

The Politics of Religious Diversity: Public Event Report



Summary of a public event at Toynbee Hall, East London
19 September 2012

Research presentations from:
ACCEPT Pluralism Project
Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance Project

Responses from:
Kris Hopkins MP
Sunder Katwala
Fiyaz Mughal

Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship
University of Bristol
October 2012

On 19 September 2012, the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship at Bristol University held an event on 'The Politics of Religious Diversity' at Toynbee Hall, East London. It featured research presentations from two major ongoing academic projects at the Centre. A high profile panel of Kris Hopkins MP, Sunder Katwala, and Fiyaz Mughal, chaired by Professor Tariq Modood, responded to the presentations. An audience of about 70 from universities, local government, faith groups, think tanks, and civil society organisations contributed with questions and debate.

Introduction

Professor Tariq Modood sets the context in British and European debates on multiculturalism and secularism

Tariq Modood (Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship, Bristol University) opened the event. He began by describing the work of Centre that he directs, which has produced the research being presented. He observed that the staff, postdocs and PhD students at the Centre probably comprise 'the single biggest critical mass of people working on Muslim identity politics in Britain.'

'It is no exaggeration to say that Muslim assertiveness has stimulated a variety of religious actors in politics, including Christian churches and groups, has prompted interfaith public cooperation, and has forced politicians, governments, public commentators, intellectuals and so on to rethink taken-for-granted uncritical ideas about secularism.'

Modood set the context of the projects in broader British and European debates. He noted that though he does not think the days of multiculturalism are over, 'there's no denying that there is a crisis in multiculturalism, or for multiculturalism.' Muslims have been central to the politics of diversity and multiculturalism over the past 20 years, and of the efforts to critique it and or to reformulate it. He introduced the ACCEPT and MPCG projects, which each involve research on the place of Muslims in the contemporary politics of religious diversity.

‘What Muslim Vote?’

Research findings on the ‘misrecognition’ of Muslim politics from the ACCEPT Pluralism Project

Jan Dobbernack (postdoctoral researcher, Bristol University) presented findings on Muslim political engagement in British elections from his work on the ACCEPT Pluralism Project with Tariq Modood and Nasar Meer. He began on the topic of ‘tolerance.’ Some common concerns about this concept are that it is less demanding and can involve keeping the ‘tolerated’ at arm’s length.

‘Toleration implies a certain sense of disapproval, so it is a kind of concept that seems to be a solution for a world that is less than ideal.’

The ACCEPT research team at Bristol is using the concepts *recognition* and *misrecognition* for a more closely specified understanding of Muslim political agency in Britain. Recognition is a condition in which there is ‘undistorted’ and ‘dialogical’ identity formation, which is a ‘vital human need.’ Misrecognition – the absence of this – is usually not passively endured and invites political agency.

The ACCEPT team has conducted research with organizations that seek to mobilise Muslim voters, to understand if and how these organizations are responding to a sense of ‘misrecognition.’ The organizations in the study include the Muslim Council of Britain, MPAC-UK, You Elect, the Cordoba Foundation, Muslim Vote, iEngage, and Operation Black Vote.

‘We think that there is a sense of misrecognition – a certain idea that there are biased rules that operate in British political life that make Muslim political actors navigate in a particular way.’

Dobbernack and his colleagues find 5 types of misrecognition experienced by these organisations. These include ‘misrecognising Muslim identity politics as markedly different in kind to other identity politics’ (type 1) and ‘misrecognising Muslim political actors as toxic and refusing political association’ (type 5) (the full list is available in the PowerPoint presentation). Dobbernack concluded the presentation by describing ways that Muslim activists have responded through strategies of oppositionality, sophistication, and multiplication.

From Multiculturalism to Muscular Liberalism?

Research findings on the Coalition government's emerging approach to faith from the MPCG Project

Therese O'Toole (Senior Lecturer, Bristol University) presented findings from the Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance project. She leads the MPCG Project with Tariq Modood, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, Stephen Jones, and Nasar Meer. The team is studying various ways British Muslims have been involved in UK governance and policy since 1997.

The MPCG presentation focused on one of the research questions the team is addressing: 'In the transition from New Labour to the Coalition, what are the continuities and changes in approaches to faith and governance?' O'Toole began the presentation by drawing attention to two high profile speeches Prime Minister David Cameron gave last year: one to mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible (12/2011) and one to a security conference in Munich (2/2011). She highlighted four quotations from these speeches in which Cameron has sought demonstrate that his government's distinctiveness from New Labour on issues of faith. The MPCG presentation took each quote in turn, asking: is the Conservative-led government actually making radical changes from the New Labour years?

O'Toole engaged with Cameron's implicit claim in the King James Bible speech that his government does 'do God' in contrast to New Labour. This does not really match New Labour's record, because they 'certainly did engage with faith groups and in lots of ways innovated a great deal in engagement with faith-based organizations.' O'Toole also considered Cameron's words that 'we are a Christian country. And we should not be afraid to say so.' She argued that here the government had signaled bold new changes by giving Christianity a central place. She described the case of the Near Neighbours programme, a key government-funded Big Society initiative of the Church Urban Fund distributing funding for interfaith and cohesion activities at parish-level. Muslim civil society actors interviewed for the MPCG project have had a mix of positive and negative views on this.

'Whilst we can see that there are continuities in engagement with faith per se – so there isn't a radical departure in terms of government's engagement with faith – the emphasis on Christian values and Christianity as a kind of core religious faith actor is something that we think is qualitatively different to the way that Labour approached these issues.'

Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (postdoctoral researcher, Bristol University) continued the MPCG presentation with two final quotes from David Cameron on the weakness of 'state-multiculturalism' and on the government's new approach of 'muscular liberalism.' DeHanas argued that the signaling of this shift actually 'masked a lot of continuity' between governments, including New Labour's sometimes 'muscular' approach, e.g., when Communities Minister Ruth Kelly gave a speech about 're-balancing' the government's relationships with Muslims. DeHanas shared 4 aspects of what muscular liberalism seems to mean in practice, and stated that an 'unintentional multiculturalism' may in fact continue through some of the Coalition's policies, such as the fact that about ¼ of new academies are faith schools.

Question & Answer on the Research Presentations

Doris Peschke (Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, ACCEPT Pluralism - Brussels) was the discussant for the presentations, and provided a response that placed them in European perspective. On the ACCEPT presentation, she said that the focus on misrecognition 'is a very intriguing point.' She questioned, however, if the team was conflating recognition and respect. She agreed that tolerance can be a weak concept, but said nonetheless: 'Tolerance is pretty important for social cohesion, so let's not do away with it as a political approach.' Indeed tolerance may be more important, she observed, in thinking about what it means to say 'we are a Christian country.' On the MPCG project she commented in particular on Near Neighbours, expressing an interest in learning more about how the programme is taking shape in a time when funding is decreasing and problems are more often tackled at a local level.

Humera Khan (An-Nisa Society) started the Question & Answer time, observing that the presentations had not addressed the history of misrecognition prior to 1997. She described the ways in which the recognition of Muslims was a 'failure of successive governments.' She also noted that most Muslim organisations had not engaged in the process of 'making ourselves citizens' by engaging directly in service delivery.

Linda Woodhead (Religion & Society Programme Director, Lancaster University) noted the interesting points the MPCG project made about 'top-down' changes but asked if they could say more about the ways that Muslim communities represented themselves. She was interested in if representation was being distorted, to see if changes from a group-level to individual-level approach mentioned might be a good thing.

Jonathan Chaplin (KLICE, Cambridge University) observed that the civic engagement organisations studied by the ACCEPT team seemed to downplay Muslim difference, and wondered if they seemed to be responding to pressure. For the MPCG project, he brought up the new Prevent Strategy's 'British values' statement form, and asked if this seems to advance the debate about what British values are.

Maleiha Malik (King's College London) agreed with Therese O'Toole's perspective that Prevent has had positive unintended consequences, and also spoke about the success of the harmonised approach of the new Equality Act. She said that, ironically in light of David Cameron's Munich speech, the Big Society is likely to 'lead to centrifugal forces that will actually cause fragmentation to us as citizens in our access to public services.'

Christina Dykes (Conservative Party) questioned the MPCG presentation's portrayal of Conservative policies. She said that she thought David Cameron's Munich speech was given in the wrong place and with the wrong messages, but critiqued how Prevent, Near Neighbours, British values, and Conservative stances on multiculturalism had been described in the presentation.

Therese O'Toole responded to several questions raised about the MPCG project. She thanked Humera Khan for the important reminder of developments prior to 1997. In response to Linda Woodhead's question, she spoke about ways that Muslims have critiqued the 'representation' of their communities, described variations in local context, and mentioned community organising (e.g., London Citizens) as one of the potentially promising alternative models of self-organisation.

O'Toole responded to Jonathan Chaplin's question about the Prevent Strategy's British values form, stating that 'a lot of it is the kinds of values you might associate with liberal democratic values' and that it seemed to have 'little national content' that is specific to Britain. She thanked Maleiha Malik for her comments on unintended consequences and said these are worthy of further discussion.

'To see the development of Prevent as an entirely negative episode in the history of the state's engagement with Muslims I think is to miss the whole picture, particularly to miss the significance of local variations and the ways local actors implemented Prevent.'

In response to Christina Dykes, O'Toole clarified the MPCG project's position on multiculturalism explaining that at the local-level it will be 'hard to dislodge' because 'local actors are very wedded to values and practices of multiculturalism.' She agreed that the Prevent Strategy was deeply problematic in many ways, but argued that this is not the full picture. **Daniel Nilsson DeHanas** also responded to Christina Dykes, clarifying that the MPCG project was raising questions about the way government is approaching Near Neighbours and that research suggests that the Church of England sees its role in the programme differently than government does.

'The Church of England has actually taken quite a different perspective on the way that Near Neighbours is managed. There's a lot more nuance to that picture and I think it's important to say that it has been good in many respects.'

Panel Discussion

A response to the research presentations from three individuals who are actively engaged in the politics of diversity



From left to right: Fiyaz Mughal, Kris Hopkins MP, Tariq Modood, Sunder Katwala

Kris Hopkins (Conservative MP)

Hopkins opened his remarks by expressing his gratitude for the invitation and noting that ‘the Conservative Party has a responsibility to come to places like this and engage in these discussions, and it needs to be more active.’

Speaking to the audience as faith actors, he said he has some bad news: ‘your role actually is going to become ever smaller.’ In his constituency in Keighley, leaders from the central mosque have told him that just 25% of populace regularly attend mosque, which draws into question ideas of ‘*the Muslim community*.’ On faith and religious institutions he said ‘that relationship isn’t as strong as it was a while ago.’ He said there has been a ‘disconnect’ with the faith of the nation in England, adding that: ‘Cameron said it is a Christian country. It is a Christian country. That’s an obvious statement. The leader of our state is the leader of that faith.’

‘The vast majority of my surgeries and my engagement with politics is not around faith and identity around faith. It’s about the BNP, the EDL, fighting racism. It’s about forced marriages. It’s about immigration and engagement with the Home Office. It’s about education, it’s about health.’

Hopkins explained that most of his work in politics is not about faith *per se*. His constituents are most concerned about issues like immigration, health, and crime, and usually faith does not enter into it. He has a strong relationship with his Muslim constituents but adds that Muslims in his community tend to be ‘inward looking.’ He said he is concerned about forced marriages and also very concerned when ‘large sections of our community remain silent as gangs of Muslim men rape white kids,’ noting that you can only have conversations about this when you have gained trust. On New Labour, he said that David Cameron had acknowledged in his first speech the strides in tolerance Labour had made. He spoke about how Tony Blair and Gordon Brown both obviously ‘did God.’

'I can tell you as leader of the Bradford Council, that Prevent was the most destructive thing I have ever seen.'

Hopkins spoke of how Prevent completely undermined the community relations work the Bradford Council was trying to do when he was its leader. He mentioned that there are community gatekeepers and postal voting issues among Muslim, and as much as he disagrees with George Galloway's politics, Galloway has been a 'saving grace' in Bradford because 'women and young people rejected the *biraderi* system' with his election and made choices for themselves.

Fiyaz Mughal (Director of Faith Matters)

Mughal began by agreeing with Kris Hopkins that much of the reason faith was put on the agenda during the previous Labour government was because Tony Blair did faith. He also agreed that there is a problem with elders as gatekeepers in some communities. Mughal then spoke about 'Muslim assertiveness.' He wanted to emphasise that this 'assertiveness' was simply a struggle to attain equality. Unfortunately the sense that Muslims have 'a different agenda' had generated a lot of anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia. Mughal compared Britain to France, Denmark, and Austria in terms of approaches to minorities, acknowledging that 'we are in different places across Europe, and sometimes in turbulent waters, so I guess where we are is a better place.'

Mughal spoke of tolerance as being a major issue since the late 1980s with the Rushdie Affair and he mentioned contemporary legal issues on Muslims and tolerance. In some cases finding Muslims 'offensive' in 'mainstream discussions in media sources' goes unquestioned. Even in research reports and discussions there can be an assumption that 'there is something inherently abnormal about Muslim communities.'

'Muslims sit on a fine line between being tolerated in some instances, and actually being actively caricatured.'

Mughal ended his remarks by speaking about the Prevent Strategy. He mentioned how it had created 'a sense of separation' between faith communities. He commended the Coalition government for listening and doing a long review of the Strategy, and 'realising that Prevent is something that needed to adapt and change.' He valued that the government had taken away some of the stigmatisation of the focus on Muslim communities and how it had been taken 'away from the prism of securitisation,' particularly in the work of the Foreign Office. But he agreed with Therese O'Toole that Prevent in its previous form had done 'some good' in terms of building capacity.

Sunder Katwala (Director of British Future)

Katwala first responded to the MPCG project, observing that the continuities in policies it had found are important but that 'shifts in narrative can really matter even when policies don't shift, because issues of identity are symbolic.' He is intrigued by debates on multiculturalism because they are often polarised, even though underpinning the

issues there may actually be a broad consensus on values. He believes it is important to have ‘a public conversation and a policy conversation that link up.’

Katwala focused most of his remarks on the ‘Muslim vote’ question in response to the ACCEPT presentation. He thinks the research will require broader contextualisation in the question of if Muslim voting patterns are in fact different. Overall, he thinks that ethnic minority voting is not much qualitatively different than other kinds. People seldom vote on the race or ethnicity of a candidate, which is actually ‘good news’ because it enables political diversity: ‘it means you can have a non-white Prime Minister.’

“That raises the question “are Muslim votes different from other kinds of minority votes?” Which raises the other question “are ethnic minority voters different?” And my overall take on that is that we tend to over-exaggerate the point to which ethnic minority voters are different.’

Drawing on a variety of historical and statistical examples, Katwala outlined some of specific the ways that ethnic minority voting patterns can be distinctive. He mentioned the importance of Enoch Powell and the Race Relations Act in traditional ethnic minority political allegiances to Labour rather than to the Conservatives. Katwala ended his remarks by speaking on the need to build a broader political consensus on issues including Britishness, anti-racism, and immigration.

Panel Questions & Answers

Humera Khan (An-Nisa Society) commented on the issue of Muslim assertiveness, arguing that ‘system failure pushed us to be more assertive.’ She said there has been an ‘assumption that we have a shared value system,’ which may well be the case, but ‘we’ve never been equal in our negotiation of whether we have a shared value system.’ The political system has failed to allow people to have ownership over public values.

Tariq Modood (Bristol University) responded to Humera Khan’s remarks on how the system, and the Labour Party in particular, had ‘failed Muslims.’ He said that this raises the question of why people see this as a failure to them *as* Muslims. He discussed changes in what are seen as acceptable or unacceptable differences in self-identification.

Kris Hopkins commented on the prioritisation of identity, mentioning a study in the North of England in which ethnic minority young people saw each other primarily as ‘Northerners,’ which he sees as a step forward in gaining a ‘better deal’ for that part of the country.

David Barclay (Contextual Theology Centre) had a question for Kris Hopkins, asking: ‘In your speech you seemed to imply a distinction between what you described as “real issues” – health care, police, crime, drugs, gangs, and more identity-based issues, particularly faith issues... Is there not a danger that you’re making a false distinction there?’ Faith actors often do not see these issues as distinct from each other.

John Eversley (London Metropolitan University) described a historical decline in identity politics that may underlie voting trends, spoke about the phrase ‘muscular liberalism’ as not developing in a vacuum but having religious roots in ‘muscular Christianity’ and ‘Christian socialism,’ and commented that the power of ideas in policymaking is often over-emphasised in comparison to ‘stakeholder management.’

Mazin Zeki (National Secular Society) expressed general agreement with Sunder Katwala that there is ‘no black vote’ and there are plural ‘Muslim communities.’ He mentioned a speech Ted Cantele was about to give at the National Secular Society conference which states that multiculturalism is ‘past its sell-by date’ and government should not fund religious groups, asking for reactions on this speech from the panel.

Mohammed Abdul Aziz (SOAS, University of London) addressed a question to Sunder Katwala. He noted that the equalities strategy from the Coalition is strong on gender and sexual orientation ‘but almost silent on areas to do with race and diversity of religion,’ and asked what kinds of differences this marked in the politics of diversity.

Kris Hopkins began his final remarks by responding to David Barclay. He reiterated that he does not distinguish between his constituents based on if they are Muslim or some other faith.

‘I do really challenge some of the siloed academic contemplations about “the Muslim community” or anybody else. I’m a One Nation Tory and I believe I was elected to represent and to look after everybody to the best of my abilities.’

Responding the question about Ted Cantele, Hopkins said ‘there was a huge amount of waste around Prevent and around some of the cohesion spend.’ He said that in times when this is being cut back we need to ask why people object – is it ideological, is it because they are losing a job?

On immigration, Hopkins noted that ‘in my party, every time it attempts to have a conversation around immigration there’s a toe curling moment of “what’s your motivation for this conversation?”’ Because of Enoch Powell and others, for a long time Conservatives were silent on immigration and this ‘left that plane open’ to others including those on the Left, but also unfortunately the BNP. Hopkins believes that David Cameron and many of the 2010 intake MPs have a modern perspective and can challenge this, adding that ‘we understand the magnitude of the journey we’ve got to make.’

Fiyaz Mughal remarked that it is important to remember that the David Cameron’s Munich speech was ‘specifically targeted towards Muslim communities around the securitisation agenda.’ He spoke of how the speech was used by the Far Right and said that politicians have a responsibility to recognise the difficult position that Muslim communities are in ‘when there is no rebuttal of some of these activities.’

Mughal expressed his dismay that it is actually acceptable in the mainstream to ask if grooming and paedophilia are ‘inherent to Muslim communities.’ He urged the government to lay out more frameworks and interventions to deal with diversity-related issues.

'That speech was used by the Far Right quite consistently. That speech that Cameron gave was used as vindication by the Far Right to say: "See, we're not actually wrong about Muslim communities, that actually even the Prime Minister is saying that." And Tommy Robinson and the very people who marched on these streets with the EDL were on record as vindicating that speech.'

Sunder Katwala said that it was important to remember that the ability to express identities, such as sexual orientation or religion, can be constrained. He agreed with Humera Khan's point that we 'haven't really had the conversation' or negotiation of shared values. He spoke of British values as something that should not be considered 'toxic,' for two reasons. First, multiculturalism without British values has tended to leave out the majority. And second, many research studies over time have shown that actually the people most positive about British values tend to be ethnic minorities, including Muslims.

'I think it's a big mistake in this conversation to see the British values thing as a sort of toxic threat, because if you do that I don't see a way out of the large numbers of people who are essentially moderate but feel it was asymmetric in multiculturalism and it didn't really have anything to say about the majority community and majority identities.'

Katwala argued that too much media coverage was being given to 'extreme minorities' such as the English Defence League and those like the poppy-burning protesters who are sometimes seen to represent Muslims. The EDL never musters more than 3000 to a demonstration, and in the previous demo there had been about 100 from the EDL compared to 1200 anti-fascist protesters. He ended saying that it is a 'responsibility of the mainstream' to make it clear that these are extreme minorities.