (1981) coined the term 'new racism' in recognition of the shift in discriminatory processes from somatic markers to those that were rather more culturally focused. First evident in the political discourses of the Conservative Party in the late 1970s, Barker highlighted the disproportionate focus on issues relating to difference and the allegation that this difference would eventually destroy the cultural homogeneity of the British nation, its identity, values, and so on. As such, difference was seen to be threatening to the very existence of 'British-ness'. Consequently, an imagined 'Self' ensues that is considered better than normative 'Otherness'. Founded upon difference rather than inferiority—as more traditional forms of discrimination typically were—not only does their difference become seen to be normal but it is also problematic for 'us'. In the contemporary British setting, Allen (2010a) suggests that it is the difference of Muslims and Islam—perceived or otherwise—that is seen to be most problematic and most threatening to 'us'. So much so that being separate, Other, and not having any aims or values in common with Britain or the British people is that which is seen to be 'normal' of Muslims and

Islam. In other words, it is normal to perceive Muslims and Islam as being inherently and irrevocably not a part of 'our way of life' (Allen, 2010b).

Shortly after the Trojan Horse allegations became public, the Department for Education (DfE) published guidance about promoting 'fundamental British values' (subsequently referred to as British values) as a means of ensuring young people would be prepared for life in modern Britain when they leave school. Seen as a direct response to the alleged takeover plot, the guidance's publication in fact preceded the findings from any of the official investigations being published. As such, it might be legitimate to ask whether the guidance—in particular the promotion of British values as a potential solution—was a genuine response or an opportunity to implement a pre-conceived policy. Nonetheless, the guidance stated that democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs were British values (Department for Education, 2014). Cameron reiterated them soon after, describing the need to promote British values as a matter of pride and patriotism (Prime Minister's Office, 2014). This particular iteration of British values was, however, far from new; the same first appeared in the Government's 2011 counter-terrorism strategy (PREVENT). This was also not the only time that the Trojan Horse allegations were linked to matters of counter-terror. Previously, the DfE had appointed Peter Clarke, the Metropolitan Police's former head of counter-terrorism, to oversee its investigation; a decision West Midlands Police's Sims described as 'desperately unfortunate' given the message it potentially sent out to Muslim communities (Pidd & Dodd, 2014).

Most striking about this iteration of British values is that they are neither exceptional nor distinctly British. Instead, they are rather more generic; resonant with fundamental liberal values of freedom, responsibility, tolerance, social justice and equality of opportunity (Sorenson, 2006). If liberal and British, how might they be different from being Canadian liberal or Swedish liberal values, for example? To answer this, one must consider how notions of national identity and notions of nationhood are created. For Durkheim (2013), such are created via what he refers to as 'social facts'. Constituting a wide range of different entities to which specific communities, societies or states express an emotional attachment, they function by unifying those same communities, societies or nations through notions of familiarity, nostalgia and security. In doing so, not only do they become unquestioned but so too do they become seen to represent or symbolise the normal and normative of national identities and notions of nationhood. In other words, they represent and symbolise how we understand who 'we' are.

In the cultural context, the social facts of British identity might somewhat superficially be symbolised by a cup of tea or in the forming of an orderly queue. Beyond the cultural, however, it becomes much more difficult. Some important factors require further consideration. First off, it is important to remember that a distinctly British identity was only conceived in the late eighteenth century. And as

Colley (1992) rightly stresses, this was linked to that which was seen to make Britain 'Great' in that particular historical period: Empire, Protestantism, warfare and industry. Symbolic of Britain's global dominance at the time, it is notions of strength and power that are normatively linked to the social facts of Britishness. Strength and power are, however, also undeniably nostalgic, given that Britain's global dominance has long since diminished. Add to this the significant changes that have occurred in Britain since the end of the Second World War—most notably as a result of mass migration from countries that were formerly part of the British Empire—and the ability to identify Britain with those progressively nostalgic and distant social facts becomes increasingly difficult (Allen, 2007). Nonetheless, those same social facts maintain a sense of validity in the contemporary setting because Britain has clung to a time when it was 'Great'. As such, notions of Britishness appear irrelevant to how Britain is today. It is maybe no surprise, then, that the Government defers to the generic.

When asked what Britishness is, two options seemingly prevail: either the culturally banal: fish and chips, queuing, cups of tea or, even more cynically, binge drinking; or the civically indistinguishable: democracy, free speech, equality and so on. Cameron expressed both in a recent speech about Britishness and British values:

> The values I'm talking about—a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law—are the things we should try to live by every day. To me they're as British as the Union Flag, as football, as fish and chips.
>
> (Prime Minister's Office, 2014)

Such political discourses confer a popular legitimacy on notions of identity and values that recall Britain's former imperial 'greatness'. While those being put forward by political actors are little more than hollow entities, that process of conjuring past social facts means that not only do recipient audiences recognise them but so too do they appear to 'make sense'. As Hall & O'Shea (2013) explain, however, 'common sense' is often the product of oft-repeated political discourses that are systematically deployed to shape and influence popular opinion. If Trojan Horse did present a political opportunity for the Government to reaffirm the Britishness agenda, to what extent might it be that the oft repeated allegations served the purpose of systematically shaping and influencing popular opinion in the Government's favour? To quote Cameron again: 'We are all British. We respect democracy and the rule of law. We believe in freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, equal rights regardless of race, sex, sexuality or faith' (Dearden, 2015). If so, then what purpose might the Britishness agenda serve?

Britishness and the Crises of Multiculturalism

A useful start-point might be an op-ed piece for the *Telegraph* written by Sir Norman Lamont, former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer. Titled 'Down with multiculturalism, book-burning and fatwas' (2002), the title alone symbolically evoked the *Satanic Verses* affair a decade previous when a group of Muslims burned copies of the book on the streets of Bradford, and Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a 'fatwa' calling for the death of its author, Salman Rushdie (Allen, 2007). In doing so, the title also removed distance whereby Muslims from Bradford were seen to be much the same as those from Tehran. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the text failed to develop many of these inferences. Instead, Lamont damningly critiqued the New Labour Government at the time's version of multiculturalism, in particular its suggestion that British identity might contemporarily be multicultural. Similarly, Lamont also castigated the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Parekh, 2000) for suggesting that British identity was no longer unidimensional, a 'community of communities' as opposed to 'a fixed conception of national identity and culture' (Lamont, 2002). From here, Lamont attacked the then Prime Minister Tony Blair's own conception of being British. Highlighting his numerous identity contradictions, Lamont criticised Blair for being 'an Anglican who attends Roman Catholic services' and for stating that he always 'carries a copy of the Koran [sic]' with him (Lamont, 2012). As Lamont concluded, while 'the Prime Minister may be clear about himself … he has managed to confuse the rest of us about the country's identity' (Lamont, 2012).

Lamont then proceeded to cite Blair's favourite philosopher, R. H. Tawney, and his argument that successful societies require its citizens' 'obedience to the law' (Lamont, 2002). For Lamont, this was not the case in Britain. For him, Britain's laws:

> are based on values, and the state has the right to intervene to protect them. Individuals cannot be left alone in their chosen communities, if that involves forced marriages, polygamy, burning books, supporting fatwas or even fighting against our Armed Forces.
>
> (Lamont, 2012)

From here, Lamont diverged away from the main argument of the piece to congratulate 'West Indians, Africans and Indians' for queuing to pay their respect to the Queen Mother while she was lying in state. As he explained, this was a public testimony of their allegiance to the crown and that they wanted to be British. As such, Lamont juxtaposed what—and whom—he believed was not British alongside what—and, again, whom—he believed was. It is telling that while Muslims were not explicitly named in either, referring to 'forced marriages, polygamy, burning books, supporting fatwas or even fighting against our Armed Forces' meant that the reader was left with little doubt about exactly who was not British. Consequently, not only does multiculturalism pose a very real threat to Britain from this perspective, but so

too does it allow space for those who are not and indeed do not want to be British—Muslims—to prefer isolation, to be disobedient towards British laws, show little respect to 'our' values while also having no apparent allegiance to the monarchy or Britain more widely. In essence, Lamont demarcates Muslims from who 'we' are.

At the time of Lamont's article, others were suggesting that multiculturalism was in crisis. For Meer and Modood, multiculturalism was 'creaking under the weight' (2009, 474) of harsh criticism, a straw man waiting to be destroyed when the opportunity arose (Modood, 2013). Kundnani (2002) and Pilkington (2008) identify the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Parekh, 2000) as the likely start point of this. While the 2001 northern mill town riots and fallout from 9/11 gave impetus to the critics, it was the 7/7 terror attacks on the London public transport system in 2005 that provided the greatest catalyst. Modood (2005) illustrates this by showing how, in the aftermath of the attacks, a raft of different justifications for rejecting multiculturalism—some calling for it to be killed off (Allen, 2014a)—were being voiced by politicians and commentators alike. Among others, these included: William Pfaff, who suggested that the perpetrators were a direct consequence of Britain's catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism; Gilles Kepel, who described the bombers as 'the children of Britain's own multicultural society'; and Trevor Phillips—former chair of the Commission for Racial Equality—who said that it was Britain's 'anything goes' multiculturalism that provided the context through which the bombers became radicalised (Modood, 2005).

Alongside criticisms of multiculturalism emerged another key discourse in both public and political spaces. Discourses about 'home-grown bombers' were routinely used as shorthand to refer to the fact that all the 7/7 perpetrators were British-raised and had had quite ordinary upbringings (Allen, 2010a; Allen, 2014a). Such discourses had other connotations also. In stressing 'home-grown', a closer proximity was suggested, thereby bringing any threat—perceived or otherwise—much closer; similar to how Lamont eradicated the distance between Muslims in Bradford and Tehran. So too did home-grown bombers mean that the 'enemy' was now seen to be inside rather than outside Britain and British society. And this made everything feel just that little bit more 'real'. Most importantly however, home-grown bomber discourses almost exclusively connoted Muslims and Muslim-ness (Allen, 2010a). Resultantly, levels of suspicion and mistrust towards all Muslims increased, which in turn reified pre-existent fears and anxieties within wider society. In turn, the capabilities, sympathies and ideologies attributed to the home-grown bombers not only became attributed to all Muslims without differentiation but seen to be 'normal'. Increasingly understood and referred to in terms of 'us' and 'them' dichotomies, Muslims were not only seen to be increasingly and inherently different to who 'we' were but so that same difference posed a direct threat to 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' institutions and 'our' way of life (Allen, 2010a). For Furedi (2002), it was a threat to 'our' very survival.

Combining discourses about the crises of multiculturalism with the need to respond to the home-grown bomber and also the 'problems' of Muslims and Islam more widely, various political and policy interventions followed in the wake of 7/7. Primarily focusing on finding 'solutions', these included policy developments that sought to, among others, encourage greater community cohesion, promote better integration, improve individual and communal feelings of belonging, place more restrictions on immigration, and teach about citizenship in schools. Multifariously entwined within this were the discourses of the Britishness agenda (Allen, 2010a). A good illustration of this can be seen in the introduction of a citizenship test in 2007 that required those wanting to become British citizens to have a better understanding of Britain, its history, culture and lifestyle. While far from explicitly communicated as such, it might be argued that the underlying purpose of this was to ensure that those coming in to the country felt more like 'us'. Most prominently, however, the Britishness agenda featured in the emergent and subsequently wide-reaching policies and legislation relating to counter-terrorism. It was in the approaches that sought to tackle violent—and more recently [at the time of writing], non-violent—forms of extremism where the Britishness agenda was, however, most evident.

This explosion of political and policy interventions were questioned, however. This author (2014a), for instance, questioned whether they sought to solve the problems of multiculturalism or, somewhat more insidiously, the problems perceived to be lurking within multiculturalism, namely Muslims and Islam. Parekh (2006) was equally forthright, asking whether the entwined Britishness agenda was a direct response to what political actors and the Government saw to be the 'problem' of Muslims and Islam. To answer this, it is worth reflecting on a major criticism posited against multiculturalism, that instead of creating a space where difference can be respected it instead creates a space where difference can be accentuated thereby encouraging certain groups and communities to remain separate and isolated (Kelly, 2002; Modood, 2005). Irrespective of whether one focuses on Lamont's attack on multiculturalism or the home-grown bomber discourses, this criticism underpins the idea that Muslims—and Islam—are not only seen as being different and separate but, importantly, deliberately so. Similar too are counter-terror discourses which, in spite of ongoing assurances by political actors from all the main British political parties to the contrary, it is popularly conceived target Muslims only (Kundnani, 2007; Khan, 2009; Spalek & Lambert, 2008; Spalek, 2010). Indeed, Muslims also believe this. Consequently, wherever the Britishness agenda finds form, not only are Muslims seen to be the problem—as also the cause—but so too are they seen to be different from 'us'. The Britishness agenda therefore functions where 'their' difference is normalised and fixed; where Muslims are not understood to be British.

Untangling the Britishness Agenda

This is nowhere more evident than when Cameron's speech to mark the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta was reported by the *Daily Mail* as, 'Be more British Cameron tells UK Muslims' (Walters, 2014). Despite the call to 'be more British' being somewhat meaningless, it appeals to common sense. If Muslims are different and separate, the argument goes, then requiring them to be more like 'us' would result in the 'problems' being 'solved'. As Gramsci (Gramsci, Hoare & Smith, 1972) explains, while common sense appears coherent it is more likely to be the product of an amalgam of social facts, historical notions and contemporary prejudices that serve to construct a narrative that seeks to capture 'everyday thinking'. Consequently, common sense is typically overly simplistic, lacks sophisticated argument and intelligent reasoning. As Hall and O'Shea (2013) put it, in giving the illusion that it is derived from the 'everyday thinking' gleaned from 'real-life' experience, it also provides answers to the questions of 'common people'. As regards Muslims, therefore, common sense informs everyday thinking that not only do they happen to be different and separate but that this difference is *what* 'they' are. Irrespective of whether allegations about Islamists trying to take over Birmingham schools were true or not, when political discourses merely infer that the takeover plot was indeed true, common sense prevails and affirms the idea in everyday thinking. In essence, because of what 'they' are, common sense insists that there is likely to be no smoke without fire. For Hall & O'Shea (2013), this is because political actors and their discourses tell us 'what we all already think'.

The Britishness agenda, therefore, deploys hollow and meaningless notions of identity to confer legitimacy on the process of demarcating 'them' (Muslims) from 'us' (the British). In doing so, the Britishness agenda functions akin to what might be described as 'new' or cultural racism. First conceived by Martin Barker (1981), new racism emerged from analysing the political discourses of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the late 1970s and early 1980s (of which Lamont was a senior political figure). Noting how early race relations legislation had begun to contain more overt expressions of racism, Barker identified a marked shift in how Thatcher's Conservatives begun to refer to and speak about minority groups. Instead of focusing on more historically established markers, such as skin colour, upon which discrimination could be justified, Barker illustrated how Conservative discourses increasingly used cultural markers of difference to achieve much the same. New racism therefore accentuated how different 'they' were from 'us'. This new approach performed three other functions. First, it enabled political actors to navigate the new landscape of race relations legislation by avoiding explicit references to markers of race, ethnicity and nationality. Second, it affirmed that 'their' difference was problematic in that it somehow threatened 'us' in terms of 'our' culture, values, way of life or so on. Third, new racism exaggerated difference and the perceived consequences of that difference (Barker, 1981).

New racism, therefore, appeals to the common sense. To illustrate this, consider how Lamont lambasted those 'fighting for the Taleban, forced marriages, polygamy, burning books, supporting fatwas' (Lamont, 2002) and Cameron demands less tolerance: 'if you don't want to believe in democracy, that's fine…if equality isn't your bag, don't worry about it…if you're completely intolerant of others, we will still tolerate you' (Prime Minister's Office, 2014). In the first, how Muslims are perceived to be problematic is set out, while in the second it is shown to be problematic because Muslim difference not only goes against 'our' way of life but more importantly threatens it. Because of this, 'we' should be less bashful—to quote Cameron—of who 'we' are and what 'our' Britishness is. Consequently, it makes sense to demand that Muslims be more British like 'us' or that British values be taught in schools to halt the alleged imposition of sharia law on 'our' education system. Far from seeming impractical, unreasonable or extreme, the Britishness agenda acquires popular legitimacy through the political discourses that tell them this is so (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). Instead of invoking popular opinion, therefore, it is the discourses of political actors that are shaping and influencing popular opinion in order to harness it in their favour. As such, it might be argued that the guidance to emerge in the aftermath of the Trojan Horse allegations were rather more pre-conceived than a genuine 'response'. Far from shaping or promoting a British identity that might be relevant and appropriate to today's increasingly diverse Britain, the Britishness agenda does—and indeed has—utilised something of a hollow and meaningless concept of British identity to discursively convey and subsequently reify who 'we' are not. As such, the Britishness agenda is a forceful and vengeful political vehicle that seeks to differentiate, demarcate and subsequently discriminate against Muslims and their communities.

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