

# The Poverty of Multiculturalism



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Patrick West

Introduction by

Kenneth Minogue

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## THE POVERTY OF MULTICULTURALISM

# **Introduction**

## **Multiculturalism: A Dictatorship of Virtue**

**Kenneth Minogue**

**I**n the last half century, millions of Asians and Africans have migrated to Europe. This has posed considerable problems of social adjustment both for the newcomers and for the existing population. These problems are relatively minor, however, compared to something else that grew out of these migrations. I refer to the fact that the doctrine of multiculturalism has imposed nothing less than a dictatorship of virtue upon a previously free people. And this is a doctrine emanating not from migrants but from the heart of our civilisation itself. I propose to say something about both the virtue, and the dictatorship.

The virtue at first sight might seem to be ‘tolerance’, something of which the British people have had a supply no less abundant than that of any other population, and more than most. But tolerance was an old liberal virtue. In our modern world, what we might call ‘holding your nose tolerance’ has been found inadequate—indeed, positively insulting. The notional beneficiaries of tolerance demanded something better: namely, social acceptance. And a little further down the line has come the demand for something more: social inclusion. As the doctrine of tolerance began in the 1960s to turn into a morality of acceptance and inclusion, it also began to make claims about reality, and turned into multiculturalism, the belief that all cultures are equal in value.

The doctrine is that we must, on pain of committing discriminatory racism, regard every individual, and every culture in which individuals participate, as being equally valuable. Indeed, as the doctrine develops, we must not only share this opinion. We must regard people of all

cultures with equal affection, employ them, make friends with them, promote them and include them in everything we do, in proportion to their numbers in the population. The doctrine ramifies in many ways—for example it finds intolerable the old familiar collective specialisations that come and go in human groups—Gurkhas in soldiering, black pre-eminence in sport, Irishmen in the Boston police, not to mention women in the caring professions. In a multicultural society, any such responsiveness to the facts of talent and temperament must give way to a precise representativeness in every sphere of life.

You might judge that this is merely a ramshackle codification of the respect for others that is familiar to us as good manners, and familiar also as the equality of opportunity so long valued in liberal politics. You would be wrong. Multiculturalism is a doctrine about purity of the heart. Sympathy for one culture rather than another, indicates an impurity of the heart. But the disposition human beings have to prefer some things to others is so powerful that this criterion would erect as the test of virtue something that is a human impossibility. And that is just the point. For if we constantly feel a set of emotions running contrary to those we have been persuaded (on pain of racism) we ought to feel, then we become entangled in a sense of guilt. We are revealed as unworthy. And the psychological power of the doctrine is enhanced by the almost sinister indifference people have to actually defining 'racism'. Any accusation of it seems to stick. Yet, is it a sentiment, an idea, a theory, a social policy, an action? And whichever of these things it might be, how do they connect together? Is there any difference between a reflex of antipathy to a culture, and a practice of assaulting those who belong to it? A similar indeterminacy will be found in our expanding 'phobia' family, as in 'Islamophobe.'

Multiculturalism, then, belongs to a family of antinomian beliefs with a long religious history behind

them. The best-known examples are Puritanism and Communism. In both cases, a doctrine of the purity of the heart was advanced as transcending mere rules of right and wrong. And the result has always been to constitute an élite of the pure in heart who would, of course, need the power to reform society so that it fully shared this ideal purity. In this process of reform, Puritans became adept at sniffing out sin, or Satanism, and set about purging society of witchcraft. Bolshevik comrades experienced the fullness of proletarian solidarity, only to find that many comrades had to be purged because they could not help revealing signs of bourgeois weakness. It is the same with us in Britain. Everybody says we must celebrate the wonderful diversity of the new multicultural society coming into being, but all too many people exhibit symptoms of racism and discrimination. Racism is, of course, a motive, a movement of the heart, but the evil of racism is such that it may work even among people who are, at least consciously, pure of heart. In antinomian doctrines, there are many ways of being a sinner. This is why we have 'institutional racism'.

So much, for the moment, about the virtue. But why am I suggesting that Britain is experiencing a 'dictatorship' of virtue? The 'dictatorship' develops out of the way in which modern governments have developed. Anybody who cares for freedom will recognise modern British government as resembling a kind of giant octopus perched above society. On the one hand, it sucks up over half of all the wealth produced by the economy, and on the other hand redistributes this wealth through tentacles that reach down into the farthest corners of society—to schools, hospitals, charities, industrial enterprises, sports clubs, museums and films, media organisations and indeed right down to the domestic hearth and the introspections of its subjects through its concern with skills, bad practices such as smoking and eating the wrong food, and good practices such as counselling.

There's always a demand for more money, and the Government has quite a lot to dispense. West End theatres, for example, are currently wondering whether to make a devil's bargain by accepting subsidies to improve their infrastructure.

Our governmental octopus is, of course, a benevolent creature, full of good intentions. Its tentacles grow ever longer because it dispenses subsidies to help social activities that have electoral appeal. Then a process develops: because taxation increases, individuals have less money for sustaining their own independent activities, and are tempted to seek funding from those ever-generous tentacles, leading of course to increases in taxation, which further reduce the independent resources in civil society, which ... and so on. First come the subsidies, and then of course come the demands for the accountable use of the taxpayer's money. Before long, social institutions have become hopelessly addicted to subsidy and can hardly imagine what a free and independent life would be like. The universities after 1920 had half a century of autonomy under the University Grants Committee before they fell under the juggernaut of the DfES. They always get you in the end. Other beneficiaries find themselves being rationalised much more quickly.

People sometimes talk of the inevitability of death and taxes, but these are as nothing compared with the rapidity with which those tentacles start pushing the beneficiaries of subsidy around. The expression 'civil society' referred in the nineteenth century to the whole network of independent social activities that were possible because the state was largely content merely to provide a framework of law and order. In the last century and more, however, the state has reduced most institutions—schools, universities, hospitals—to a condition of helpless dependence. The liberal democratic state has turned into this interesting octopus, sitting astride everything we do,

and frightfully eager to help us with any project we might want to engage in.

The marriage between multiculturalism and big government was obviously made in heaven. Big government found in the multiculturalist passion for purity of heart a licence to extend its tentacles into areas it had not previously been able to reach, while multiculturalism found in the state the instrument of national purification it needed. The alliance had some of the features of the mediaeval relation between a guiding church and the secular arm enforcing its policies.

The problem to which this alliance responded was the coming of mass migration into Europe, largely from Africa and Asia. European societies had long been familiar with large-scale migration because Europeans had swarmed over Australia and the Americas from the beginning of modern times. The United States was a society almost entirely constructed out of migrants. The problem with post-1945 migration was that it involved people of different colours and religions. Cultural variation had sometimes led to tensions in the United States, but most of those migrants had come from more or less Christian Europe. In this new situation, the problems of having black and white, Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc., not to mention, in feminist times, men and women settling down alongside each other in modern liberal states were of a whole new complexity.

Libertarian economists often thought there was no problem at all; rising manpower facilitates growth. Nationalists often thought that migration was destroying the very conditions of toleration that made Europe such an attractive place. But the doctrine that soon established itself as dominant, both as a respectable sentiment and as the orthodoxy of state policy, was multiculturalism.

The multiculturalists explained to us that all cultures were equal. This vague expression might mean, what an anthropologist would certainly think, that every culture

must be understood as a human response to a context and therefore as having moral value and intellectual interest in its own terms. But it might also mean that the cultures of the migrants to Britain were equal in all respects to that of the Europeans among whom they were settling. Nobody in his senses believed that. Virtually everybody in Britain believes, and rightly, that whatever the shallowness and injustices of European life, it is superior to that of most other cultures. This powerful conviction results not merely from the fact that it happens to be the way of life with which we are familiar. It also arises because we regard our apparatus of rights and the rule of law as better than the Islamic Sharia, for example. Nor do we regard our disapproval of the ritual genital mutilation of young girls, something prevalent in parts of East Africa, as a mere local prejudice. Nor do we think our notions of equality of opportunity have much to learn from the caste societies of the Indian sub-continent. Nor are we commonly going in search of many lessons about the decent treatment of women, and of political prisoners, from the Chinese. Indeed, we hardly need to pose these questions theoretically before practice tells us the answer: millions of outsiders are beating on our doors trying to get in, and there is no reverse traffic. The strange unreality of the doctrine that all cultures are equal thus resembles the way in which Marxist moonshine used to persuade simple intellectuals in Europe that Communist states were the way of the future, when the actual inhabitants of those countries were banging on their prison walls trying to get out and into a bit of decent capitalist law and order. Political reality is indeed rather mysterious stuff, but the quickest way to discover the lie of the land is to look at where the refugees are coming from, and where they are going to.

It followed from multiculturalism that diversity of cultural composition was an unalloyed blessing for Britain, and that any doubt about this could only result

from evil sentiments such as racism and xenophobia. And it was this doctrine that rapidly led to the emergence of a large and expensive bureaucracy whose point was to guarantee that migrants should share equally in the benefits of British nationality. Before long the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) was generating anti-discrimination officers, equal opportunity consultants, tribunals, political correctness rules and other devices for enforcing on Britain the virtue of tolerance. The irony was that this virtue in its modern form was nothing but a rather strange codification of a practice whose provenance was to be found only in British (and to some extent wider European) history. Its main character was individual equality before the law. Commentators often think our tolerance inferior to that accorded to Jews and Christians in Umayyad Spain and the Ottoman Empire. These were indeed highly civilised practices, and certainly preferable to what was going on in Europe at various times. Nonetheless, the status of a *dhimmi* (one who is tolerated and taxed) in Islamic societies is not at all the same as one who enjoys equal rights in Britain.

The cutting edge of multiculturalism however is to be found in its insistence that the Anglo-Saxons and Celts of Britain must not think their language, religion, laws and customs in any way superior to those of the people who, for some mysterious reason, want to come and live here rather than stay home. The implication has in practice been that in any conflict between the migrants and local custom, local custom should give way. The migrants have had to be supplied with official materials in their own languages rather than being required to understand English; religious holidays of the new cultures have had to be accommodated by employers, and legislation had to be adapted to migrant customs. A law to enforce the wearing of crash helmets by riders on motor cycles had to be modified to accommodate Sikh practices, as did another law about the possession of knives.

It is this aspect of multiculturalism that most grates upon the average Briton, who resents the idea that whatever in the way we live any ethnic group might find *offensive* must be changed. One result of multiculturalism was that schools with an ethnic intake began to exclude Christmas festivities, including Jesus in his crib surrounded by wise men, while sundry local authorities banned the term 'Christmas' from their seasonal cards and replaced it with anodyne words, such as (in Birmingham) something called 'Winterval'. The primary school child who came home having picked up from his teacher the idea that the police were all something called 'racist' may not be entirely standard, but he does typify the kind of muddle emerging from this strange passion for attitudinal engineering. And these are relatively familiar examples of multicultural enthusiasm, because they reveal the basic level at which the doctrine irradiates British life, namely, among schoolteachers and local officials. Admittedly, the dictatorship of multicultural virtue could not operate without higher agencies such as the CRE, but at this level one often finds rather more sophistication than further down the administrative chain. Indeed, Trevor Phillips, who currently heads that Commission, has been critical of some aspects of multiculturalism in recent times.

For the remarkable thing is that the British have a lot less trouble accommodating peoples of other faiths and cultures than they have in tolerating their own home-grown multiculturalists. These local enthusiasts are way ahead of the spokesmen for ethnic minorities in discovering possible sources of ethnic offence, forever sniffing out racism and xenophobia among the natives. It is these people rather than actual immigrants who continually describe Britain as a 'racist society' and make a big play with the marvellously muddled idea of 'institutional racism'. It is notable that earlier waves of migration to Britain—Jews from the late nineteenth

century, Poles before and after the Second World War—settled into British life very successfully, no doubt in part because they were not forever being told how much their sensibilities were being offended by vile local xenophobes. That settling in cannot have been easy—but no settling in ever is.

The human problem is that nobody much likes foreigners as such. It is much nicer to live among your own kind, people you can recognise and trust. No doubt this kind of response is unsophisticated, but the human world constantly illustrates the dislike of one group for another. Tamil and Sri Lankan, Muslim and Hindu in India, Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland—these may be cited merely to remind us how universal is the incidence of antipathy and conflict, and there is no country in which such ethnic passions are not found. Migration is not an adventure for the weak. The remarkable thing about Britain, and other European countries, is how easily (all things considered) it has so far been.

The eagerness of the multicultural establishment to abandon British customs, however, is one of the facts that reveals the extent to which multiculturalism arises less from love of others than from hatred of our own form of life. No other culture is ready to abandon its own convictions with the same insouciance, and the reasons for that can only be guessed at; the reasons are certainly buried deep in the nature of our civilisation. But part of it is our Western capacity for becoming so bewitched by the ideal that we learn to hate the real.

Promotion and visibility are particularly areas where multiculturalism has created the most mayhem. Senior positions in European life are a scarce resource for which people compete, usually on the basis of ability. Multiculturalism is in this context the demand that ethnic minorities should be 'represented' in senior positions in proportion to their numbers in the society at large. The dread word 'quotas' is not commonly used, but that is

what it amounts to. The only way of making sense of this demand is to assume that all cultures and populations are, statistically speaking, equally good at the whole range of skills that modern Western society has generated. The implication is that wherever seniority is 'hideously white' (as a BBC Director General once put it) the cause must lie in racism and xenophobia. Again, we have a case where an impossible ideal generates Western self-scourging. It reveals how prejudiced and bad we are.

But as with the parallel case of feminism, which also drives promotion away from ability towards quotas as the test of advancement, water is being asked to run uphill. I do not know the reason, but there is no doubt that some cultures tend to specialise in some activities rather than others. No doubt such specialisations change over time—Jews who once specialised in chess and commerce, for example, turned out to be highly effective soldiers in Israel. It requires a different temperament to be a soldier from that which fits someone for nursing. This is an area where anyone sensible will be sensitive to opportunity and contingency. The last thing a society needs is a dogma to which we are all bound, generating, as it inevitably does, that special kind of incompetence found in international organisations where the jobs must be shared out equally between the nations who belong to it. But one inevitable consequence of multiculturalism is a constant drip of complaint from would-be ethnic high-flyers that they are not getting a chance in law, or academia, or wherever the gravy train happens to be.

Multiculturalism might just be tolerable if it were simply a mobilisation of British decency and tolerance in favour of supposedly vulnerable people understood less as migrants than as guests to whom we owed a duty of hospitality. But the fact that it has generated an expensive and intrusive bureaucracy to dominate our lives shows that it is something different, something in fact quite alien to the historical traditions of acceptance of others that

developed in Britain over hundreds of years. It has clamped onto us a dictatorship of virtue whose like has not been seen since Cromwell's major generals took us over. Its effect has been to create in Britain a corporate state, in which the government presides over a set of corporations constituted of politically correct categories. An actual vote means less and less in Britain, but the voice of these corporations is increasingly heard in the land, and its tones are becoming increasingly inescapable.

