

The King is wrong to extol separate communities

The fashionable orthodoxy that privileges tribal identity over national unity can only ever sow division and intolerance

Trevor Phillips – Monday October 23 2023, The Times

It is, according to legend, one of the worst deals of all time: the Lenape tribe's sale of a 13 mile-long sandy island to a Dutch trader called Peter Minuit for 60 guilders' worth of beads and trinkets. You'd pick the lot up for 20 quid in any high street today. But 400 years later, that sum would barely get you a pizza and beer in New Amsterdam, or as we know it today, Manhattan.

The Lenape's descendants say they thought they were simply handing over a licence to hunt beaver. The Dutch for their part insist that they were following traditional real estate practices. But the trade is an object lesson in why the combination of tribe and territorial loyalty can be lethal. When things go wrong the damage can last for generations.

As our modern world retreats to the vicious tribalism of past ages, ethnic diversity, which should be a wellspring of creativity, is becoming a platform for conflict. And right now, the conflict in the Middle East is spreading its contagion to the streets of British cities.

Gaza, as thin as Manhattan though twice as long, is home to more than two million individuals, mainly Arab and mostly Muslim. In the past two weeks we have seen the Middle East brought to the brink of war because of competing claims by ethno-religious groups to the same piece of land. Personally, I see little future for Israel if it does not eliminate Hamas and make it possible for moderate Palestinians to regain power in Gaza and the West Bank. The path to that outcome is narrow and brutal and will start in the miles of secret tunnels below Gaza itself. There will be carnage, mostly of Gazans.

It is hard to see the resolution of the Israelis failing. Their lives depend on it. But what then? The prospect of generations of Jews confined to an armed fortress evokes history that no one wants. Palestinian hearts and minds will need to follow, and that will require a defeat for the ideologues of identity. On both sides extremists are already reasserting the age-old notion that you can only really trust your own kind, and that if the others don't actually kill you, they will still contrive to rob you. This is fertile ground for extremists. In their world, every attempt at compromise is proof positive of betrayal.

The pluralism of liberal democracy is wilting in the face of the resurgence of these ancient loyalties all over the world. In Europe, ethno-nationalists – the Brothers of Italy, France's National Rally, the Sweden Democrats – are dominant. Liberals like me spent the second half of the 20th century imagining a future in which people would be freed of their communal history and judged by the content of their character. Instead we find ourselves contemplating a reality in which too many are imprisoned by the content of their past.

Bizarrely, the one political party in Europe whose leadership represents the symbolism that liberals dreamt of in a multi-ethnic polity is divided and exhausted: the party of Sunak, Hunt, Cleverly and Braverman.

That is why I was deeply disturbed by the speech made by our not-so-new King last week describing Britain as a "community of communities", a phrase that in my view amounted to a clarion call for permanent racial division in our society. I have reason to feel some guilt. Twenty-three years ago this month, a think tank of which I was chairman published a report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain. I had read the drafts but failed to notice that late in the editing process the assertion that Britain should be seen – positively – as a "community of communities" appeared in the text.

I had persuaded the then home secretary, Jack Straw, to launch the publication; he shocked everyone by laying into the central premise, which he said amounted to the idea that minority and majority communities should be encouraged to retain their separateness, that the state should recognise their right to follow ancestral customs and that any criticism of a "community" bordered on bigotry. In short,

whatever your particular religious or cultural group identity demanded should be respected and permitted, irrespective of the damage that it might do to community cohesion. As it happened, I agreed with Straw.

But over the past two decades the orthodoxy has grown among liberal-minded people that tribal identity should be privileged over national unity. Today, this belief even has a fancy academic title: standpoint theory, or, if you want to be really pretentious, “standpoint epistemology”. The key element of this is that every one of us belongs to an identity category – defined by sex, race or some other characteristic.

Anyone who is not in our group, apparently, can never stand in our shoes and therefore can never understand our lives. Ergo they have no right to argue with us about anything that relates to that characteristic. No man can ever challenge a woman’s claim to oppression, unless “he” declares himself a “she” in some fashion. No white person can contest a person of colour’s accusation of racism – and let’s be clear, none of you is ever crossing that line, whatever make-up you choose.

The King means well. Ironically, his verbal encouragement of division between his subjects is completely contradicted by his life’s work. His charities, above all the Prince’s Trust and Business in the Community, have been two of the most effective engines of racial integration and equality in our nation. It is a pity that the monarch’s advisers have led him into treacherous waters that threaten to undo the good that has taken him more than 50 years to create. We should pay attention to what he has done rather than what he now says.

The group most likely to take comfort from the King’s words are the Corbynistas, self-styled anti-imperialists who took to the streets over the weekend. Among them were supporters of Hamas, most merely deluded but a few monstrously complicit in justifying the massacre of October 7 with pictures of paragliders and chants of “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”, which they must know requires the elimination of the Jewish state.

It is almost inexplicable that so few have been charged with public order offences. Caught up in an earlier march, even as a veteran of similar marches myself, I found the intensity of anti-Israeli sentiment troubling. Were I Jewish I think I might have heard ugly echoes of earlier ages.

Worst of all, the new orthodoxy is making even those of us who could encourage others to feel at ease with diversity lose the confidence to do so. It is shameful that the presenter of BBC’s *Question Time*, Fiona Bruce, felt the need to apologise for calling someone in her audience a “black guy”. I counted the total number of people in the studio – about a hundred – and noted the number of people of colour among them; it was obviously the most efficient way of identifying the gentleman in question.

I would have done exactly what Fiona did. I don’t imagine that the young man felt any shame or embarrassment about his colour. It is a scandal that the BBC appears to think that he should.