



The New Politics of Belonging

A joint conference held with The Runnymede Trust
as part of its 40th Anniversary Celebrations

Monday 6th October 2008

An Interim Report

The “new politics of belonging” has its origins in a whole range of issues, including societal fears around national security in the face of unorthodox terrorist threats; the increasing speed of change in migration patterns that has resulted in immigrants to the UK from an ever broader range of countries; ongoing and persistent inequality facing longer settled ethnic minorities and new trends towards globalisation, mixed (ironically) with pressures for localism and further political devolution. It is a politics that finds its expression through citizenship testing, reform of the curriculum in the teaching of British history, endless debates about national identity, and, most recently, flying the flag as a visible means of asserting belonging.

It was to consider these issues that some 80 people gathered at Cumberland Lodge on an early October day. The conference also set itself the task of examining what traditional political structures might have to offer this agenda. What needs to change in our democratic structures, civic society, constitutional arrangements, and political activism in order to enable all to feel a sense of belonging which can lead to better citizenship? How can a politics that re-engineers the relationships between citizens and between citizens and the state contribute to the creation of a ‘society at ease with itself’?

The conference was also part of the celebrations for the Runnymede Trust’s 40 years of work to promote race equality in this country. Looking back at the successes and reversals of that first 40 years, it was also hoped that it would generate an agenda for the next 40 years of such work and aspiration, as Britain seeks to become an ever more successful multi-ethnic society.

Before the conference heard from its extraordinary collection of speakers, however, it was presented with a set of “shorts” (specially commissioned films) portraying the lives and aspirations of young people from various ethnic backgrounds, all of whom are British and all facing the usual challenges of holding a citizenship status not necessarily reflected in the realities of their everyday lives.



Simon Hughes and Baroness Prashar
Photograph © Benedict Hilliard

After this salutary reminder of what many face day by day, the floor was handed over to four politicians to consider the ways in which government can create a sense of belonging. Each represented one of the three major parties (Claude Moraes, Labour MEP and President of the All Party Group on Anti-Racism and Diversity; Simon Hughes, MP and President of the Liberal Democrats, and Paul Goodman, Conservative MP and Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government) and the session was expertly chaired by Baroness Usha Prashar, Cross Bench Peer and Chairman of the Judicial Appointments Commission.

The second session of the morning considered the question of representation and political engagement. Simon Woolley, the Director of Operation Black Vote, gave an impassioned presentation of the challenges involved in enabling black citizens to become engaged with the political process. Sunder Katwala, the General Secretary of

the Fabian Society, provided a contrasting perspective to this, and the session was given a slightly different twist by hearing from Farah Pandith, a Senior Adviser in the US State Department, reflecting on the contrasts and points of similarity on these issues between this country and the USA. The session was chaired in a suitably eirenic spirit by Bhikhu Parekh, a member of the House of Lords as well as being a Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Westminster.

The role of citizenship in creating civic society came under scrutiny in the third session. Having heard from politicians in the first session and activists in the second, it was now the turn of academics to consider the issues under review. In this, also, the Conference was fortunate in its speakers, hearing in turn from Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford, Gerry Stoker, Professor of Politics and Governance at Southampton and, finally, Mary Hickman, Professor of Irish Studies and Sociology at London Metropolitan. This session was chaired by Bharat Mehta, the Chief Executive of the City Parochial Foundation. A final panel brought together some of those who had already participated formally at other points during the day, together with Michelynne Lafleche, the present Director of the Runnymede Trust and Margaret Wetherell, a Professor at the Open University.

Having heard from such an extraordinary group over the course of what was an intense and involving day, it was perhaps appropriate that it should finish with reflection on the theme in a very different way. After dinner the conference had the pleasure of hearing from the playwright, actor and writer, Kwame Kwei Armah, reflecting autobiographically on the issues raised during the day and of how he saw them impacting on his own children and their peers in the decades to come. It proved both a moving finale and a potent reminder of what lay at the heart of this day long discussion; that it is always individuals, with their particular histories, who lie at the heart of all and any political process. Questions of "belonging" will always begin here, with this potency of the "other".

Andrew Taylor

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Please note: a full report of the conference will be published by The Runnymede Trust in due course.