

Multiculturalism is weakened when individual rights are neglected

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At their best, councils are brilliant at helping communities solve local problems. But we have to be honest and admit that sometimes these problems have roots far beyond the locality and possibly beyond the capability of civic action. You can recognise this locally when people are unable to agree what the nature of the problem is, let alone agree how it should be solved. When this happens, my argument is that councils should go back to the principles of public ethics.

Over the past few months Birmingham City Council's problems in dealing with the so-called "Trojan Horse" affair have been subject to much debate and comment. Birmingham's challenges remind us of the essence of local government. For too long we have been transfixed by service management questions - how to "source" supply, markets and how to manage demand. These service challenges have taken us away from community governance, which is local government's very purpose.

Of course we need to make sure services are delivered effectively. And in this era of austerity we need to devote a great deal of energy to reforming the state, redesigning our services and dramatically lowering our costs. But these efforts will count for nothing if we get the essentials of community governance wrong. Birmingham has done a fine job over the past few months. It has acknowledged its mistakes and moved forward. We all need to learn its lessons and remind ourselves of the value of public ethics.

Part of our problem is that our conventional approach to community issues is frozen in the past. And sometimes this leads us to act in a clumsy way that simply doesn't fit with the realities of 2014. This convention has its roots in a 1980s "group based" approach to equal opportunities and the notion of the "parallel lives" of different community groups that was developed by Ted Cantle's excellent study of community cohesion that reported after the 2001 riots in several northern cities and towns.

Adopting a "group based" approach to community development and cohesion was understandable from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. During this period it was crucial that local government tried to root out racism and redress discrimination and disadvantage. To this end it was right that councils sought to protect the interests of minorities from the ever present danger of the tyranny of a majority.

What's more, addressing discrimination, disadvantage and racism remain necessary activities. But "group based" approaches are insufficient to deal with the challenges of our age. And yet we often hear of the views of, say, the UK's "Muslim community" despite the obvious reality that it is an umbrella term to describe myriad different perspectives and positions within the set of very broad Islamic traditions that are represented in our country.

The Rotherham affair is essentially about individual men using power, violence and sexual abuse on young vulnerable girls. The fact that the men were predominantly Asian should not have had the slightest impact on the council, the police or their partner agencies in their dealing with this appalling behaviour. They were dealing with vulnerable individuals and their violent abusers - not groups of girls, nor groups of men.

In the nation's major cities we live in conditions of radical social diversity. People of varied ethnic origins, of differing cultural heritage, and people of different faiths (and none) live among each other usually rather well. Tolerating our differences is a first step; truly respecting others' differences is a second step. After all, few of us want just to be tolerated. In truth, we crave the respect of others - and not just for what customs, traditions and beliefs we hold, but because of who we are, as individuals in our own right.

What's more, [recent research from Ipsos MORI](#) on the complex source of personal identity in the UK shows that it is our personal values and age that are more important sources of personal identity than our nationality, ethnicity or religion.

A focus on public ethics would require councils explicitly to balance the rights and claims of individuals, the claims of community groups, and the claims of the wider public good. And in so doing we will find that individual rights and claims are often in conflict with community claims, which in turn are often in conflict with the claims of the wider public good. When that happens what should we do?

Well, in local government, we have experts in our midst who have to make fine judgments about these competing claims every day - children's social workers have to balance children's rights to flourish free from harm and neglect with the right to family life; and they have to weigh this against broader family concerns and interests. These are hard decisions about one child and one family. The same style of approach and ethical considerations need to be used when it comes to many children, many families and many communities. In short, individual human rights have precedence over the claims of community; however strongly held and authentic those claims may be.

Nations are not mosaics of smaller but distinctively different and separate communities. Nations comprise citizens who themselves have ties and attachments to many differing and overlapping communities of identity, faith, place and cultural heritage. In the 21st century, a healthy multiculturalism springs from individual freedom and mutual acculturation. The prospect for a healthy multiculturalism is weakened when we fail to protect individual rights over the claims of cultural conservatism from any quarter.

Perhaps the lesson we should take from Birmingham is not from their troubles in respect of the "Trojan Horse" inquiry but rather from the personal story of the brilliant English cricketer [Moeen Ali](#), who hails from the city. His story and positivity, and the character of his authentic connection to his Muslim faith, shows us how modern life in Britain is multi-faceted, has many sources for belonging and attachment; and above all is, at its very best, both plural and inclusive.

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