

Separate and Unequal: How integration can deliver the good society!

Britain is separate because it is unequal, and it is unequal because it is separate. The gap between rich and poor, having exploded during the 1980s, is still growing, despite measures to address poverty in the 13 years of Labour Government. At the same time, we face growing fragmentation in our communities.

Nick Johnson*

Britain is separate and unequal. It is separate because it is unequal, and it is unequal because it is separate.

Britain, as well as being a society with declining social mobility and an increased gap between rich and poor, is a country where social segregation is increasing. We are still living with the Thatcher legacy, which not only profoundly accelerated inequality and social division, but also created an ethos that there is 'no such thing as society'. Collective institutions such as trade unions and political parties are steadily losing members. Our society has become far less integrated. The ties that bind people together have eroded, to be replaced by the idea of every individual for themselves.

We need a new vision to inform policy development, particular in a period where Labour is in

opposition. That vision must go beyond simply equality and cover the type of society in which we live – our relationships with each other as well as our own individual opportunities. A good society requires that we worry more than just about individual equality indicators: it also demands we look at the health of our social fabric. Integration can provide that vision.

Because the left in politics is primarily motivated by the value of equality and fairness, issues of integration and identity are often viewed as being a distraction from what really matters: if social problems are addressed, issues of identity will look after themselves. But there is an important political problem here. It will not be possible to build the broad coalitions needed to address social inequalities if issues of identity are dismissed as second order. Indeed, integration relies upon the one to drive the other and states quite simply that life chances will not be equal

* Nick Johnson is an independent policy and research consultant, working on equality, cohesion and integration issues across the public and voluntary sectors.

unless there is full interaction and social solidarity.

There are three central tenets of an integrated society – equality, interaction and participation. Integration demands that our citizens are equal, connected and empowered.

Separate and unequal

The world over, segregation entrenches inequality. And a more equal society can only happen with greater integration.

Geographical exclusion makes the path out of poverty even more difficult. Place matters; locality can have a profound effect upon life chances. For many it is a double whammy – as well as being more likely to suffer from poverty themselves, they are also more likely to live in poor areas. And in all this, the aspirations of local people are limited by the world around them. This is clear in socio-economic as well as ethnic terms. This may explain why many of the previous Government's social justice initiatives have not had the impact that had been hoped.

Those critics from the left who argue that the focus should solely be on equality are missing an opportunity. From Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' onwards, the left has been on the defensive on matters of migration and culture. This has allowed the right to embrace integration without equality in part because some on the left have banished integration from debates over equality and fairness. Public concern about a lack of integration and rising immigration is unchallenged by the left.

A major factor in the current integration debate is how the thesis of multiculturalism has struggled to adapt to the age of 'super diversity'. Integration is able to build upon the progressive elements of multiculturalism while taking it be-

yond notions of race and faith into a wider policy framework.

This poses a challenge for progressives. Multiculturalism has been a key plank of the left's platform for over forty years. Indeed, the left's embrace of multiculturalism has been crucial in making Britain a country increasingly at ease with its diversity.

However, as our diversity has increased, set notions of ethnic and minority identification cannot cope with the sheer pace and scale of mobility that we see in the twenty first century. People increasingly have multiple identities and different facets matter most at different times – context should be everything.

Furthermore, from recognising and supporting difference, we started to reward it to the extent that funding mechanisms and means of representation undermined social interaction. People were encouraged to organise in distinct cultural or ethnic groups in order to gain access to funds or be seen as representative voices. While initially this was a way of defending minority interests and voices, it has become a way of conveniently putting people into boxes which are often neither relevant nor helpful.

Additionally, the desire to celebrate cultural difference has undermined some of the central tenets of equality. We have concentrated too much on celebrating identity difference and not enough time worrying about an economic one. Integration recognises that we are greater than the sum of our parts and what Martin Luther King called the 'inter-related structure of reality'.

The good society

Despite our current economic concerns, most western nations should be a much better place to live than ever before – we are wealthier, we

live longer and technology means communication and travel opportunities have expanded

exponentially. However, more of us live alone, we express greater anxiety about the future and are generally less happy than previous generations. We complain of poor work-life balance,

time taken to commute to work and incessant pressure of generating more income. Volunteering has declined with far fewer people taking part in community activities such as sport, religious worship or charitable activities.

We need to reassert a collective vision of the good society. This requires some on the left to rise above narrow interest or lobby groups. No longer can we see equality through the prism of minority rights, with disadvantaged or marginalised groups competing against one another for limited resources or legislative privileges. Too often, measures to address inequality have been presented as targeting some individuals or groups rather than benefiting society as a whole. As well as stepping back from making the arguments of the wider social benefits of a more equal society, this also undermines solidarity.

A good society is an integrated one; an integrated society is one where there is truly equal citizenship with no group or individual denied any rights or opportunities.

Citizenship here is not just a legal status but a cultural notion. It is about participation in the life of the community and nation, whether that is voting in elections, volunteering or campaigning against the expansion of a local supermarket. Integrated citizens feel empowered and engaged in the democratic process.

Integration thus rejects the uber-liberalism that has led to the obsession with choice and indi-

vidualisation in public service reform. No longer is it important that all schools provide good quality education; merely that parents can choose to send their children to the school they want. This argument undermines the shared stake we have in each other's lives and opportunities. Crucially, it also removes the incentive for equality – rather than a shared commitment to improved services for all, it becomes a competition between people for a limited supply.

This is not to revert to some kind of monolithic service delivery that refuses to accept cultural or religious difference but to say that public services are a social asset for everyone. We must assert the fact that we are citizens and not consumers.

Policy implications

To succeed, integration must be central to the development of public policy. It is about how we develop policy across the board, providing a vision of the type of society we wish to see – one that has equality, interaction and participation. This needs to include areas such as housing, health and the criminal justice system. Integration demands that we think differently about policy.

For instance, an equal and inclusive education system is the foundation of an integrated society: personal development, knowledge, skills and competencies are crucial for any member of society to fulfil their potential. Education settings can also encourage participation and interaction from the earliest opportunity between children of different backgrounds and allow children to develop positive attitudes and behaviour towards others.

We need to make sure that our education system promotes interaction. Children should be

children first, not any particular class, race or faith. Ensuring that our schools are equally accessible for all communities would provide an immediate impetus towards ensuring that they are all equally well-funded, attract the best teachers and deliver equally good education for all children and young people. If any child could, in theory, go to any school, then the demand for them all to be equally good will move from being a political cause to a national imperative. School choice must be monitored so that it is an equal choice for all families. The Coalition Government's proposals for more Academies and Free Schools could well prove to be disastrous in this regard, entrenching segregation and inequality into our education system.

Inequalities in attainment rates still need to be addressed. Eventual success will only come where there are no clear patterns of attainment and participation by ethnic group, social class or gender. This has to be intrinsic to the assessment of whether a school, college or university is successful, no matter its overall position in any league table.

The curriculum and educational culture should promote integration. This should include a richer teaching of history and citizenship. This Citizenship must be about culture and values as well as facts and should aim to equip pupils to live in a diverse, multicultural society in the same way and to the same level as the process for new migrants.

Just as with education, participation in the labour market is vital to improving the life chances of all individuals, not only enabling a decent standard of living, but also contributing to personal well-being and self-esteem. The key policy challenge in the workplace is to eliminate the persistent employment gap and the respective

pay penalties from the labour market. The minimum wage has been beneficial but is only a floor – the living wage should be promoted across the public sector. We should also explore the idea of differential levels depending upon regions of the country.

Our workplaces must reflect British society in the twenty first century. That means that in terms of the total workforce, across professions and through the ranks in individual organisations and industries, there should be fair and equal distribution of people.

Where good intentions and targeted efforts do not bring about the necessary changes, some form of special measures and positive action must be considered. This does not have to extend as far as positive discrimination but it can require greater training and support for marginalised employees, perhaps compensating for the lack of education and skills opportunities available to them earlier in their life. We must be bold in breaking the cycle.

As our population becomes ever more diverse, the need for our institutions and instruments of power to reflect this grows more urgent. Participation in political processes and decision making is crucial to ensuring that individuals are able to exercise their democratic rights and to influence the governance of a country.

Our political parties must be more open and inclusive and seek to ensure that they are truly representative of the wider population.

If we accept that voting and participating in the democratic process is a crucial expression of citizenship, we should consider the issue of compulsory voting. Perhaps, just as with obeying the rule of law, voting should be an obligation of citizenship. To aid this, elections should

either be moved to weekends or even Election Day could be made a public holiday which could double as a celebration of common citizenship.

Devolution presents opportunities and risks, and must be done right if it is not to exacerbate existing inequalities. The right form of localism could be a huge asset in developing integration – the sites, spheres and agents of interaction all need a local concentration. However, in a segregated world, localism could entrench the divisions between communities – allowing capture of services by a vocal minority and thus greater exclusion. The postcode lottery must end. Decent and accessible services should be available in all parts of the country to all communities.

Conclusion

Integration is more than the sum of its parts; it is crucial that all policy areas work together to create solidarity and inclusion. It stems from an explicitly political starting point – as outlined in Labour's own statement of aims and values – that 'by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone'.

Integration offers a progressive approach to the social challenges of the twenty first century. It offers us a way to reject a narrow conservatism that tries to erode diversity into a monolithic whole. However, it also is how we can move beyond the identity politics that has been sustained by many on the left. These two schools of thought are set up in opposition to one another and thus a prisoner of each. Identity politics was a legitimate challenge to a conservatism that did not want society or institutions to change and demanded conformity from new immigrants or other groups in society. At its extreme, this conservatism turns into xenophobia, racism and overt prejudice. The left's response was and is

correct - rightly asserting that different views, lifestyles and cultures are equally legitimate. However, in rejecting an assimilationist approach that privileged the status quo and was resistant to change, too great an adherence to identity politics also implicitly rejected notions of a shared identity and experience. What made us different became more important than what we had in common.

We are not looking to replace difference with uniformity but arguing that we need some mutual identity alongside our own individual identities. That mutual identity is also constantly evolving, shaped by our diversity and by social change. Indeed, it is the process of change and the negotiation, tolerance and understanding involved that may well be the most important aspects. As Robert Putnam argues, 'the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of "we".'

But integration as a policy framework goes beyond ideas of identity; it also drives forward the cause of a more equal society. In recent years, debates over equality have become too focused upon individual life chances and paid too little attention to the state of the society we share. That also means we have tended to ignore how the one reinforces the other. Creating a shared sense of belonging and solidarity is impossible in a society that is as unequal as the one in which we live.

Integration offers Labour a clear distinction between its own values, rooted in community and solidarity and the liberal individualism of the Coalition. It means the Party needs to abandon some of the obsession with consumerism and individual choice and return to its collective roots. By adopting a communitarian outlook, focussed upon equality for all and interaction

between all, we can move towards a society that achieves those goals. Our relationships with each other are as important as our individual opportunities. Furthermore, our neighbour's opportunities should be as important as our own.

Solidarity and strong community ties are essential to breaking down inequality but they are impossible to achieve while inequality persists. An individual's wellbeing is directly related to the society around them and their actions, behaviour and attitudes should be seen in relation to the communities they live in.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the FES London.

**ViSdP (Person responsible according to the German Press Law): Karl-Heinz Spiegel,
Director, FES office London**

