

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Professor Chandran Kukathas discussing multiculturalism in the 21st century.
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Ariane Sparks: Hi. I'm Ariane Sparks. Welcome to the HotSeat. With us today to discuss multiculturalism in twenty-first century society is Professor Chandran Kukathas. Thanks for being with us, Chandran.

Professor Chandran Kukathas: Pleasure.

Ariane Sparks: First, can you tell us what multiculturalism is?

Professor Chandran Kukathas: Well, it's ambiguous term because it's used in different ways. Sometimes people use the term multiculturalism simply to identify the fact of cultural diversity. So societies that have numerous ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are described as multicultural. But multicultural is also a term of art; it is used to describe a set of policies. So a number of countries have had multicultural policies over the years beginning with Canada and Australia and, more laterally, Britain and the United States. And these are policies which are designed, in one way or another, to accommodate that diversity. In some ways, they address issues of diversity by providing special facilities, rights or accommodations for indigenous peoples but also to some extent they provide for special accommodations for other sorts of minorities, particularly immigrant minorities.

Ariane Sparks: Speaking at a security conference in Munich recently, David Cameron criticised the UK's decades-old policy of multiculturalism as encouraging segregated communities where Islamic extremism can flourish. Do you agree with his assessment?

Professor Chandran Kukathas: No, I think it's an overstatement because there has been a concentration of populations of different ethnicities, different groups for a very long time, for as long as we can remember. In fact, if you think about a city like Sydney, there is a very large concentration of people of English descent in parts of Sydney and this well pre-dates policies of multiculturalism. Similarly, in Melbourne, it's been a Greek city, in many ways, for a very, very long time and there have been large sections of Melbourne that have been dominated by Greeks but this goes well back before policies of multiculturalism had come in. I think it will be the same in Britain as well. There have been areas where different minorities have concentrated for rather obvious reasons really. When you go to a new place, you look for people who are familiar. The question is how long will this take to change and I think there will be many factors that come in to this. So to point to multiculturalism as the explanation I think is insufficient; you'd have to look at this a lot more closely.

Ariane Sparks: Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Nicolas Sarkozy have also expressed similar concerns about the effects of multiculturalism. Do you think this represents a growing consensus across Europe?

Professor Chandran Kukathas: That multiculturalism is a problem or has somehow failed as a policy which is what I think most of them are saying. I'm not sure that it is a consensus but it's a view that's been very widely touted. What's never been explained is exactly what it is that's failed because it's not as if multiculturalism is a single set of very clear policies; it's really a term that's used to apply to a wide range of policies that have grown up over a very long period of time and I think you need to make a more careful assessment to see what exactly has failed. I think it is unlikely that it is the whole swath of policies that has failed. What's more likely is that there are some policies that have bad effects and others that don't. So the answer is to look more closely at the whole list of policies coming under the rubric of multiculturalism and to ask which things are causing difficulties or problems and which things are successful.

Ariane Sparks: What do you think David Cameron's intentions were in raising the multiculturalism issue at this time?

Professor Chandran Kukathas: Well, it's striking that the observation he makes about multiculturalism comes in the middle of quite a long speech and it's only one or two sentences that he devotes to multiculturalism. So I think there are a couple of things going on here. One, given that the context of the speech was Islamism and his worries about Islamic terror and his concern to play down the connection between terrorism and Islam as such because he wanted to make a point that this is not a problem with the religion as such but with the particular ideology of militant or political Islam. The claim he wants to make about multiculturalism is in part intended as part of a balancing act. He wants to make clear to one part of his constituency that he's still critical of aspects of public policy that may foster or foment this kind of political Islam so that's a part of the concern. But the other thing that was going on in this bit of the speech was he was trying to say something about liberalism and he used the term muscular liberalism to suggest what we need to do is move away from the kind of liberalism of pure tolerance to a liberalism that is much more, almost aggressive, about asserting the fundamental importance of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom of association and so on. So what he was doing there was, I think, signalling something. Now the question is whether what he was suggesting is something that is important or even viable. Now for myself, I'm a bit more sceptical about what he has to say here because, I think, suggesting that we need to move toward a more muscular form of liberalism and contrasting that with multiculturalism may get the balance wrong. I think he underestimates the importance of the idea of tolerance as something that is fundamental to liberalism. I think the reason he is pushing the muscular liberalism is that he wants to soften the impact of the kinds of multicultural policies that he thinks have been promoted over the years by suggesting that we can somehow return to something that is more traditionally British or European and by asserting muscular liberalism and this is what he's doing. And it's also very striking that he's using the term liberalism when he's the leader of the conservative party. But then politics makes strange bedfellows in more ways than one.

Ariane Sparks: Alright, we'll leave it there. Professor Kukathas you are off the HotSeat. Thank you for being with us.

Professor Chandran Kukathas: Thank you.

Ariane Sparks: And thank you for being with us. Please tune in next month for our next edition of the HotSeat.