

A review of a Policy Exchange paper written by Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran and Zein Ja'far.

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The paper can be found at <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/libimages/246pdf>

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This is a paper that should be read by everyone in a position to influence opinion on community and populous issues and by all politicians in both central and local government. It charts the history of the development of the Muslim community in Britain and analyses in detail the thoughts and issues that Muslims believe about their religion and their acceptance or otherwise of British values. At the beginning it defines the terms it uses concerning Islam although they probably should not be taken as universal definitions.

A clear message that comes from this paper is that the problems concerning a minority of the Muslim community are extremely complex and for which there are no easy or obvious answers. The paper does not offer any solutions but is intended to inform and widen the debate. It is evident that there is a wide range of varying views by British Muslims on all the important issues; there is even evidence of contradictory views within the same family. Indeed, the analysis indicates that there is no predominant view on any of the main issues.

Islam is different to other religions in that in Islam religion and politics are entwined. It is very evident that as the Muslim community has grown in Britain it has also become more politicised. This shift to religious politics has in part been caused by the political shift to the left in mainstream politics. However, in doing so Muslims have not chosen to seek formal representation but rather to use their influence to lobby politically for advantage to the Muslim community. This has had consequences for the wider population as it has seen Muslims being granted privilege for their religious and cultural issues. The paper suggests that this was a mistake and argues that the government has been seduced by one-sided lobbying. Moreover, once the lobbying was seen to be successful it has encouraged further attempts to impose a Muslim culture on top of a British culture e.g. acceptance of elements of Sharia law.

The privilege granted to diverse identities in race relations has emphasised the differences between religious and cultural communities. It has caused a differential treatment instead of the previous 'colour-blind' approach of the past. The problem now is that we are trying to treat them differently to other groups. Furthermore, the recognition of diversity has prevented migrants from integrating and the provision of wide scale interpreter services meant they do not need to learn English. By insulating them we created communities for incubating Islamo-fascism. The blurring and mistaking of multiculturalism and multiracism, sometimes for

deliberate advantage, has aggravated the situation. Even the very subjective definition of "institutional racism" in the Macpherson Report has had the effect of increasing racial tension.

The paper suggests that both local and central government through ill-informed policies and actions are largely responsible for much of today's problems. It argues that government does not understand the Muslim community and that most of its actions have been wrong and set them apart instead of helping integration. Engagement has been on the basis of cultural difference. At a local level politicians have been motivated to engage in order to secure votes. The paper offers evidence to show that political leaders and other key national and local figures are guilty of not understanding the fundamental aspects of Muslim identity and culture. This leads to inappropriate statements and actions when trying to address amongst other issues, why the Muslim community is disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, employment, housing and health.

There is evidence to show that young Muslims are attracted to Islamism because it is opposed to government policy per se, coupled with what is regarded as a hatred of Western society and its perceived lack of moral values. However, it fails to identify why a minority of young Muslim men start their radical journey although it discounts a number of possible reasons. Certainly these young men find Muslim life in Britain confusing, not least over what "Britishness" is and what it means for them. As a result they tend not to accept British values and seek a touchstone elsewhere. Young Muslims are more likely to identify with their religion than their parents but there is no obvious reason for this. The suggestion to empower them through creating 'young MPs' only serves to set them further apart from society. One of the themes explored is the sense of 'victimhood'. It looks into the myths of Muslim victimisation and acknowledges that it is an argument often used to close down debate. However, the wider public debate on Muslim issues has had the effect of fostering a victim mentality amongst Muslims, although some Muslims believe some show too much sensitivity and tend to exaggerate. There is a genuine sense that Muslims have been unfairly tarnished by the impact of Islamic terrorism. This sense has been made more acute because the authorities have treated Muslims as a separate group instead as a part of the wider society and in many cases have overreacted creating a climate of tension and sensitivity between groups. Ill-informed attempts to accommodate perceived Muslim sensitivities are generally counter-productive.

In providing this analysis of British Muslim views the paper clearly shows that there is a greater diversity and disagreement amongst Muslims than they probably realise themselves. Also, it is interesting to note that the majority of Muslims do not believe that the principle Muslim organisations that claim to represent them actually reflect their views. The paper concludes with a timely warning. "The constant focus on listening to young Muslims can make politicians forget that there is a wider population out there that is feeling disengaged too. Young people are generally less likely to vote, and many regard the political process as irrelevant to their lives. When the Government consults with Muslims, the answers it hears are probably not so different to people their age. Engaging with them on the basis of their religious identity will not overcome this bigger problem."

This paper is of value in that it explores the attitudes of Muslims in Britain today and readers may find some of the facts associated with these attitudes quite surprising and different to

popular perception. It also explains why government is failing to properly engage with the Muslim community and how policies to improve engagement have actually made the situation worse. A better understanding of these attitudes by politicians and key figures would doubtless facilitate improved relations to the benefit of the population at large.