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Chapter 6

Nationhood and Muslims in Britain

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“THESE ARE difficult times to be British,” Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright maintain. Their assessment centers on how “the state which underpinned British identity is no longer the confident structure of earlier times.”¹ They are not alone in coming to this view, and at least two implications follow from their observation.² One is that the political unity of the administrative and bureaucratic components of the state is related to cultural features of British nationhood, including the ways in which people express feeling and being British. This is perhaps a familiar assessment of the configuration of all nation-states, though it could also imply that the state has been one—though not necessarily the most important—touchstone in the historical cultivation of British as a national identity.³

A number of contemporary political developments that put into question the prevailing coherence of the British state—for example, devolution, European integration, globalization—might add to the kinds of issues informing Gamble and Wright’s view, and are perhaps most starkly illustrated by the promised 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Of course, Britain has since its inception been a multinational state.⁴ It was constructed in a series of treaties and parliamentary acts between its constituent nations: England and Wales joining in 1536, Scotland in 1603 and 1707, Ireland in 1801 (formalizing a long-standing occupation), and Northern Ireland in 1921, 1922, and 1949. Britain thus has always contained a certain intrinsic tension that has had the potential to be productive as well as undermining.⁵ It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that “the empirical view of Britishness is open to objection,” for Britain’s “nested” nations have always retained and cultivated—rather than erased—distinguishing languages, churches, systems of law, jurisdiction over education and local governance, and

other features of civil society.⁶ To some extent, it is precisely these issues that are now reflected in forms of regional citizenship, and rearticulated in current debates on these nations' territorial governance in a manner that goes beyond issues of constitutional devolution *per se*.⁷ Questions of national identity in Britain—such as who is British and what Britishness consists of—are therefore complicated by the fact that English and British have long been “(con)fused—[with] the coterminosity of flag, anthem, symbols compounding the confusion.”⁸ Although as yet “English nationalism is the dog that did not bark,” the same is not true for England's Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish neighbors.⁹ In each case, nationalist and regionalist parties have recently assumed power at the regional level, either outright or in a minority or coalition government.¹⁰

The second implication in Gamble and Wright's statement about the decline of British identity is at first less obvious but no less important. It concerns how current debates about Britishness are not restricted to national minorities but have also come to focus on ethnic minorities, namely migrant and post-immigrant minorities, frequently thought of as visible minorities. For example, one salient articulation of contemporary British national identity in governmental policy and discourse, frequently discussed in the press, is concerned with the promotion of common civic values, as well as English language competencies among ethnic minorities through a wider knowledge of—and self-identification with—British cultural, historical, and institutional heritages, as well as approved kinds of political engagement and activity.¹¹ A sort of British civic national identity, as the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB) described, remains embedded in particular cultural values and traditions that involve not only an allegiance to the state, but also intuitive, emotional, symbolic allegiances to a historic nation, even while the idea of the nation is contested and reimagined.¹²

Two Minorities or One Majority

Although this chapter is principally concerned with the place of Muslims in British nationhood, some elaboration of the ongoing debates about British nationhood is required to properly understand the place of Muslims within these debates. To be sure, Muslims have not created the wider debate.¹³ On the contrary, they have found themselves positioned between two impulses. One is a centrifugal multinationalism—such as Welsh devolution, Northern Ireland power sharing, or the prospect of Scottish independence—and the other centripetal—such as the civic integration of newer ethnic minorities. These need not pull in opposite directions, insofar as “Britain's past and present immigrant minorities easily fit into this [common] framework.”¹⁴ By common framework,

we might think about a consensus that multiple identities are valuable and not in themselves a problem for identifying with Britain. As Bhikhu Parekh argues, "Just as it [Britain] has learned to respect the diversity of its four nations, it should respect the diversity of its immigrants."¹⁵ This prospect has important conditions that can hinder or facilitate a meaningful settlement in which minorities feel that they belong and their status as British is not constantly challenged or questioned. Parekh continues:

The way a country treats its members plays a particularly important role. They are more likely to identify with the country if they are accepted as its full and legitimate members and treated with respect, enjoy equality with the rest, are free to express their other cherished identities, and have the opportunity to lead a minimally decent life. Conversely, they are unlikely to feel at home in the country and see it as theirs if their very presence is resented, if they are subjected to discriminatory treatment, mocked and ridiculed with impunity, or if they are required to sacrifice their other identities as a precondition of their membership or as proof of their commitment to the country.¹⁶

Applying this observation to the question of where Muslims fit into contemporary debates about nationhood in Britain brings out that national identities usually reflect the culture of the majority.¹⁷ One normative option is to remake the nation (and national identities) in plural forms, something that needs to register what Michael Billig describes as the "banal" features of ordinary nationhood that may not commonly be understood to be inscribed with majority ethnic, cultural or racial features.¹⁸ It was this very assessment of British national identity that, at the turn into the twenty-first century, informed the CMEB, a nongovernmental inquiry created by an influential equality think-tank and charity, the Runnymede Trust. This inquiry characterized British national identity as potentially "based on generalisations [that] involve a selective and simplified account of a complex history" in which "many complicated strands are reduced to a simple tale of essential and enduring national unity."¹⁹ Because they do not easily fit into a majoritarian account of national identity or cannot be reduced to or assimilated into a prescribed public culture, minority differences thus may be negatively conceived.

Britain has faced particular challenges in addressing issues of disadvantage tied to cultural difference experienced by a variety of ethnic and religious minorities. The most substantive response, developed cumulatively during the final quarter of the twentieth century and made up of a range of policies and discourses, is commonly known as multiculturalism. The multicultural response has sought to promote equality of access to opportunities and accommodate aspects of minority difference while promoting the social and moral benefits of ethnic minority-related

diversity in an inclusive sense of civic belonging. This has been neither a linear nor stable development, has frequently been subject to (often productive) criticism from a variety of camps, and has especially been under stress since the publication of the CMEB report.²⁰ More than a decade since then, a period that has included civil disturbances, wars abroad, and terrorism at home, as well as the distinctively multicultural London 2012 Olympics, the core idea that Britain rejects the idea of integration—being based on a drive for unity through uncompromising cultural assimilation—remains as true as ever.

This is not to say that competing discourses and policies do not have significant traction, but the resilience and dynamism of Roy Jenkins's famous 1966 definition of integration in Britain—as “not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance”—is clearly evident to those who choose to look. That is not to deny this has been qualified. Hence the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002 explicitly introduced a test, implemented in 2005, for those seeking British citizenship. Thus applicants should show “a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic” and “a sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom.”²¹ Immigrants seeking to settle in the United Kingdom (applying for “indefinite leave to remain”) also have to pass the test, which latter stipulation has been effective since April 2007. If applicants do not have sufficient knowledge of English, they are encouraged to attend English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and citizenship classes. Despite important variations, emphasis and explicitness on national identities is thus renewed in countries that have not always prioritized it—such as Britain, Denmark, and increasingly Germany. This phenomenon is not simply a methodological artifact whose true meaning is obscured by *methodological nationalism*.

In contrast, postmigrant groups have been recognized as ethnic and racial minorities requiring state support and differential treatment to overcome distinctive barriers in their exercise of citizenship. This recognition includes how, under the remit of several race relations acts (RRAs), the state has sought to integrate minorities into the labor market and other key arenas of British society by promoting equal access. It is nearly forty years since the introduction of a third RRA in 1976 cemented a state sponsorship of race equality by consolidating earlier, weaker legislative instruments, those in 1965 and 1968. Alongside its broad remit spanning public and private institutions, recognizing indirect discrimination, and imposing a statutory public duty to promote good race relations, the 1976 RRA created the Commission for Racial Equality (later amalgamated into the Equality and Human Rights Commission) to assist individual complainants and monitor implementation of the act. Does this amount to multiculturalism? We argue that it does, though lacking any official

multicultural act or charter, in having rejected the idea of integration more than forty years ago.

“Framing” Muslims

According to the most recent census of England and Wales, around 2.7 million people (or 4.8 percent of the population) define themselves as Muslim—making Muslims the second largest religious group after Christians (33.2 million, or 59.3 percent).²² As the Office for National Statistics summarizes, the areas with the highest proportion of Muslims are in London, especially Tower Hamlets and Newham, respectively 34.5 percent and 32.0 percent, and Redbridge and Waltham Forest, both higher than 20 percent.²³ Beyond London, areas more than 20 percent Muslim include Blackburn with Darwen in the northwest (27 percent), as well as Bradford in Yorkshire and the Humber, Luton in the east of England, Slough in the southeast, and Birmingham in the West Midlands. The precise cross-tabulations of ethnic composition are yet to be released, but it is anticipated that they will not show a radical departure from the configuration of ethnic proportions set out in the last census.²⁴ In 2001, those of Pakistani origin made up 42.5 percent of the Muslim population; Bangladeshi, 16.8 percent; Indians, 8.5 percent; and most interestingly “other white,” 7.5 percent. This “other white” category includes those of Turkish, Arabic, and North African origin who did not define themselves as nonwhite; East European Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo; and white Muslims from across Europe. Finally, 6.2 percent of the Muslim population identified as black African, 5.8 percent as other Asian, and 4.1 percent as British. Even with this heterogeneity, it is still understandable that Muslims in Britain are associated primarily with South Asia, especially given that they make up roughly 68 percent of the British Muslim population.

Although a small proportion of the total population of England and Wales, Muslims are the minority group whose national loyalty and integration has been of greatest concern.²⁵ This may partly be due to anxieties following the attacks of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, though fear throughout the West of Muslims and questions about their loyalty predate the war on terror.²⁶ Muslim identities have thus become a staple feature of contemporary political discussion in Britain. It is the content of these familiar discussions, however, which some have argued “operates as the other half of a distorted dialogue,” that is of concern.²⁷ Despite fears of British Muslims’ loyalty, available evidence suggests that most Muslims do identify with Britain and feel British. Using the 2005 Home Office Citizenship Survey, Anthony Heath and Jane Roberts show that 43 percent of Muslim respondents identify very strongly with Britain and

42 percent fairly strongly.²⁸ These figures are corroborated by earlier survey data, and later surveys even suggest that British Muslims identify more strongly with Britain than the British public at large.²⁹ Polling data from Max Wind-Cowie and Trevor Gregory support this further:

Our polling shows that 88 percent of Anglicans and Jews agreed that they were “proud to be a British citizen” alongside 84 percent of non-conformists and 83 percent of Muslims—compared with 79 percent for the population as a whole. . . . This optimism in British Muslims is significant as—combined with their high score for pride in British—it runs counter to a prevailing narrative about Muslim dissatisfaction with and in the UK. While it is true that there are significant challenges to integration for some in the British Muslim community—and justified concern at the levels of radicalism and extremism in some British Muslim communities—overall British Muslims are more likely to be both patriotic and optimistic about Britain than are the white British community.³⁰

Despite this evidence, leading politicians often conceive of and portray Muslims as having difficulty feeling British and seeing their British identities as meaningful parts of their individual identities. Likewise, many leading journalists portray some Muslims as having difficulty “being British” and behaving as British people are “supposed” to behave. These portrayals have significant consequences. Politicians, the publicly funded education system, the media, and the arts help shape the broader public subjective sense of national identity issues.³¹ Similarly, journalists who write for national newspapers convey information about, as well as an image of, the nation that readers often internalize, thus influencing the way they think about their own and others’ identification with the nation.³² If senior politicians and journalists suggest that some Muslims have difficulty feeling and being British, it is unsurprising if Muslims are seen as outsiders by large sections of the public in Britain. The discourse about Muslims by important public figures, in short, contributes to and reinforces a sense among many in Britain that Muslims, or at least a good many Muslims, do not belong.

Feeling British

How do senior Labour and Conservative party politicians conceptualize and portray the ability of Muslims to feel British?³³ We can begin to get a glimpse of their views through interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 with six members of the Labour government—Labour was in power between 1997 and 2010—and four members of the shadow Conservative cabinet, as well as published reports of their speeches and comments. All the politicians interviewed had some responsibility for the policy area of community cohesion, which since its introduction in 2001 as a

government focus, has been intimately tied to issues relating to Muslims and Britishness.³⁴ Indeed, this policy area was initially created to help prevent disturbances like those in 2001 in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, in which young Muslims participated, often provoked by the far-right British National Party. It also developed in response to reports on the disturbances that recommended a national debate on “the common elements of nationhood.”³⁵ The reports seemed to suggest that Muslims who participated in the riots had difficulty seeing themselves as British, a view supported by the then home secretary, David Blunkett, who praised the reports for facing “head on” how “people in the Asian community help the second and third generation feel British.”³⁶

Certain junior ministers, such as Angela Eagle, responsible for community cohesion policies were sanguine about the ability of Muslims to feel British. Hence Eagle, when interviewed, said that “having a British identity isn’t inconsistent with being a British Pakistani.”³⁷ Mike O’Brien, a minister of state for pension reform in 2007 and 2008 and for race equality from 1999 to 2001, said that “a lot of Muslims actually do” feel British and that they are unlikely to have difficulty doing so because “a person can feel dual identity, you can be British and you can feel Pakistani . . . that’s not a problem.”³⁸ Fiona Mactaggart, MP, suggested that even Muslims who say they do not feel British may not really be rejecting their British identities: “If the British government has done something you think is wrong, like going to war with Iraq, then you can say I’m no longer British . . . that’s a way of rejecting their values. . . . But I’m not sure how profound it is.”³⁹ These Labour Party ministers contested the view that Muslims had difficulty feeling British, unlike their senior colleague and cabinet minister David Blunkett. To be sure, Blunkett claimed, “you can be first generation Pakistani and British.” But when asked which immigrant groups might have difficulty feeling British, he indicated that among some Pakistanis, “I think there’s a lip service to Britishness and the issue is if we get under the surface, do people really mean it, do they feel it?” He added, “You see, Pakistani covers a lot of different backgrounds, Pashtun and all the rest of it, and so it’s difficult and they don’t always agree with each other. So I always have to find out who the community leaders are [laughs]. . . . I think they would, I think all those groups would pay a lip service to being British.”⁴⁰

Unsure about whether many Pakistanis pay lip service to Britishness, Blunkett stated, “I don’t have any authentic statistics on it, I don’t have anything that is not just pure anecdote.”⁴¹ Indeed, Blunkett was the home secretary who set up the Home Office Citizenship Survey mentioned earlier, in which more than four-fifths of Muslim respondents claimed that they very strongly or fairly strongly belonged to Britain.⁴² In establishing the survey, Blunkett reflected the turn toward “evidence-based policy” and the prevailing “mood” in government in support of “management

by numbers."⁴³ It is thus difficult to understand why, despite requesting data relating to Muslims and despite a mood in government that favored using it, Blunkett relied on anecdotal information. One possible reason is his view that survey data on Muslim attitudes to feeling British reflect the "lip service" Blunkett believes some are willing to pay to Britishness.⁴⁴

Blunkett also linked views about feeling British to social class. Some Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims, he indicated, have difficulty feeling British because they are "at the very bottom of the economic ladder." He saw a relationship between feeling British, integration, and being economically successful:

The Hindu community have managed not to be the focal point of bitterness and hatred . . . because there's a very much larger middle class, and wherever you have a larger middle class . . . then integration, social cohesion go hand in hand. . . . And therefore the answer to your question is those areas of inward migration, where people have been struggling at the very bottom end of the economic ladder, that obviously means Bangladeshi and to some extent Pakistani communities, although that is changing.⁴⁵

In a lecture delivered in 2003, Blunkett spoke of a growing number of young Muslims who believe they have to choose between identifying as Muslim or British. Other leading politicians have made similar claims. As Blunkett said, "There will always be those . . . encouraging their followers to define their faith and their identity in opposition to outsiders rather than in positive terms. . . . It is a worrying trend that young second generation British Muslims are more likely than their parents to feel they have to *choose* between feeling part of the UK and feeling part of their faith."⁴⁶ In a Fabian pamphlet written when Ruth Kelly was secretary of state for local government and communities and Liam Byrne was minister of state for immigration, Byrne and Kelly expressed similar concerns about Muslims' identity: "There is a particular issue with a minority of second and third generation Muslims' ability to feel British."⁴⁷

Like the views of many politicians, Blunkett's were often inconsistent and contradictory. He noted in a 2001 newspaper interview that after September 11 he thought that

there was a real problem in trying to hook the Islamic community and do something about them feeling part of the country. . . . We needed to throw up a protective screen and we needed at the same time to hold out a hand to say, you know, you are part of us. . . . It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you say to people . . . we think you are very different, we think that there is a problem here and . . . and we're extremely concerned that you do something about it, then that re-enforces a feeling. Whereas if you embrace people, we've all done this in our own lives, if you embrace somebody who is giving you a hard time, then it's much more difficult.⁴⁸

One strategy for Blunkett was to embrace Muslims and help them “to feel part of our community.”⁴⁹ At the same time, however, as we have indicated, he emphasized that many Muslims lack a strong British identity, and, in the interview in 2001, noted how some Muslims should avoid marrying people from their countries of origin and need to adhere to British norms.⁵⁰ By Blunkett’s own admission, his approach was not only inconsistent with his and his government’s data sets and approach to using such data, but also with his ideas of how to make Muslims feel at home in Britain at a time when they felt threatened by the “atmosphere that . . . had been created by the attack in America.”⁵¹

Similar contradictions are found among leading Conservative Party politicians. On the one hand are indications that they accept that Muslim values are now part of British society, as when William Hague, then Conservative Party leader, in the week after the 2001 disturbances in Oldham, pointed to “the way in which Muslim values are being built into the edifice of Modern Britain.”⁵² Sayeeda Warsi, as opposition spokeswoman on community cohesion, and after a trip to Sudan to aid the release of a British school teacher, made clear that being a Muslim does not conflict with British values: “I hope our mission to Sudan demonstrated to people in Britain, and in other Western countries, that you can be Muslim and hold firm to your country’s values and interests.”⁵³ Former community cohesion spokesman Paul Goodman distinguished, in an interview, between older Muslim immigrants and the younger generations: “The very oldest tranche of the people . . . I don’t get the sense that when they arrived they wanted to engage with the mainstream culture.” But in successive generations, he believed, are those “who plunge themselves into the mainstream.”⁵⁴

Other leading Conservatives conceived of and portrayed Muslims rather differently. When we asked the then shadow security minister Pauline Neville Jones, who in 2007 published a report on community cohesion, whether any particular “types of people” might have difficulty feeling British, she answered, “That’s a very good question, and a kind of important question, actually. What I’m about to say is not based on either work we’ve done or, or stuff I’ve read.”⁵⁵ She went on to say that there could be “quite a lot of people who don’t feel particularly British” and that thus the focus should not be exclusively on Muslims. However, when asked whether some Muslims might have difficulty feeling British, she responded, “yep.”⁵⁶ Elsewhere she has been quoted as saying that the challenge “is not how you try to indigenise Islam . . . which is important, but how you give British Muslims in this country the feeling that actually they are Brits, like any other British [*sic*].”⁵⁷ Former community cohesion spokesman and later attorney general, Dominic Grieve, shared such views. He seemed unaware of studies concerning British identity while

saying, in our interview, that non-Muslims might have difficulty feeling British, and suggesting that Muslims might have trouble both being and feeling British and hold views that are out of sync with British norms and traditions:

If looked at bluntly, I keep on meeting very pleasant people, not just Muslims, sometimes from other religious groups but I have to say principally Muslims, who seem to me to have views, and I have listened carefully to what they've got to say, which are certainly incompatible with development in our national and historical tradition.

It is true there are only a tiny number of people who want to blow themselves up on the underground killing people for the sake of their view of what the world should be like. But equally it seems to me that whilst there are large numbers of Muslims living in Britain who have very little difficulty reconciling their religious views with the advantages of living in a pluralist democratic society, there are actually quite a large number of them who, whilst they might be quite grateful for the fact that they are living in a pluralist society rather than being persecuted somewhere else, *actually want to live in a society that is very different*.⁵⁸

Thus, although "large numbers" of peaceful Muslims are glad to live in Britain and benefit from doing so, he says, they allegedly wish Britain to be a very different society and this prevents them from identifying with it. Interestingly, Neville Jones offered a more critical view of British society that might explain why Muslims are loathe to identify with it. She referred to "aspects of modern western British secular society [that] are particularly unattractive. The violence, the lawlessness, the drunkenness, the, um, the vulgarity, these are all things that no sane person would actually want to join."⁵⁹

Being British

Leading journalists also have made problematic links between Muslims and Britishness, but in a different way from the politicians we have discussed. The newspaper coverage following former home and foreign secretary Jack Straw's controversial comments in 2006 about Muslim women who choose to wear the niqab (a full-face veil) is a case in point.⁶⁰ In his weekly column in the *Lancashire Telegraph*, Straw explained the reasons why he asked Muslim women wearing the niqab to remove the veil when meeting him in his Blackburn constituency office.⁶¹ The removal of the face veil, he argued, enabled him to engage more effectively in a face-to-face dialogue. He was better able to "see what the other person means and not just hear what they say." He described face veils as a "visible statement of separation and difference" that made "better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult."⁶² He continued:

It was not the first time I had conducted an interview with someone in a full veil, but this particular encounter, though very polite and respectful on both sides, got me thinking. In part, this was because of the apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds—the entirely English accent, the couple’s education (wholly in the UK)—and the fact of the veil. Above all, it was because I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone “face-to-face” who I could not see.⁶³

Much later, and as the 2010 general election neared, Straw apologized for the problems that his views caused Muslims, but in his memoirs he subtly changed positions again by noting how glad he was that he raised the issue.⁶⁴ The notion that Muslims wearing the veil are antithetical to British traditions is implied in Straw’s claims that his views reflect in part “the concern of other white people.”⁶⁵

Straw’s comments seemed have encouraged and given legitimacy to journalists to portray some Muslims as unable to be British.⁶⁶ Characteristic of much of the newspaper coverage, and from all impressions, the national popular reaction saw the issue of the niqab—which was universally agreed to be worn by only a tiny percentage of Muslim women—presented as a matter of national identity and minority-majority relations rather than a rather marginal issue of personal religious choice. Consider the most widely read middle-market national newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, a publication widely recognized for focusing its coverage on controversial matters of ethnic minority difference. The *Daily Mail*’s editorials frequently framed their discussion by juxtaposing British national identity with Muslim separatism (facilitated by multiculturalism). The following extract from such an editorial provides a good illustration of how Muslims and national identity were often cast as mutually exclusive in that newspaper:

This Government has actively promoted multiculturalism, encouraged Muslim “ghettoes” and set its face against greater integration. Anyone who dared to question this new apartheid was routinely denounced as a “racist.” Britishness? Who cares? For New Labour yes, including Mr Straw, it became an article of faith for the ethnic minorities to celebrate their own languages, culture and traditions, at the expense of shared values. There could hardly be a more effective recipe for division. Is it really surprising . . . if they [Muslims] see Mr Straw’s views on the veil as a juddering reversal of all that has gone before?⁶⁷

Several important ideas intermingle in this passage, but clearly Britishness is portrayed as the opposite to a government-sponsored multiculturalism that encourages people to celebrate their differences. The latter has allegedly created a type of apartheid, especially among Muslims who were permitted, if not encouraged, to celebrate their

distinctive features under multiculturalism. Seen as a corollary of multiculturalism, Muslim difference is juxtaposed with, and seen as antithetical to, Britishness, which stands for shared values and integration. Like multiculturalism, then, Muslim difference is conceived as a competitor to Britishness, the latter also seen to be missing among Muslims—although a sense of Britishness is viewed as having the ability to rectify the problems that multiculturalism has allegedly fostered, including “Muslim ghettos.”

Prominent columnists in the *Daily Mail* expressed similar views. For example, Alison Pearson articulated how she and other women feel a sense of ownership of Britain that is disturbed by women wearing the niqab:

It's not a nice sensation—to feel judged for wearing your own clothes in your own country. The truth is that females who cover their faces and bodies make us uneasy. The veil is often downright intimidating. . . . I just don't like seeing them on British streets. Nor do I want to see another newspaper provide, as it did this week, a cut-out-and-keep fashion guide to the different types of veil: “Here we see Mumtaz, or rather we don't see Mumtaz because the poor kid is wearing a nosebag over her face, modelling the latest female-inhibiting shrouds from the House of Taliban.”⁶⁸

More is at work here than national identity. There are clear intersections with gender and the discourse on female submission that undergirds the contested nature of what veiling signifies.⁶⁹ For Pearson, the “country” belongs to women who are willing not to cover their faces and who have a “liberal” conception of modest dress. Those who wear veils are in some sense aliens, even if they are also British citizens. Their standards of prescribed modesty are not simply regarded as extreme but as un-British, making other women uneasy and self-conscious in “their own country.” The “British streets,” as Pearson puts it, are no place for those wearing a garment from the “House of Taliban.”

Perhaps surprisingly, some journalists at the *Daily Telegraph*, a conservative-leaning newspaper, adopted a far more nuanced position with regards to the niqab. Charles Moore, columnist in and former editor of the newspaper, did not endorse the idea of the veil as a symbol of oppression. Indeed, he noted how discussions about it among Muslims in Britain can at times signify autonomy.⁷⁰ Moore not only noted “a struggle for control of Islam in this country, and for its political exploitation,” but that wearing the niqab can simply be a form of rebellion among teenage girls against oppression they experience from their parents: “There is an attempt to ‘arabise’ Muslims from the Indian sub-continent, persuading them to wear clothes that are alien to their culture to show their religious zeal. . . . For a few Muslim girls in this country, wearing the veil is a form of oppression imposed by their families; for more, it is a form of teenage rebellion, of

showing more commitment than their parents—a religious version of wearing a hoodie.”⁷¹

Moore wrote that “many non-Muslims find these veils a little unsettling . . . not because they are an exotic import to these shores . . . but because they conceal the face.” Nonetheless, Moore noted that setting up British national traditions and wearing “the veil” as opposed to each other is “a hostile statement about the society in which the wearer lives,” and wrongly portrays Muslims who wear the niqab as being hostile to Britain and unwilling to behave like other British people.⁷²

But what about more difference-friendly newspapers like the *Independent*? *The Independent* has a reputation for balanced discussion and is less likely to cast British national identity and examples of Muslim difference as mutually exclusive. Indeed, one editorial, titled “Mr Straw has raised a valid issue, but reached the wrong conclusion,” maintained that “it [the niqab] is not the wearing of the headscarf. . . . Unlike in France, where the wearing of headscarves at school became a highly contentious political issue, the attitude to headscarves in Britain has been wisely liberal, which has kept the subject largely out of the political domain.”⁷³ Another editorial went as far as to contrast what it characterized as negative contemporary press coverage of Muslims with that experienced by other groups in earlier periods: “The shameful aspect is that we are repeating our mistakes, in standing by while certain ethnic or religious minorities—in this case, Muslims—are demonised. Britain may be seen abroad as having managed the transition to a multicultural society more successfully than some, but as a nation we have not overcome the tendency to suspect, even fear, ‘the other.’”⁷⁴

Still, the *Independent*’s editorials and main stories are particularly striking when contrasted with the ways its leading columnists use national identity to condemn those who wear the niqab and sometimes also the hijab.⁷⁵ This includes, most notably, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, one of only two or three Muslim columnists in the national press, who has portrayed wearers of the niqab not only as deliberately rejecting British, or at the least, Western society, but also as acting and dressing as aliens and abusing their freedoms by trying to make Britain more like Saudi Arabia: “When does this country decide that it does not want citizens using their freedoms to build a satellite Saudi Arabia here? . . . It [the niqab] rejects human commonalities and even the membership of society itself. . . . It is hard to be a Muslim today. And it becomes harder still when some choose deliberately to act and dress as aliens.”⁷⁶

The view that being Muslim and British can, at times, conflict is also nicely illustrated by the *Sunday Telegraph* columnist Patience Wheatcroft, who characterized the niqab as “a barrier that limits the creation of relationships. It unites those who nestle behind such garments and makes it harder for them to integrate. . . . It may be that there are many Muslims

who choose to wear the veil but also want to play a full role in British society. They should realise that they are making that more difficult because of the uniform they choose to wear."⁷⁷

In sum, journalists working at newspapers that are traditionally thought to span the political spectrum are portraying some Muslims as having difficulty being British.

Conclusions

We have shown that some politicians are expounding the view that Muslims do not feel British, even though since the 1990s the relevant surveys suggest just the opposite; clearly a number of leading politicians conceive of and are promoting an inaccurate view about British Muslims. Also significant are the rationales for the politicians' stated views. Blunkett's reasons were economic. Although we certainly do not want to deny that poverty may cultivate a sense of exclusion, poverty is also experienced by certain white communities, but they are not typically thought to have difficulty feeling British. For several other leading politicians quoted here, some Muslims have difficulty feeling British because they want Britain to be a more Islamic land and they have difficulty leaving their own communities. These are empirical claims that have yet to be investigated, but given the high percentage of Muslims who feel British, these claims, even if true, can apply to only a very small percentage of Muslims.

An understanding of what it means to be British is also being projected by senior journalists, and it does not include all Muslims. Focus on the tiny number of Muslims wearing the niqab has been considerable, the Jack Straw incident acting as a lightning rod for hostility against Muslims. The incident was seized on as an opportunity to lambaste not just conservative Islam, especially in its gender relations aspect, but multiculturalism as well. A marginal issue of dress obsessed the nation and its media for more than a week in 2006. The outpouring of emotional repulsion was massive against the niqab as un-British in a way that threatened the acceptance of other Muslims not wearing the niqab but visibly devout in various ways.

This flood of negative feeling about the niqab in particular and Islam more generally, bursting through usual restraints about public discourse, illustrates an important feature of nationhood. For such exclusionary, affective power, no less than imaginative inclusivity, is a central feature of national belonging. Indeed, we noted earlier that the CMEB outlined how such exclusive understandings of the nation can be inaccurate, reflecting a selective reading of British history and a privileging of the majority that is difficult to justify. More inclusive understandings of what it means to be British that do not interpret Muslim difference as a barrier are available. Indeed two of the authors of this chapter have separately suggested

the need to accept them.⁷⁸ Doing so would entail a willingness among journalists to accept a more inclusive form of Britishness, which would provide a “space for Muslims” within the nation.⁷⁹ Certainly when the CMEB suggested recasting the national story, the media’s reaction was hostile.⁸⁰ But, significantly, and despite questions about both attachment to and ability to be a part of Britain, the vast majority of Muslims still feel British. Although we are right to be alert to the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies, what is clear is that even if others cannot envisage a conception of the nation that includes Muslims, many Muslims can.

Notes

1. Gamble and Wright 2009, 1.
2. Scholars typically begin a chronology of the contemporary British question by making reference to Tom Nairn’s 1977 book *The Break-Up of Britain*. Nairn of course was a Marxist critic who offered more of a challenge to the idea of the union than an analysis of its condition. For our purposes, the debate really commences in the early 1990s and is neatly summarized by the late Bernard Crick’s observation, from the middle of that decade, of how “for the first time anyone can remember in a people who have taken themselves so much for granted, have been widely envied for their psychological security, an anxious debate has broken out about national identity” (1995, 168). The difference between Great Britain and the United Kingdom can be confusing. Politically, Great Britain brings together the three home nations of England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as a number of islands off those coasts, including the Isle of Wight, Anglesey, the Isles of Scilly, the Hebrides, and the island groups of Orkney and Shetland. The United Kingdom, meanwhile, includes all of these as well as Northern Ireland. Territories that have further autonomy from both Great Britain and the United Kingdom include the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, which have distinct legislative and taxation systems. The derivation of the term Great Britain predates the British Empire, and is a consequence of distinguishing the British mainland from Lesser Britain, which approximates to modern Brittany in France.
3. Uberoi and McLean 2009.
4. Although a multinational British state (and indeed identity, albeit unevenly) came about through time, a formal category of British citizenship, as distinct from the imperial category *civis Britannicus sum*, did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century postwar decolonization. This multinational settlement, however, has always been asymmetrical to the extent it has not been evenly federal but instead unevenly devolved.
5. Moreover, other times have seen severe tensions threatening a unified Britain, for example, the period of winding down of empire in the postwar period, in which a series of wide-ranging questions on the future of the Union were raised (Aughey 2009).

6. Parekh 2009, 33.
7. Hepburn 2011.
8. McCrone 2002, 304.
9. Kumar 2010, 471.
10. Hepburn and McLoughlin 2011.
11. Meer and Modood 2009.
12. CMEB 2000.
13. Meer 2010.
14. Parekh 2009, 37.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 34.
17. Smith 1988; Uberoi 2008.
18. Billig 1995.
19. CMEB 2000, 2.9 16.
20. Meer and Modood 2014.
21. Home Office 2004, 11.
22. Office for National Statistics 2012, 2.
23. Ibid., 8.
24. Ibid.
25. Dunt 2009.
26. Matar 2009.
27. Morely and Hussain 2011, 5.
28. Heath and Roberts 2008, 14.
29. Modood et al. 1997; Gallup 2009.
30. Wind-Cowie and Gregory 2011, 39, 42.
31. Gellner 1983, 57.
32. Anderson 1983.
33. These sections draw on previously published materials from Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010; Uberoi and Modood 2010; and Uberoi and Modood 2012.
34. Dwyer and Uberoi 2009; McGhee 2003, 377; Bright 2007, 11. Varun Uberoi conducted nine of these interviews and Tariq Modood one of them. Each interview was semistructured, lasted approximately an hour and, as the main text indicates, was with a Labour or Conservative politician who since 2001 had responsibility in government or opposition for community cohesion.
35. Home Office 2004, 19.
36. Blunkett 2001.
37. Angela Eagle, interview by the authors, October 15, 2007.
38. Mike O'Brien, interview by the authors, October 30, 2007.
39. Fiona Mactaggart, interview by the authors, October 16, 2007.
40. David Blunkett, interview by the authors, March 11, 2008.
41. Ibid.
42. Heath and Roberts 2008, 14.
43. Hood 2008, 7–8.
44. David Blunkett, interview, March 11, 2008.

45. David Blunkett, interview, 2008.
46. Blunkett 2003, 3 (emphasis added).
47. Byrne and Kelly 2007, 25.
48. Blunkett 2001.
49. David Blunkett, interview, 2008.
50. Blunkett 2001.
51. David Blunkett, interview, 2008.
52. Hague 2001, 6.
53. Sayeeda Warsi, interview by the authors.
54. Paul Goodman, interview by the authors.
55. Pauline Neville Jones, interview by the authors, October 17, 2007.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Jones and Fowler 2007, 9.
58. Dominic Grieve, interview by the authors, September 18, 2007 (emphasis added).
59. Neville Jones, interview by the authors, 2007.
60. The discussion of newspaper coverage draws on a systematic content analysis of the national press reaction to Straw's comments, although here it purposefully limits the time-frame to a ten-day period in which the issue dominated the news agenda, from October 5 to October 15, 2006. A search of the LexisNexis database of national newspaper archives using the keywords *Straw* and *Veil* identified 497 items. These, using Atlas Ti, were coded in two stages: first, as newspaper editorials or leaders, news items or features, letters, and columnist opinion or comment; and, second, according to a coding schedule devised to tap keywords such as *Britishness*, *cohesion*, *multiculturalism*, and so on, before qualitatively tracing how the newspaper items invoked or made reference to accounts of national identity and citizenship. For a full methodological discussion, see Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010, 91–92.
61. Straw 2006.
62. Throughout the article and subsequent interviews, Straw continually distinguished between the niqab and other types of Muslim coverings such as the hijab.
63. Straw 2006.
64. Straw 2012, 480, 484.
65. *Ibid.*, 480.
66. Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010.
67. *Daily Mail* 2006.
68. Pearson 2006.
69. Dwyer 2008.
70. Moore 2006.
71. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Daily Mail* 2006.
74. *Independent* 2006a.
75. See Lewis 2006; Orr 2006; Smith 2006.

76. Alibhai-Brown 2006.
77. Wheatcroft 2006.
78. Modood 1992; Uberoi 2008.
79. Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010.
80. CMEB 2000.

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