

Making Multiculturalism Work



I want to begin with two contrasting stories which highlight the journey I've been on in the course of this research. Right at the start of the process I remember watching a TV debate on multiculturalism. The panel covered all the classic bases – British identity, immigration, extremism – and yet it was difficult to escape the nagging feeling that the whole discussion was far too intangible and detached to have anything to say to the people I live and work with in East London.

Six months later, having just finished writing the report, I heard some very sad news. The wife of one of the people I'd come across through my research had had a stroke. It was clearly a very difficult time for this family, but there was one remarkable caveat to an otherwise bleak situation. Because this guy had been involved in a Near Neighbours project in Tower Hamlets which had helped fathers and sons to go on monthly trips together with activities like camping and archery. And now this eclectic mix of Eastern Europeans, Bengalis and White East Enders were rallying around the family – cooking meals, offering lifts to and from the hospital and even praying together across religious divides.

The lesson of these two stories is the essence of this report – that making multiculturalism work requires fewer expert opinions, and more local relationships between people of different faiths and ethnicities.

Let me explain how I got there. As I read around the topic of multiculturalism after watching the TV debate I soon discovered that I wasn't the only one who found themselves slightly frustrated with the standard discourse on this subject. In fact since roughly the turn of the millennium there has been a growing chorus of voices raising concerns about how we understand multiculturalism – and here I should be clear that I don't mean multiculturalism in the sense of the diversity of British society but in the sense that Tariq Modood has defined as 'the political accommodation of minorities formed by immigration to western countries'.

You might call this 'the cohesion question'. It started in earnest with Ted Cantle's 2001 report after the Bradford riots which famously warned of the danger of groups living 'parallel lives', and it continued all the way through to David Cameron's speech in Munich in 2011 which attacked what he called 'state multiculturalism' for having 'allowed the weakening of our collective identity'. Whilst that was quite a controversial treatment of the subject, I



think the sentiment was put more appropriately by the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who said “multiculturalism was a fine, even noble idea in its time. It was designed to make ethnic and religious minorities feel more at home in society...but there has been a price to pay, and it grows year by year...It has led not to integration but to segregation.”

So if multiculturalism has been good at respecting and recognising difference, how do we build on and go beyond that in promoting stronger and deeper relationships across difference?

Well there have been a variety of academic and political attempts to try and address this issue, and I would argue that all of them have been a fairly unremitting failure. On the academic side you have people like Ted Cante who argue that what we need to do is stop talking about multiculturalism and instead use the new paradigm of ‘interculturalism’. The problem with this is that trying to define ‘interculturalism’ is so hard as to make it practically useless. Cante himself says that interculturalism is “a dynamic process in which there will be some tensions and conflicts, as a necessary part of societal change in which people are able to positively envision ideas for multicultural and multifaith societies and where diversity and globalisation are recognised as permanent features of a society, to be embraced, rather than feared.” Got that?

The politicians are no better. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown’s were often to be found talking about ‘core British values’ as their way of promoting unity across diversity. Again, this largely resulted in a kind of bland set of buzz words which a thoroughly discredited politician class told everyone we should aspire to. It’s possible that these attempts to make multiculturalism work have actually just made things worse. When I interviewed an academic in Queen Mary’s University she complained about the way that multiculturalism has become “an elite discourse, it’s what the elite tell people we should have, so the whole language of multiculturalism is tainted with this do-goody liberal elite thinking”. I think she has a point.

Part of the reason why these academic and political interventions have so far missed the point is that they tend to come from the top or centre and then hope that new ideas and practices will trickle down. If we from our perspective of civil society were to look the other way round, what might we see?

Well the first thing we might see is that any attempt to make multiculturalism work has to seriously take into account the wider view of what I call the withering of the public square. In the last half century or so, British public life has been marked by institutional decline, loss of social capital and a growing marketised culture which has encouraged people to view themselves and others as consumers rather than citizens. The statistics



for institutional decline are fairly staggering – membership of churches and trade unions has roughly halved since the 1980's and political parties are even worse – the Conservatives used to have nearly 3 million members and now both they and Labour have under 200,000. And the consumerist point was rammed home to me a few years ago when I was the President of the Oxford University Student Union as the fees system was changing. What I saw was a real sense of deep sadness amongst both students and academics at the way the language of students as consumers ultimately cheapened everybody's vocation and the impoverished the collective life of the university.

These wider trends in civil society have serious implications for a discussion of multiculturalism. They point towards the dual tasks of rebuilding institutions that help people to encounter and relate to one another, and of developing people's skills so that they are able to build the kind of relationships across difference that act as the glue binding communities together.

My research wasn't ever going to tackle all of this, so I focussed primarily on this latter question of skills (though I am still very much interested in the institutional question). I was helped a lot by the work of the American political philosopher Danielle Allen, who has developed the concept of 'political friendships', which I have found a very useful way of describing the kind of cross-barrier relationships that make integration and cohesion real. She says "I do not argue that we should all just be friends, nor do I argue that each of us should seek some human commonality that binds us even to strangers, and base our relationships to them on that. Political friendship is not an emotion, but a practice: a set of hard-won, complicated habits used to bridge differences of personality, experience and aspiration."

I think this really hits the mark for me. We can't catalyse the relationships we need in our communities purely by appealing to people's hearts (let's all be friends) or people's minds (seeking human commonality). There is no shortcut through the often slightly messy business of actually relating and spending time together, and what we need to make that process successful are these "hard-won, complicated habits" that Allen mentions.

But what are they? How can we promote them? And what challenges might that bring?

This is what I set out to find. I looked at two examples of projects that seemed to be having some success at bringing people together across ethnic and religious differences at a grass-roots level. One was the Government-funded Near Neighbours programme which gives small grants to social action projects that bring together two or more faith or ethnic groups. And the other was the civil society alliance of Citizens UK who use community



organising to campaign for things like the Living Wage and the ending of child detention in the immigration system.

The first key habit that I identified was that of working together. ‘Dialogue’ is all very well, but if there is no tangible common action then it’s extremely hard to create any sense of shared history or future. As one of my interviewees put it “solidarity is best built through action and working together through shared issues, not sitting in rooms and talking about things.” This is something that seems to have been picked up on in recent years – the Government talks about working side-by-side not just face-to-face. But it was interesting looking at how Near Neighbours and Citizens UK encourage people to develop their skills in working together. Near Neighbours is I think particularly innovative in this respect by giving small grants to projects with the sole criteria that they involve two or more different religious or ethnic groups. It requires significant faith on the part of central government to allocate resources like this, with very little ability to test or measure how they are being used. But the results that I saw were truly impressive. Because by refusing to tell projects what they should do or how they should do it the programme allows people to develop their own ideas and the organisational skills needed to really get things done with others. It is no coincidence that many of the NN projects have now spawned additional activities, like the dads I mentioned earlier who have formed their own football team. Citizens UK have a similar ethos of helping to develop people’s capacity for common action running through their organisation. At their public events you will never see Citizens UK staff on the stage. Instead all of the presentations, celebrations and negotiations with power are done by ordinary people in member institutions like churches, schools, trade unions etc. My particular favourite bit of this process is what’s called ‘pinning’, when it’s someone’s job to make sure that the politician or businessman who is being asked for something gives the alliance a straight answer. There was a beautiful moment before the last London mayoral elections when Boris Johnson did a classic digression, only to be reminded by a teenage boy at one of the member schools – ‘Mr Mayor, I’m not sure you answered our question’.

The second and complimentary habit that I found was that of sharing core motivations. If people are going to get beyond surface level co-operation, they need to be free to share some of their deepest reasons for why they do what they do. This feels to me to be an area of real weakness in the UK, as I came across a number of people who shared experiences of being involved in some kind of civic engagement but who were discouraged from exploring or sharing their motivations, particularly if these came from their faith. So one community organiser talked about youth programmes in East London and said that these were “excellent examples of places where you try to be as secular as possible, and in that you miss out...the reason why they’re there trying to do a good thing is completely about their faith”. A recent Church



Urban Fund survey found that 44% of over 100 faith representatives on Local Public Partnerships felt that the main partners were not open to discussing faith issues. Community Organising takes a very different approach. Every community organising meeting begins with what's called a 'Rounds'. This is an opportunity to recognise who is in the room and what has brought them there, and usually involves people having a space to introduce themselves and to answer a question which touches in some way on their motivations ('what makes you angry about your neighbourhood', or 'tell a story about a time when you've seen positive change', or 'what's your favourite thing to spend money on?'). Sometimes these rounds take up a significant chunk of the meeting, but I've never heard anybody complain that they are a waste of time, and in fact people often say they are the most productive bit of the meeting! Another feature of Citizens UKs is their use of testimony – people giving often very personal accounts of what the different campaigns mean to them, with faith and family particularly strong themes. I am convinced that this is a key reason why Citizens UK have such strong teams of diverse activists – they're prepared to co-operate over long campaigns, because they know why people are involved and can trust them to stick at it even with faced with opposition.

So it seems that building these skills of working together and sharing motivations is crucial if we're going to help people to develop 'political friendships' across difference. And what that often means is making space within our organisational structures and processes for people to step up or step out – to take on or share more than they might be used to, to be stretched.

But if we're going to be serious about building these skills then we have to be aware that they will force us to make some quite difficult choices.

For example, when trying to develop the skill of working together, a key question that emerges is who is considered 'acceptable' to work with. There is, I think, a real irony here in 'progressive' circles that whilst outwardly championing diversity and difference, many people are actually quite restrictive in who they will be seen co-operating with in public. For example there's a conversation which comes around with depressing regularity about whether political parties should be working with faith groups that they might agree with on social justice but disagree with on issues of equality and personal morality. There was a classic example of this recently in an article on the LabourList website titled 'Labour needs to stand up to some faith groups on equality issues'. In it the author used the analogy of a developing friendship to describe the relationship between the Labour Party and religious organisations, arguing "You begin by finding the things that you agree on, and build up respect. As the relationship grows, you find areas where you disagree, but because you respect that person, you accept them as a friend despite these views." Sounds pretty reasonable, doesn't it? But she



then says “the question for me is, would I be a friend with someone who thinks my sexuality, or right to access to contraception or abortion is inherently wrong? I would not. Why are making these exceptions seen as not a problems when we deal with faith groups?”

You might think this is an isolated exception, but it’s not. In fact the highly respected Policy Exchange think tank produced a report a couple of years ago called “Choosing our friends wisely: Criteria for engagement with Muslim groups”, which listed nine categories of people or groups with whom the Government “must not engage”.

This conception of friendship or engagement which allows you to rule certain people out a priori because they are not ‘progressive’ enough is a very dangerous route to go down. It’s dangerous because it does nothing to build relationships across difference, but it’s also dangerous because isolating less mainstream views tends to harder both sides and allow narratives of persecution to develop.

We have to move away from judging potential partners through a ‘progressive test’ of their beliefs, towards using a ‘relational test’ of whether they can co-operate with people from different backgrounds. Some people and groups will still rule themselves out of engagement by not being able to do this, but many others who may not have all the ‘right’ views will. Where NN and Citizens UK have pioneered this more open, ‘relational test’ approach, they have found that it can create seemingly unlikely alliances which are transformational for all involved. For example in Tower Hamlets the East London Mosque works together alongside churches, synagogues, trade unions and student unions on issues like housing and the living wage. And what people have found is that they are both surprised by how much they do actually have in common, and that the process of relating and working together is a journey for everyone which might lead to some radical changes of mind.

The second key choice we might have to face is whether to buck the trend by allowing discussion of faith in public, something which some people consider to be inherently divisive. Again the lived experiences of Near Neighbours and Citizens UK largely debunk this idea, finding instead that people are more than capable of handling fundamental disagreements without having to stop working together. The true test of political friendship is not how well we can avoid areas of dispute, but how we deal with them when they do come up. This is one of the areas where I think community organising hasn’t quite got it all worked out, because their method for handling fundamental difference is what’s called wedge issues, which is the idea that there are some topics that will divide the alliance rather than unite it and that Citizens UK therefore won’t work on those issues. That’s probably a good pragmatic decision for an organisation that is interested in making big changes happen,



but it does slightly beg the question of how groups are supposed to deal with wedge issues. Because the danger is that if they are forever off the table then they become frozen as divisive issues with no hope for reconciliation or even real understanding. I think there may be a need to try and combine best practices from different fields here, so that the wedge issues which community organising might help to identify can be dealt with in a way that doesn't have to lead into active campaigning but protects the relationship so that people can work together on the many pressing issues that they do already have common ground over.

So the business of promoting political friendships might be a little more controversial than at first glance. And in fact, I would argue that were the habits of working together and sharing core motivations spread widely throughout public life it would be subtly revolutionary because it would break down some of the unhelpful barriers of public and private that lie behind the kind of exclusive secularism that we've already discussed in relation to faith motivations in the public square. But perhaps that's a topic for another time, because at its heart this report has a very simple and I hope powerful message. It is that making multiculturalism work in the UK will not be done by new theories but by building real relationships at a local level between people of every background and belief. Near Neighbours and Citizens UK are far from perfect in how they do this, and in the report I lay out some critiques of how they operate. But what they do is demonstrate some key principles which should be applied far more widely in Political parties, civil society organisations and really anywhere in our diverse society where we're faced with common problems. Then perhaps like the Dads of Tower Hamlets we might all find ourselves surprised by the possibilities of political friendships to create diverse yet united communities of which we can all truly be proud.

