

## The multicultural narratives of Britain and the Netherlands as reflected in various levels of contemporary society

The concept of multiculturalism has long been a staple of society both in Britain and the Netherlands. Resulting from various different historical facts, from the countries' colonial past to the more recent inception of the European Union and the associated freedom of movement, both nations have developed a name for cultural diversity. In recent decades, this identity has become the centre of much heated debate and uncertainty.

Before exploring the finer details of the multicultural question, it is first important to be able to understand what exactly is meant by the term. The Oxford Dictionary defines multiculturalism as 'the presence of, or support for the presence of, several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society' (Oxford Dictionaries | English, 2019). However, this definition explicitly regards only the *presence* of various cultures, falling short of explaining the *role* multiculturalism plays in society. Another definition which fulfils this end is that of Erasmus University professor Peter Scholten, who maintains that 'multiculturalism is generally posited as the opposite of assimilationism, as it stresses cultural pluralism and a more culturally neutral, open form of citizenship' (Scholten, 2012).

By looking at multiculturalism from the perspective of various different *spheres* of society, we can gather a relatively rounded idea of the multiculturalist views of the country as a whole. By taking a wide range of different perspectives within society, we can better understand where certain ideas and ways of thinking manifest the most. To this end, we can identify three of the most prominent sectors of society.

The first of these is the *legal* or *official* sphere, which provides an objective view based on laws and policies in regard to multiculturalism. Second, the *political* sphere; the various ways in which prominent politicians deal with the question of multiculturalism through their campaigns and debates. Finally, and perhaps the most significant, there is the *public* sphere. This, too, presents a relatively objective view based on statistics gathered by means of public surveys, which provide concrete data on the public's take on various aspects of the topic.

First of all, in regard to the official or legal take on multiculturalism, there is a very interesting trend in both Britain and the Netherlands, namely a reluctance to officially affirm multiculturalism specifically. In the case of Britain, multiculturalism 'has not been formally affirmed in any constitutional, legislative or parliamentary sense' (Queensu.ca, n.d.). In the Netherlands, however, it is more the case that policies aim to avoid multiculturalism in general, instead favouring a strategy of integration. In 1994, 'Dutch policy [shifted] away from the recognition and maintenance of cultural diversity. The Integration Policy focused heavily on the socio- economic incorporation of immigrants' (Queens.ca, n.d.; Bruquetas-Callejo, 2007; Entzinger, 2006; Vasta, 2007).

In this respect, Britain and the Netherlands take relatively different approaches to multiculturalism. Britain favours policies of equal representation and opportunity for all ethnic groups in the country, such as the Race Relations Amendment Act, which 'requires each of the UK's four Arts Councils to demonstrate they are promoting racial equality' (Queens.ca, n.d.). While such a policy existed for a time in the Netherlands, 'In 2008, the last ethnic group targeted programs on the public broadcaster were [replaced] by a Dutch language program... [which] attempts to reach all ethnic minorities as a whole (Queens.ca, n.d.; Awad and Roth, 2011).

Possibly the most significant policies regarding multicultural narratives are those surrounding education, and the ways in which children are taught about life in a multicultural society. In Britain's

case, 'the multicultural, anti-racist policies and practices in education that were slowly developing during the 1980s had more or less disappeared by the 1990s... there has been no review of the National Curriculum to enquire whether it reflects Britain as a multicultural society' (Queens.ca, n.d.; Tomlinson 2005, 167). As for the Netherlands, although multiculturalism 'has been included in some ethnically diverse schools, in general the curriculum focus tends to be on integration rather than multiculturalism' (ibid.).

As demonstrated thus far, the aim of the Netherlands in regard to multiculturalism is to adopt a strategy far more aimed at integration and social cohesion. This extends into the need for new immigrants to take an integration course, effective since 1998, and a compulsory civics test as of 2003 as part of the naturalisation process (Queens.ca, n.d.; Entzinger, 2006; Vasta, 2007). This attitude is perhaps most characterised by the shift from the significantly-named Minorities Policy to the Integration Policy in 1994 (Queens.ca, n.d.; Entzinger, 2006).

Perhaps this apparent avoidance of multiculturalism, regarding the specific term in Britain's case and the overall concept in the Netherlands, reflects something about each nation's official attitude toward the fact of a multicultural society. It is clear from the existence of various pro-diversity policies that the presence of cultural minorities is important to both nations, therefore each respective government clearly acknowledges multiculturalism as a fact. The overarching issue revolves around this idea of a national identity, which is perhaps made more unclear by the potential for each nation to identify as a land of diversity. Whether the apparent need to avoid this idea is due to the potential pressure to retain a certain standard of national identity is unclear as of yet. This, therefore, leads into the next levels of society, which may better reflect the core of this trend.

When it comes to politics, very rarely are sentiments surrounding such matters as multiculturalism aroused unless to inspire debate. This century in particular has seen many politicians in Britain and the Netherlands rise to prominence by playing with ideas of diversity and immigration, capitalising on the politics of nostalgia to rouse images of a *better* time gone by (Mudde, 2016). University of Oxford researcher Ellie Vasta characterises this by describing the calls of Dutch conservative and populist groups for 'cultural integration with a view to restoring an (imagined) homogenous nation' (Vasta, 2007).

In the case of Britain, the immediate thought evoked by the mention of multiculturalism, especially in regard to politics, is now unavoidably always Brexit. After all, the question of Britain as a multicultural nation and the policies surrounding immigration were significant motivating factors in the referendum. It goes without saying that the drive to leave the European Union led to the rise of much debate surrounding the benefit of multiculturalism, much of which was characterised by largely negative views. Examples of a resistance to immigration can be found in the 2017 Conservative Party manifesto, which stated that current levels of net migration – 273,000 – were 'still too high', promising to slash the number to 'sustainable levels', which were specified as being 'in the tens of thousands' (The Conservative Party, 2017; The Guardian, 2017).

Yet similar sentiments have been present in British politics since long before Brexit was even conceived. In 2004, Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission of Racial Equality, is noted to have expressed his belief that 'multiculturalism was out of date because it "suggests separateness", suggesting instead that it should be 'replaced with policies which promote integration and "assert a core of Britishness"' (BBC News, 2011). Going even further back to 1968, in his infamous 'Rivers of

Blood' speech, Enoch Powell is described to have 'warned of the dangers, as he saw them, of unchecked immigration... [urging] a policy of repatriation for those immigrants already in the UK' (Smith, 2019). Despite bringing an end to his political influence, this speech resonated in such a way that it is believed to have given rise to much of the discontent which has characterised British multicultural debate ever since.

As for the Netherlands, much of their political discourse in regard to multiculturalism is the result of such major political events as 'the long year of 2002'. While campaigning for the parliamentary elections, the right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn called for both 'zero immigration', saying that the Netherlands was 'full', as well as a 'cold war against Islam' (Scholten, 2012). Although his campaign had already amassed a significant following, his assassination the same year gave rise to a great deal of discontent and further support for his party's aims. His spiritual successor, Party for Freedom leader Geert Wilders, has since maintained Fortuyn's ideas, having expressed his belief that "all non-Western immigration must be stopped" (Cohen, 2005). Continuing Fortuyn's anti-Islamic legacy, Wilders has put forward policies such as a *kopvoddentaks*, or "head-rag tax", as well as a ban on the Koran (Comiteau, 2011).

Both Britain and the Netherlands have proven that their political relationship with multiculturalism has long been under strain. Be it the result of increased immigration over time or the more recent significant increase in terror attacks across Europe and their unfortunate reflection on the Muslim faith, many prominent politicians have used this discontent to the benefit of their own campaigns. The result, of course, is simply the continuation of this discontent, which inevitably contributed to the majority leave vote in the European Referendum (BBC News, 2016). The exact extent of this discontent, however, cannot be justly represented on a political scope. This leads on to the third and final prominent *sphere* of society.

Arguably, the most significant opinions toward multiculturalism and the extent to which it is handled on a national scale come from the public. As those who undeniably spend the most time among the local and common levels of society, it is their views which tend to most accurately represent those of the nation as a whole. Through various surveys and polls, it has been possible to gather objective statistics to represent the general sentiment of both nations.

The immediate question which arises here is that of discrimination toward cultural minority groups. In the wake of Brexit, according to a report by Opinium Research, 5,468 racially or religiously aggravated offences were reported to the police in England and Wales in July 2016, an increase of 41% from the same month in 2015. The same report shares that only 38% of British minorities said they believed that the UK is a less racist country than it was before. A further 52% of ethnic minorities said that Britain has become less tolerant since voting to leave the European Union, as well as 48% of white Britons (Crouch and Minhas, 2017).

According to this report, when asked if the UK was successfully integrated, 49% of ethnic minorities agreed, while a majority 53% of white Britons disagreed. 52% of white Britons and 35% of ethnic minorities suggested that this lack of integration was the result of minorities not making an effort. On the flipside, 24% of white Britons and 32% of ethnic minorities claimed the reason was that the British are not open and accepting (ibid.) A 2009 report by the Dutch Multicultural Society showed that this sentiment was similarly reflected in the Netherlands, where 66% of the native Dutch respondents said that migrants should not adhere to their own customs and beliefs, with more than

half feeling that migrants were not sufficiently integrated into Dutch society. (Dutch Multicultural Society: FACTS AND FIGURES, 2009).

In another set of studies in Britain, 52% of respondents said that immigrants placed public services under strain (Rahim, 2018), 27% felt migrants took jobs away and 34% thought migrants took more from society than they contributed (The Guardian, 2017; Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, 2017). A survey in the Guardian showed further concern that public services were under strain from immigration, and that 'migrants were willing to work for less, putting jobs at risk and lowering wages' (Booth, 2018).

Some more positive results showed that '63% of people felt migrant workers supported the economy by doing the jobs British workers did not want to, and a similar number said they brought valuable skills for the economy and public services such as the NHS'. 59% also said that 'the diversity brought by immigration has enriched British culture' (ibid.). In a similar polling, when asked if 'diversity is a good thing for British culture', 60% of people agreed that it was (Rahim, 2018). In the Netherlands, however, in 2004, only around 10% agreed that migrants were an enrichment to Dutch Society, although 80% still maintained that Dutch children should come into contact with many different cultures (Dutch Multicultural Society: FACTS AND FIGURES, 2009).

Regarding local areas, 85% of white British respondents living in areas with a mostly white population said they strongly felt they belong in Britain, while 79% of those in areas with a mostly non-white population felt the same, according to the England and Wales 2007 Citizenship Survey (Manning, 2011). Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, over 40% said that they would move if they lived in a neighbourhood with a large migrant population (Dutch Multicultural Society: FACTS AND FIGURES, 2009).

It is important to mention that, while these public statistics provide concrete data of general opinions toward multiculturalism, they are not entirely representative of each nation as a whole. First of all, each study can only include a set number of participants, who may not faithfully represent their region or nation. Furthermore, many of these results are national averages drawn from many different statistics. These results would likely vary greatly depending on the specific area. As noted by Hope not Hate representative Rosie Carter, "Where people live, and their living conditions, makes a real difference – that includes the perceived impact of migration on their community, broader grievances about economic insecurity and levels of contact with migrants and ethnic minorities too" (Booth, 2018). Furthermore, the great range of time in which these studies took place likely renders a significant portion of the results less representative of current public sentiment, as any number of recent developments could have altered public opinions.

Nevertheless, these statistics do allow us to draw some basic conclusions. While there appears to be a general consensus that immigration and multiculturalism is – or has the potential to be – something positive for society, there is also a significant amount of anxiety. These concerns mainly revolve around the idea of strained resources and a sort of mutual alienation as a result of limited integration.

To conclude, it would appear that on all levels of society, in both Britain and the Netherlands, there is a general consensus in favour of integration above general multiculturalism. While much of the public express a positive outlook on the contribution of immigrants and minorities, there are plenty who also argue that many should be better integrated among society. Many immigrants themselves

have expressed a need not only for better integration, but also greater official support with this integration, particularly in the case of Britain.

Many of these views of multiculturalism appear to point toward a central theme of national identity, which is reflected in the legal policies of both countries, of which the Netherlands appears to be the most outspoken. Although Britain flaunts a larger focus on equal representation, there is a lack of compulsory integration such as that prioritised in the Netherlands. Of course, an ideal government strategy would maintain both integration and equal representation in order for society to truly begin to be as one.

**2489 words**

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