

Tribal Britons should live and let live

Culture, not race, is becoming the main barrier for modern migrants

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Plus ça change ... It's hard not to feel the force of the old maxim when confronted with the Mori survey for Prospect magazine which, as this newspaper reported yesterday, found that four in 10 white people don't want an Asian or black Briton as their neighbour - while two in five Britons generally would prefer to live in an area with people from the same ethnic background. Seven years into New Labour Britain, four years after the MacPherson report and liberals thought they were licking this race problem. Now along it comes again to bite you.

Should we be concerned by the report's findings? I think, on the whole, yes, but not for the reasons most liberals think we should be.

Although many of the questions - as well as the headlines generated - are phrased racially, respondents have answered culturally. The poll asked if "race and immigration" was one of the most important issues facing Britain today, and found that 29% believed so, three times the level of a decade ago. But most of the respondents' resentment was aimed at asylum seekers or recent immigrants as opposed to second generation black and Asian Britons who, together with their parents, make up the vast majority of non-whites living in this country.

On London Live Radio's phone-in yesterday, the story was similar. A white man from Chelmsford, Essex, complains about a mosque that has been erected 100 yards from his house, and that now the value of his house has plummeted 20%. A white lady from Peckham, inner-city London, says that she has no problem with the black Britons her children go to school with, but with the dirty-looking eastern European women who hassle her for money on the street.

Whether we like it or not, human beings are tribal animals. When I walk into a room, I feel most comfortable among second-generation west African-Brits. I would expect our upbringings and experiences to be similar and that they, given time, would understand where I'm coming from, in a way that the middle-class whites I went to university with and the working-class whites and British Caribbeans that I grew up around, might not. I would relax instantly too in a room of writers, for the same tribal reasons. And writers of west African background - they can live next to me any time they want.

Who we believe our tribe to be is determined by a number of factors: race, class and, most crucially, culture. This latest survey confirms that more and more people are moving beyond straight racial thinking, proving that culture is the deeper category. The main faultline now is not what colour you have to be to be British but, rather, who has British or western ways - and who doesn't. If you have those western ways, most of the time you're one of us.

Racial thinking remains deep in the European psyche, where race and culture are still commingled in people's minds. The problem for UK blacks, for example, is that we are now so negatively associated with street culture that many aspirationally minded whites (and blacks) don't want to live by us, because they don't want their children unfavourably influenced. These parents don't mind their kids listening to R'n'B or hip-hop, but they don't want the full monty.

We are supposed to be moving towards "post-black" and "post-white" times. But these poll results and real life suggest that while African-American and Caribbean trappings will be seized upon by some whites

as a lifestyle choice, and some western-minded black people will benefit, so much of the real work of undermining entrenched stereotypes remains to be done.

At least black Brits can battle to change their image. For many Asians, though, I believe the problem is more intractable. Asian cultures, with their different languages and religions, are perceived, post 9/11 especially, as more alien, and more threatening. Unless you're seen as clearly British, you may be the enemy within.

In France, they've always preferred the route of total assimilation of their once colonial subjects. In the US, every new arrival has to take citizenship lessons but, once they've passed that test, they are left to live their own way, even though they don't mix.

Britain has long had its third way: a largely hands-off approach - indirect rule in the colonies and, over here, no citizenship test but housing historically integrated, at least at the working class level. Now we need to take a leaf from the US and widen our concept of Britishness by becoming more of a "do as you please" people and giving people the space to live their lives as they wish. People may always be tribal, but we cannot halt modernity. The migrant genie is way out of the bottle and can't be put back. It may be that we'll never all want to live right by one other. But we can all work towards sharing the same country, more happily.

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