Chapter 6

Nationhood and Muslims in Britain

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Introduction

'These are difficult times to be British', maintain Gamble and Wright (2009: 1). Their assessment centres on how 'the state which underpinned British identity is no longer the confident structure of earlier times' (ibid.). They are not alone in coming to this view[1], and at least two implications follow from their observation. One is that the political unity of the administrative and bureaucratic components of *the state* is related to cultural features of British nationhood, including the ways in which people express *feeling* and *being* British. This is perhaps a familiar assessment of the configuration of all nation-states, though it could also imply that the state has been one – though not necessarily the most important - touchstone in the historical cultivation of 'British' as a national identity (Uberoi and McLean, 2009).

A number of contemporary political developments which put into question the prevailing coherence of the British state (e.g., devolution, European integration, globalisation) might add to the kinds of issues informing Gamble and Wright's view, and

[1] Scholars typically begin a chronology of the contemporary 'British question' by making reference to Tom Nairn's (1997) *The Break-Up of Britain*. Nairn of course was a Marxist critic who offered more of a challenge to the idea of the union than an analysis of its condition. For our purposes the debate really commences in the early 1990s and is neatly summarised by the late Bernard Crick's (1995: 168) observation, from the middle of that decade, of how: '…for the first time anyone can remember in a people who have taken themselves so much for granted, have been widely envied for their psychological security, an anxious debate has broken out about national identity'. The difference between *Great Britain* and the *United Kingdom* can be confusing. Politically, *Great Britain* brings together the three 'home nations' of England, Scotland and Wales, as well as a number of islands off the coasts of England, Scotland and Wales (e.g., the Isle of Wight, Anglesey, the Isles of Scilly, the Hebrides, and the island groups of Orkney and Shetland). The *United Kingdom*, meanwhile, includes all of these as well as Northern Ireland. Territories that have further autonomy from both Great Britain and the United Kingdom include the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands which have distinct legislative and taxation systems. The derivation of the term *Great Britain* predates the British Empire, and is a consequence of distinguishing the British mainland from 'Lesser Britain' which approximates to modern Brittany in France.

are perhaps most starkly illustrated by the promised 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence. Of course Britain has since its very inception been a multinational state.[2] 'Britain' was constructed in a series of treaties and Parliamentary Acts between its constituent nations: England and Wales joining in 1536, with the addition of Scotland in 1603 and 1707, Ireland in 1801 (formalizing a long-standing occupation), and Northern Island in 1921-2 and 1949. Britain thus has always contained a certain intrinsic tension, which has had the potential to be productive as well as undermining[3]. It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that 'the empirical view of Britishness is open to objection' (Parekh, 2009: 33), for Britain's 'nested' nations have always retained and cultivated – rather than erased - distinguishing languages, churches, systems of law, jurisdiction over education and local governance, alongside other features of civil-society. To some extent it is precisely these issues which are now reflected in forms of regional citizenship (Hepburn, 2010), and re-articulated in current debates on these nations' territorial governance in a manner that goes beyond issues of constitutional devolution per se (Jones & Fowler, 2007, cf Bogdanor, 1979). Questions of national identity in Britain (e.g., who is 'British' and what does 'Britishness' consist of?) are therefore complicated by the fact that English and British have long been '(con)fused – [with] the coterminosity of flag, anthem, symbols compounding the confusion' (McCrone, 2002: 304). While - as yet - 'English nationalism is the dog that did not bark' (Kumar, 2010: 471) the same is

[2] Although a multi-national 'British' state (and indeed identity, albeit unevenly) came about through time, a formal category of British citizenship (as distinct from the imperial category *civis Britannicus sum*) did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century period of post-war decolonisation. This multinational settlement, however, has always been a-symmetrical to the extent it has not been evenly federal (but instead unevenly devolved).

[3] Moreover, other times have seen severe tensions threatening a unified Britain, for example, the period of winding down of empire in the post-war period, in which a series of wide-ranging questions on the future of the Union were raised (Augley, 2009).

not true for England's Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish neighbours. In each of the three cases nationalist and regionalist parties have recently assumed power at the regional level, either outright or in a minority or coalition government (Hepburn and McLoughlin, 2011).

The second implication in Gamble and Wright's statement about the decline of British identity, is at first less obvious but no less important. It concerns how current debates about Britishness are not restricted to *national* minorities, but have also come to focus on *ethnic* minorities, namely migrant and post-immigrant minorities, frequently thought of as 'visible' minorities. For example, one salient articulation of contemporary British national identity in governmental policy and discourse, frequently discussed in the press, is concerned with the promotion of common civic values, as well as English language competencies among ethnic minorities through a wider knowledge of - and self-identification with – British cultural, historical and institutional heritages, as well as approved kinds of political engagement and activity (Meer and Modood, 2009). A sort of British civic national identity, as the Commission on the future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB) (2000) described, remains embedded in particular cultural values and traditions that involve not only an allegiance to the state, but also intuitive, emotional, symbolic allegiances to a historic nation, even while the idea of the nation is contested and re-imagined.

Two 'minorities' or one 'majority'

Although this chapter is principally concerned with the place of Muslims in British nationhood, some elaboration of the on-going debates concerning British nationhood is required to properly understand the place of Muslims within these debates. To be sure, Muslims have not created the wider debate (Meer, 2010). On the contrary, they have found themselves positioned between two impulses. One is a centrifugal multinationalism (e.g., Welsh devolution, Northern Ireland power sharing, the prospect of Scottish Independence), and the other is centripetal (e.g., the civic integration of newer ethnic minorities). These need not pull in opposite directions, in so far as 'Britain's past and present immigrant minorities easily fit into this [common] framework' (Parekh 2009: 37). By common framework we might think about a consensus that multiple identities are valuable and not in themselves a problem for identifying with Britain As Parekh argues, '[j]ust as it [Britain] has learned to respect the diversity of its four nations, it should respect the diversity of its immigrants'. There are important conditions for this prospect which can hinder or facilitate a meaningful settlement where minorities feel that they belong and their status as British is not constantly challenged or questioned. Parekh continues:

> The way a country treats its members plays a particularly important role. They are more likely to identify with the country if they are accepted as its full and legitimate members and treated with respect, enjoy equality with the rest, are free to express their other cherished identities, and have the opportunity to lead a minimally decent life. Conversely, they are unlikely to feel at home in the country and see it as theirs if their very presence is resented, if they are subjected to discriminatory treatment, mocked and ridiculed with impunity, or if they are required to sacrifice their other identities as a precondition of their membership or as proof of their commitment to the country (ibid. 34).

Applying this observation to the question of where Muslims fit into contemporary debates about nationhood in Britain brings out that national identities usually reflect the

culture of the majority (Smith, 1988; Uberoi, 2007). One normative option is to re-make the nation (and national identities) in plural forms, something which needs to register what Billig (1995) has described as the 'banal' features of ordinary nationhood which may not commonly be understood to be inscribed with majority ethnic, cultural or racial features. It was this very assessment of British national identity which, at the turn of the twenty-first century informed the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain's (CMEB), a non-governmental inquiry created by an influential equality charity (the Runneymede Trust). This inquiry characterized British national identity as potentially 'based on generalisations [that] involve a selective and simplified account of a complex history' in which '[m]any complicated strands are reduced to a simple tale of essential and enduring national unity' (cmmd 2.9 p. 16)'. Because they do not easily fit into a majoritarian account of national identity, or cannot be reduced to or assimilated into a prescribed public culture, minority 'differences' thus may be negatively conceived.

Britain has faced particular challenges in addressing issues of disadvantage tied to cultural difference experienced by a variety of ethnic and religious minorities. The most substantive response, developed cumulatively during the final quarter of the last century and comprised of a range of policies and discourses, is commonly known as multiculturalism. The multicultural response has sought to promote equality of access to opportunities and accommodate aspects of minority difference while promoting the social and moral benefits of ethnic minority-related diversity in an inclusive sense of civic belonging. This has neither been a linear nor stable development and has frequently been subject to (often productive) criticism from a variety of camps, and has especially been under stress since the publication of the CMEB report (Meer and Modood, 2014). Over a

decade since the publication of this report, a period that has included civil disturbances, wars abroad and then terrorism at home, as well as the distinctively multicultural London 2012 Olympics, the core idea that Britain rejects the idea of integration --- being based upon a drive for unity through uncompromising cultural 'assimilation' -- remains as true as ever.

This is not to say that competing discourses and policies do not have significant traction, but the resilience and dynamism of Roy Jenkins' (1966) famous definition of integration in Britain - as 'not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance' – is clearly evident to those who choose to look. That is not to deny this has been qualified. Hence the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) explicitly introduced a test (implemented in 2005) for those seeking British citizenship. Thus applicants should show 'a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic' and 'a sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom' (Home Office 2004, p. 11). Those immigrants seeking to settle in the UK (applying for 'indefinite leave to remain') equally have to pass the test (effective since April 2007). If applicants do not have sufficient knowledge of English, they are encouraged to attend English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and citizenship classes. Despite important variations therefore it is evidently the case that in North Western Europe there is presently a renewed emphasis and explicitness on national identities amongst countries that have not always prioritised this e.g. Britain, Denmark, and increasingly Germany. This phenomenon is not simply a methodological artefact whose true meaning is obscured by 'methodological nationalism'.

For in contrast to other to such cases, post migrant groups have been recognised as ethnic and racial minorities requiring state support and differential treatment to overcome distinctive barriers in their exercise of citizenship. It includes how, under the remit of several Race Relations Acts (RRAs), the state has sought to integrate minorities into the labour market and other key arenas of British society through a cumulative approach that promotes equal access as an example of equality of opportunity. It is nearly 40 years since the introduction of a third RRA (1976) cemented a state sponsorship of race equality by consolidating earlier, weaker legislative instruments (RRA 1965, 1968). Alongside its broad remit spanning public and private institutions, recognition of indirect discrimination and the imposition of a statutory public duty to promote good 'race relations', it created the Commission for Racial Equality (later amalgamated into the Equality & Human Rights Commission) to assist individual complainants and monitor the implementation of the Act. Does this amount to multiculturalism? We have argued that it amounts to a British multiculturalism which, although lacking an official 'Multicultural Act' or 'Charter' in the way of Australia or Canada, rejected the idea of integration being based upon a drive for unity through an uncompromising cultural 'assimilation' over 40 years ago.

'**Framing' Muslims**

According to the most recent census of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2012: 2), around 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent of the population) define themselves as 'Muslim'. This makes Muslims the second largest religious group after Christians (33.2 million people amounting to 59.3 per cent of the population). As the

Office for National Statistics (2012: 8) summarises, the areas with the highest proportion of Muslims are in London (especially Tower Hamlets and Newham which are, respectively, 34.5 per cent and 32.0 per cent Muslim, and Redbridge and Waltham Forest, where the figure is over 20 per cent). Beyond London, areas with more than 20 per cent Muslims include Blackburn with Darwen in the North West (27.0 per cent), as well as Bradford in Yorkshire and the Humber, Luton in the East of England, Slough in the South East, and Birmingham in the West Midlands. The precise cross-tabulations of ethnic composition are yet to be released, but it is anticipated that they will not show a radical departure from the configuration of ethnic proportions set out in the last census (ONS, 2001). In 2001, those of Pakistani origin made up 42.5 per cent of the Muslim population, Bangladeshis 16.8 per cent, Indians 8.5 per cent , and most interestingly other white, 7.5 per cent . This other white category includes people of Turkish, Arabic and North African ethnic origin who did not define themselves in non-white terms as well as East European Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo and white Muslims from across Europe. Finally, 6.2 percent of the Muslim population identified as Black African, 5.8 percent as Other Asian, and 4.1 percent as British. Even with this heterogeneity, it is still understandable that Muslims in Britain are associated first and foremost with a South Asian background, especially since they make up roughly 68 per cent of the British Muslim population.

Though a small proportion of the total population of England and Wales, Muslims are the minority group over whom there has been most concern with respect to national loyalty and integration (Gallup, 2009, 20). This may partly be due to anxieties following the attacks of 9/11 (in New York) and 7/7 (in London), although fear throughout the West

of Muslims and questions about their loyalty predate the 'war on terror' (Matar, 2009). Muslim identities have thus become a staple feature of contemporary political discussion in Britain. It is the content of these familiar discussions, however, which some have argued 'operates as the other half of a distorted dialogue,' that is of concern (Morely and Hussain, 2011: 5). Despite fears of British Muslims' loyalty, available evidence suggests that most Muslims do identify with Britain and feel British. Using the 2005 Citizenship survey, Heath and Roberts (2008, 14) show that 43 percent of Muslim respondents claim that they 'very strongly' belong to Britain and 42 percent say that they belong 'fairly strongly'. These figures are corroborated by earlier survey data, and later surveys even suggest that British Muslims identify more strongly with Britain than the British public at large (Modood *et al*, 1997; Gallup, 2009). Polling data from Wind-Cowie and Gregory (2011) support this further:

> Our polling shows that 88 per cent of Anglicans and Jews agreed that they were 'proud to be a British citizen' alongside 84 per cent of non-conformists and 83 per cent of Muslims – compared with 79 per cent for the population as a whole. (p. 39) [...] This optimism in British Muslims is significant as – combined with their high score for pride in British – it runs counter to a prevailing narrative about Muslim dissatisfaction with and in the UK. While it is true that there are significant challenges to integration for some in the British Muslim community – and justified concern at the levels of radicalism and extremism in some British Muslim communities – overall British Muslims are more likely to be both patriotic and optimistic about Britain than are the white British community. (p. 41).

Despite this evidence, leading politicians often conceive of and portray Muslims as having difficulty 'feeling British' and that their British identities are meaningful parts of their individual identities. Likewise, many leading journalists portray some Muslims as having difficulty 'being British' and behaving as British people are 'supposed' to behave.

These portrayals have significant consequences. Politicians who control the state, through institutions like the publicly funded education system, media and arts, help to shape the broader public's subjective sense of national identity issues (Gellner, 1983, 57; Smith, 1992, 100). Similarly, journalists who write for national newspapers convey information about, as well as an image of, the nation that readers often internalise, thus influencing the way they think about their own and the extent of others' identification with the nation (Anderson, 1983). If senior politicians and journalists suggest that some Muslims have difficulty feeling and being British, it is unsurprising if Muslims are seen as outsiders by large sections of the public in Britain. The discourse about Muslims by important public figures, in short, contributes to and reinforces a sense among many in Britain that Muslims, or at least a good many Muslims, do not belong.

Feeling British[4]

How do senior Labour and Conservative party politicians conceptualise and portray the ability of Muslims to feel British? We can begin to get a glimpse of their views through interviews we conducted in 2007-8 with six members of the then Labour government (Labour was in power between 1997 and 2010) and four members of the shadow Conservative cabinet as well as published reports of their speeches and comments. All the politicians interviewed had some ministerial or shadow cabinet responsibility for the policy area of community cohesion, which since its introduction in 2001 as a focus by the government has been intimately tied to issues relating to Muslims

[4] These sections draw on previously published materials from Meer, Dwyer, and Modood (2010); Uberoi and Modood (2010) and Uberoi, Meer, Modood, and Dwyer (2011).

and Britishness (Dwyer and Uberoi, 2009; McGhee, 2003, 377; Bright, 2007, 11).[5] Indeed, this policy area was initially created to help prevent disturbances like those that occurred in 2001 in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in which young Muslims participated, often provoked by the far-right British National Party; the policy area also developed in response to reports on the disturbances that recommended a national debate on 'the common elements of nationhood' (Home Office, 2001, 19). The reports seemed to suggest that Muslims who participated in the riots had difficulty seeing themselves as British, a view supported by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who praised the reports for facing 'head on' how 'people in the Asian community help the second and third generation feel British…'(Independent, 9/12/01).

Certain junior ministers, like Angela Eagle MP, responsible for community cohesion policies were sanguine about the ability of Muslims to feel British. Hence Eagle, when interviewed , said that 'having a British identity isn't inconsistent with being a British Pakistani' (Interview with Angela Eagle 15.10.07) Mike O'Brien MP, a Minister of State for Pension Reform in 2007-08, but a previous minister for Race Equality 1999-2001, said that 'a lot of Muslims actually do' feel 'British' and that they are unlikely to have difficulty doing so because 'a person can feel dual identity, you can be British and you can feel Pakistani…that's not a problem' (Interview with Mike O'Brien 30.10.07). Fiona Mactaggart MP suggested that even Muslims who say they do not feel British may not really be rejecting their British identities: 'If the British government has done something you think is wrong, like going to war with Iraq, then you

[5] Varun Uberoi conducted nine of these interviews and Tariq Modood one of them. Each interview was semi-structured, lasted approximately an hour and, as the main text indicates, was with a Labour or Conservative politician who since 2001 had responsibility in government or opposition for community cohesion.

can say I'm no longer British…that's a way of rejecting their values… But I'm not sure how profound it is' (Interview with Fiona Mactaggart 16.10.07). These Labour Party Ministers contested the view that Muslims had difficulty feeling British, but this was not so for their senior colleague and cabinet minister David Blunkett. To be sure, Blunkett claimed, 'you can be first generation Pakistani and British…'. (Interview with David Blunkett, 11.03.08). But when asked which immigrant groups might have difficulty feeling British he indicated that among some Pakistanis, 'I think there's a lip service to Britishness and the issue is if we get under the surface, do people really mean it, do they feel it?' He added:

> 'you see Pakistani covers a lot of different backgrounds, Pashtun and all the rest of it, and so it's difficult and they don't always agree with each other. So I always have to find out who the community leaders are (laughs)…… I think they would, I think all those groups would pay a lip service to being British… (ibid).

Unsure about whether *many* Pakistanis pay lip service to Britishness, Blunkett stated that 'I don't have any authentic statistics on it, I don't have anything that is not just pure anecdote…' (ibid). Indeed, Blunkett was the Home Secretary who set up the Home Office Citizenship Survey which, as already noted, showed that more than four-fifths of Muslim respondents claimed that they 'very strongly' or "fairly strongly" belong to Britain (Heath and Roberts, 2008, p.14) In establishing this survey, Blunkett reflected the turn towards 'evidence based policy' and the prevailing 'mood' in government in support of 'management by numbers' (Hood, 2010, 7-8). It is thus difficult to understand why despite requesting data relating to Muslims and despite a mood in government that favoured using it, Blunkett relied on anecdotal information. One possible reason that Blunkett felt that he didn't have any '*authentic* statistics' on whether Muslims feel British

is his view that survey data on Muslims attitudes to feeling British reflect the 'lip service' that he thinks some of them are willing to pay to Britishness.

Blunkett also linked views about feeling British to social class. Some Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims, he indicated, have difficulty feeling British because they are 'at the very bottom of the economic ladder' and he believes that there is a relationship between feeling British, integration, and being economically successful:

> The Hindu community have managed not to be the focal point of bitterness and hatred…. because there's a very much larger middle class, and wherever you have a larger middle class…. then integration, social cohesion go hand in hand…. And therefore the answer to your question is those areas of inward migration, where people have been struggling at the very bottom end of the economic ladder, that obviously means Bangladeshi and to some extent Pakistani communities, although that is changing….. (ibid)

In a lecture he delivered in 2003, Blunkett spoke of a growing number of *young* Muslims who believe they have to choose between identifying as Muslim or British, and similar claims have been made by other leading government politicians. As Blunkett said, 'there will always be those….encouraging their followers to define their faith and their identity in opposition to outsiders rather than in positive terms… It is a worrying trend that young second generation British Muslims are more likely than their parents to feel they have to *choose* between feeling part of the UK and feeling part of their faith…..' (Blunkett, 2003, 3, Emphasis added). In a Fabian pamphlet written when Ruth Kelly was Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities and Liam Byrne was Minister of State for Immigration, they expressed similar concerns about Muslims' identity: 'there is a

particular issue with a minority of second and third generation Muslims' ability to feel British (Byrne & Kelly, 2007, 25).

Like the views of many politicians, Blunkett's were often inconsistent and contradictory. He noted in the interview that 'post 11th of September', I 'think there was a real problem in trying to hook the Islamic community and do something about them feeling part of the country'. He went on: 'we needed [after 9/11/] to throw up a protective screen and we needed at the same time to hold out a hand to say, you know, you are part of us…' He added, 'it's a self fulfilling prophecy, if you say to people…we think you are very different, we think that there is a problem here and…and we're extremely concerned that you do something about it, then that re-enforces a feeling. Whereas if you embrace people, we've all done this in our own lives, if you embrace somebody who is giving you a hard time, then its much more difficult'. One strategy for Blunkett was to embrace Muslims and help them 'to feel part of *our* community' (Interview with Blunkett, Emphasis added). At the same time, however, as we have indicated, he emphasized that many Muslims lack a strong British identity, and in a newspaper interview in 2001, he noted how some Muslims should avoid marrying people from their countries of origin and needed to adhere to British norms (Blunkett, 2001). By Blunkett's own admission, his approach was not only inconsistent with his and his government's own data sets and approach to using such data, but also with his own ideas of how to make Muslims feel at home in Britain at a time when they felt threatened by the 'atmosphere that… had been created by the attack in America (Interview with Blunkett).

Similar contradictions are found among leading Conservative Party politicians. On the one hand, there are indications that they accept that Muslim values are now part of British society, as when William Hague , then Conservative Party leader, in the week after the 2001 disturbances in Oldham, pointed to 'the way in which Muslim values are being built into the edifice of Modern Britain' (Hague, 2001, p.6) Sayeeda Warsi as opposition spokeswoman on community cohesion, and after a trip to Sudan to aid the release of a British school teacher, made clear that being a Muslim does not conflict with British values: 'I hope our mission to Sudan demonstrated to people in Britain, and in other Western countries that you can be Muslim and hold firm to your country's values and interests' (Warsi, undated, p2) Or listen to former community cohesion spokesman Paul Goodman, who in our interview distinguished between older Muslim immigrants and the younger generations: 'The very oldest tranche of the people . . . I don't get the sense that when they arrived they wanted to engage with the mainstream culture'. But in successive generations, there are those 'who plunge themselves into the mainstream'.

Other leading Conservatives conceived of and portrayed Muslims rather differently. When we asked the then Shadow Security Minister, Pauline Neville Jones, who in 2007 published a report on community cohesion, whether any particular 'types of people' might have difficulty feeling British, she answered, 'That's a very good question, and a kind of important question, actually. What I'm about to say is not based on either work we've done or, or stuff I've read' (Interview with Pauline Neville Jones, 17.10.07). She went on to say that there could be 'quite a lot of people who don't feel particularly British' and thus the focus should not be exclusively on Muslims. However, when asked whether some Muslims might have difficulty feeling British, Neville-Jones responded,

‘yep’ (ibid). Elsewhere she has been quoted as saying that the challenge ‘is not how you try to indigenise Islam . . . which is important, but how you give British Muslims in this country the feeling that actually they are Brits, like any other British (sic)’ (Jones and Fowler, 2007, p. 9). Former community cohesion spokesman and now Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, shared such views. He seemed unaware of studies concerning British identity whilst saying, in our interview, that non-Muslims might have difficulty feeling British, and suggesting that Muslims might have trouble both being *and* feeling British and hold views that are out of sync with British norms and traditions:

> If looked at bluntly, I keep on meeting very pleasant people, not just Muslims, sometimes from other religious groups but I have to say principally Muslims, who seem to me to have views, and I have listened carefully to what they've got to say, which are certainly incompatible with development in our national and historical tradition’ (Interview with Dominic Grieve, 18.9.07).

He went on:

> It is true there are only a tiny number of people who want to blow themselves up on the underground killing people for the sake of their view of what the world should be like. But equally it seems to me that whilst there are large numbers of Muslims living in Britain who have very little difficulty reconciling their religious views with the advantages of living in a pluralist democratic society, there are actually quite a large number of them who, whilst they might be quite grateful for the fact that they are living in a pluralist society rather than being persecuted somewhere else, *actually want to live in a society that is very different*... (ibid).

Thus, while he says that ‘large numbers’ of peaceful Muslims are glad to live in Britain and benefit from doing so, they allegedly wish Britain to be a very different society and this prevents them from identifying with it. Interestingly, Neville Jones offered a more critical view of British society that might explain why Muslims are loathe to identify with it. She referred to 'aspects of modern western British secular society[…that] are particularly unattractive. The violence, the lawlessness, the drunkenness, the, um, the

vulgarity', these are all things that no 'sane person would actually want to join' (Interview with Pauline Neville Jones, 17/10/ 07).

Being **British**

Leading journalists also have made problematic links between Muslims and Britishness, but in a different way than the politicians we have discussed. The newspaper coverage following former Home and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's controversial comments in 2006 about Muslim women who choose to wear the *niqab* (a full face veil) is a case in point. [6] In his weekly column in the *Lancashire Telegraph* (5 October, 2006) Straw explained the reasons why he asked Muslim women wearing the *niqab* to remove the veil when meeting him in his Blackburn constituency office. The removal of the face veil, he argued, enabled him to engage more effectively in a 'face-to-face' dialogue. He was better able to 'see what the other person means and not just hear what they say'. He described face veils as a 'visible statement of separation and difference' that made 'better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult'. [7] He continued:

> It was not the first time I had conducted an interview with someone in a full veil, but this particular encounter, though very polite and respectful on both sides, got me thinking. In part, this was because of the apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds - the entirely English accent, the couple's education (wholly in the UK) - and the fact of the veil.

[6] The discussion of newspaper coverage draws on a systematic content analysis of the national press reaction to Straw's comments although here it purposefully limits the time-frame to a ten day period in which the issue dominated the news agenda (5 to 15 October, 2006). By searching the LexisNexus database of national newspaper archives with the key words 'Straw' and 'Veil', identified 497 items were identified which, with the use of Atlas Ti, were coded in two stages – first, according to whether they comprised newspaper editorials or Leaders, news items or features, letters, and columnist opinion or comment and, second, according to a coding schedule devised to tap key words such as 'Britishness', 'cohesion', 'multiculturalism' and so on, before qualitatively tracing how the newspaper items invoked or made reference to accounts of national identity and citizenship. For a full methodological discussion see Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010: 91-92).

[7] It is also worth noting that throughout the article and subsequent interviews, Straw continually distinguished between the full face veil or *niqab*, and other types of Muslim coverings such as the headscarf or *hijab*.

> Above all, it was because I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone 'face-to-face' who I could not see (ibid.).

Much later, and as the 2010 general election neared, Straw apologised for the 'problems' that his views caused Muslims, (Straw, 2012, p.480; Daily Mail, 27 April 2010), but in his memoirs he subtly changed positions again by noting how glad he was that he raised the issue (Straw, 2012, p.484). The notion that Muslims wearing the veil are antithetical to British traditions is implied in Straw's claims that his views reflect in *part* 'the concern of other white people…' (Straw, 2012, p.480).

Straw's comments seemed have encouraged, and given legitimacy to, journalists to portray some Muslims as unable to be British (Meer, Dwyer and Modood 2010). Characteristic of much of the newspaper coverage, and from all impressions, the national popular reaction saw the issue of the *niqab* --- which was universally agreed to be worn by only a tiny percentage of Muslim women --- presented as a matter of national identity and minority-majority relations rather than a rather marginal issue of personal religious choice. Consider the most widely read middle-market national newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, a publication widely recognised for focusing its coverage on controversial matters of ethnic minority difference. The Daily Mail's editorials frequently framed their discussion by juxtaposing British national identity with Muslim separatism (facilitated by multiculturalism). The following extract provides a good illustration of how Muslims and national identity were often cast as mutually exclusive in that newspaper:

> [T]his Government has actively promoted multiculturalism, encouraged Muslim 'ghettoes' and set its face against greater integration. Anyone who dared to question this new apartheid was routinely denounced as a 'racist'. Britishness? Who cares? For New Labour yes, including Mr Straw, it became an article of faith for the ethnic minorities to celebrate their own languages, culture and

> traditions, at the expense of shared values. There could hardly be a more effective recipe for division. Is it really surprising…if they [Muslims] see Mr Straw's views on the veil as a juddering reversal of all that has gone before? (Daily Mail, 7 October, 2006)

Several important ideas intermingle in this passage, but clearly Britishness is portrayed as the opposite to a government- sponsored multiculturalism that encourages people to celebrate their differences. The latter has allegedly created a type of 'apartheid', especially among Muslims who were permitted, if not encouraged, to celebrate their distinctive features under multiculturalism. Seen as a corollary of multiculturalism, Muslim difference is juxtaposed with, and seen as antithetical to, Britishness which stands for shared values and integration. Like multiculturalism then, Muslim difference is conceived as a competitor to Britishness, with the latter also seen to be missing among Muslims --- although a sense of Britishness is viewed as having the ability to rectify the problems that multiculturalism has allegedly fostered, including 'Muslim ghettoes.'

Prominent columnists in the Daily Mail expressed similar views. For example, Alison Pearson articulated how she and other women feel a sense of ownership of Britain that is disturbed by women wearing the *niqab*:

> It's not a nice sensation - to feel judged for wearing your own clothes in your own country. The truth is that females who cover their faces and bodies make us uneasy. The veil is often downright intimidating. […] I just don't like seeing them on British streets. Nor do I want to see another newspaper provide, as it did this week, a cut-out-and-keep fashion guide to the different types of veil: 'Here we see Mumtaz, or rather we don't see Mumtaz because the poor kid is wearing a nosebag over her face, modelling the latest female-inhibiting shrouds from the House of Taliban' (Pearson, 2006)

More is at work here than national identity. There are clear intersections with gender and the discourse on female submission which undergirds the contested nature of what veiling

signifies (Dwyer, 2008). For Pearson, the 'country' belongs to women who are willing *not* to cover their faces and who have a "liberal" conception of modest dress. Those who wear veils are in some sense aliens, even if they are also British citizens. Their standards of prescribed modesty are not simply regarded as extreme but as un-British, making other women uneasy and self-conscious in 'their own country'. The 'British streets,' as Pearson puts it, are no place for those wearing a garment from the 'House of Taliban'.

Perhaps surprisingly, some journalists at the *Daily Telegraph,* a conservative-leaning newspaper, adopted a far more nuanced position with regards to the *niqab*. Charles Moore (2006), columnist in and former editor of the newspaper, did not endorse the idea of the veil as a symbol of oppression. Indeed, he noted how discussions about it among Muslims in Britain can at times signify autonomy. Moore not only noted 'a struggle for control of Islam in this country, and for its political exploitation', but that wearing the *niqab* can simply be a form of rebellion among teenage girls *against* oppression they experience from their parents: :

> There is an attempt to 'arabise' Muslims from the Indian sub-continent, persuading them to wear clothes that are alien to their culture to show their religious zeal… *For a few Muslim girls in this country, wearing the veil is a form of oppression imposed by their families; for more, it is a form of teenage rebellion, of showing more commitment than their parents* - a religious version of wearing a hoodie (7th October 2006, emphasis added.)

Moore wrote that 'many non-Muslims find these veils a little unsettling…not because they are an exotic import to these shores…but because they conceal the face' (ibid). Nonetheless Moore noted that setting up British national traditions and the wearing of 'the veil' as opposed is 'a hostile statement about the society in which the wearer lives'

(ibid), and wrongly portrays Muslims who wear the *niqab* as being hostile to Britain and unwilling to behave like other British people.

But what about more 'difference friendly' newspapers like the *Independent*? *The Independent* has a reputation for balanced discussion, and is less likely to cast British national identity and examples of Muslim 'difference' as mutually exclusive. Indeed, one editorial, entitled 'Mr Straw has raised a valid issue, but reached the wrong conclusion,' maintained that 'it [the *niqab*] is not the wearing of the headscarf…. Unlike in France, where the wearing of headscarves at school became a highly contentious political issue, the attitude to headscarves in Britain has been wisely liberal, which has kept the subject largely out of the political domain' (7 October, 2006). Another editorial went as far as to contrast what it characterized as negative contemporary press coverage of Muslims with that experienced by other groups in earlier periods:

> The shameful aspect is that we are repeating our mistakes, in standing by while certain ethnic or religious minorities - in this case, Muslims - are demonised. Britain may be seen abroad as having managed the transition to a multicultural society more successfully than some, but as a nation we have not overcome the tendency to suspect, even fear, 'the other' (*Independent*, 6 October, 2006).

Still, the *Independent's* editorials and main stories are particularly striking when contrasted with the ways its leading columnists use national identity to condemn those who wear the *niqab* and sometimes also the hijab (headscarf) (see Ingram 2006,; Lewis 2006;-, Orr 2006; Smith 2006)-. This includes, most notably, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2006), one of only two or three Muslim columnists in the national press, who has portrayed wearers of the niqab as not only deliberately rejecting British, or at the least,

Western society, but also acting and dressing as aliens and abusing their freedoms by trying to make Britain more like Saudia Arabia:

> [W]hen does this country decide that it does not want citizens using their freedoms to build a satellite Saudi Arabia here? […] It [*niqab*] rejects human commonalities and even the membership of society itself… It is hard to be a Muslim today. And it becomes harder still when some choose deliberately to act and dress as aliens (9 October, 2006).

The view that being Muslim and British can, at times, conflict is also nicely illustrated by The *Sunday Telegraph* columnist Patience Wheatcroft (2006) who characterised the *niqab* as

> [A] barrier that limits the creation of relationships. It unites those who nestle behind such garments and makes it harder for them to integrate… It may be that there are many Muslims who choose to wear the veil but also want to play a full role in British society. They should realise that they are making that more difficult because of the uniform they choose to wear (8 October, 2006).

In sum, journalists working on newspapers papers that are traditionally thought to span the political spectrum are portraying some Muslims as having difficulty being British.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have shown that some politicians are expounding the view that Muslims do not feel British, even though since the 1990s the relevant surveys suggest just the opposite; clearly a number of leading politicians conceive of and are promoting an inaccurate view about British Muslims. Also significant are the rationales for the politicians' stated views. Blunkett's reasons were economic and while we certainly do not want to deny that poverty may cultivate a sense of exclusion, poverty is also experienced by certain white communities, but they are not typically thought to have

difficulty feeling British. For several other leading politicians we quoted, some Muslims have difficulty feeling British because they want Britain to be a more Islamic land and they have difficulty leaving their own communities. These are empirical claims that have yet to be investigated, but given the high percentage of Muslims who feel British, these claims, even if true, can only apply to a very small percentage of Muslims.

An understanding of what it means to be British is also being projected by senior journalists and it does not include all Muslims. There has been a considerable focus on the tiny number of Muslims wearing the *niqab*, with the 'Jack Straw incident' acting as a lightening rod for hostility against Muslims. The incident was seized upon as an opportunity to not just lambast conservative Islam, especially in its gender relations aspect, but multiculturalism as well. A marginal issue of dress obsessed the nation and its media for over a week in 2006. There was a massive outpouring of emotional repulsion against the *niqab* as un-British in a manner that threatened the acceptance of other non-*niqab* wearing Muslims but who were visibly devout in various ways.

This flood of negative feeling about the *niqab* in particular and Islam more generally, bursting through usual restraints about public discourse, illustrates an important feature of nationhood. For such exclusionary, affective power, no less than imaginative inclusivity is a central feature of national belonging. Indeed, we noted earlier that the CMEB outlined how such exclusive understandings of the nation can be inaccurate, reflecting a selective reading of British history and a privileging of the majority that is difficult to justify. More inclusive understandings of what it means to be British, that do not interpret Muslim difference as a barrier, are available and indeed two

of the authors of this paper have separately suggested the need to accept them (Modood, 1992; Uberoi, 2007). Doing so would entail a willingness amongst journalists to accept a more inclusive form of Britishness, which would provide a 'space for Muslims' in the nation (Meer, Dyer and Modood, 2010). Certainly when the CMEB (2000) suggested recasting the national story, the media's reaction was hostile. But despite questions about both Muslims' attachment to, and ability to be a part of Britain, it is notable that the vast majority still feel British. While we are right to be alert to the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies, what is clear is that even if others can not envisage a conception of the nation that includes Muslims, many Muslims can.

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