



## **Multiculturalism Bites**

*David Miller on Multiculturalism and the Welfare State*

### **David Edmonds:**

The government taxes the man in work in part so it can provide some support for the man on the dole. The welfare state arose for several reasons. One was to provide us all with an insurance scheme in case we fall on hard times. Another was to create a mechanism for redistribution from the rich to the poor. But David Miller, of Nuffield College Oxford, fears that multiculturalism threatens to undermine support for redistribution, and so undermine support too for the welfare state.

### **Nigel Warburton:**

*David Miller, we're going to talk about multiculturalism and the Welfare State. Could you just say a little bit about how they connect?*

### **David Miller:**

Well I supposed that they're both in different ways reflections of basic liberal commitment to the idea of equality between people. So in one case what we're talking about is bringing about certain forms of material equality between people, equality in income, in healthcare, in education and so forth. And in the other case, what we're thinking about are different cultural groups, religious or ethnic groups, and about how to give them equal respect in the society to which they belong. So underneath both of these there are notions of equality but perhaps rather different notions, but they're held together by a basic liberal idea of equal treatment of persons.

### **NW:**

*Liberalism is usually focused on equality of persons as you pointed out, but it gets complicated with groups. How can groups be treated equally by the Welfare State?*

### **DM:**

The problem is not exactly equal treatment by the Welfare State. I think the issue is really whether the way we treat groups may cause problems for equal treatment of individuals by the Welfare State. When we treat groups equally we have to be willing to distribute resources, possibly unequally between individuals, in order to ensure that, for example, each group has a fair chance to see its culture prosper and develop, and for its members to feel that they can live according to the beliefs and values that define the group.

### **NW:**

*It's interesting because the Welfare State, in Britain anyway, predates multiculturalism as a political movement.*

### **DM:**

That's indeed the case. An important influence on the development of the Welfare State was the sense of solidarity people felt particularly in the aftermath of war. So the idea was that you were going to create a kind of home for people where everybody would contribute and then they would be protected in various ways against the hazards of life, in old age, in ill health, and so on. But that did seem to depend upon the idea of a unified society in which people were looked after by fellow citizens. So that was certainly developed at a time when although there were obviously economic divisions in the society they were not to the same extent cultural divisions. So, it was a pre-multicultural situation one could say in which the Welfare State was first developed

### **NW:**

*Given that, what sort of tensions have risen in recent years in and obviously much more multicultural societies than was the case just after the Second World War?*

**DM:**

I think that there are two potential reasons why a society becoming more multicultural might cause problems for support for the Welfare State. One is very simple, it's just that people tend to extend their solidarity to those who they think are in some sense like them. I mean, how they define 'likeness' can vary, but there's usually a sense of the person who's going to be the beneficiary of your scheme is somebody you can identify with as a person like you in some sense. I think the other problem is that the scheme of the Welfare State is a scheme whereby everybody contributes at certain points, and then at other points they withdraw from the scheme: for example they have pensions when they've finished their working life, when they get ill they draw benefits that they've contributed while they were fit. Now, when you start changing the composition of a society, if people start coming in, then of course that link between contribution and benefit becomes more tenuous. And I think there's some evidence that people are very sensitive to the possibility that people might come in and start drawing benefits straightaway without having made the right kind of contribution.

**NW:**

*So you've got two ideas there. One is that the beneficiaries of our generosity are going to be people a bit like us, and obviously within multiculturalism there's a sense that different members of different groups aren't quite like each other. But the other one is the resentment of what's perceived as unearned benefit, that people arrive and immediately draw on the common pool of resources.*

**DM:**

And these two can come together and people can somehow assume that because somebody doesn't look like them they must also be somebody who's newly arrived and therefore hasn't made the relevant contribution. Of course that's very often false, but I think it does create a social problem that has to be addressed if we're going to have a society that's both multicultural and also that has a strong welfare system that provides support for people.

**NW:**

*Now is this just a hunch or is there some empirical evidence to back up what you're saying?*

**DM:**

Yes, I think there is. I mean I think for example there's a large body of literature on trust which is important here. Trust matters because if you're going to be part of a welfare scheme you have to believe that the other participants are not going to be abusing the system in various ways, and there's a lot of evidence about the way in which diversity in society does tend to bring about a breakdown in trust. Now I'm not saying these things are set in stone because there are ways in which we can react to this and compensate for it. But I think it's important to acknowledge that there is a problem in the first place and that trust is going to be part of the picture.

I mean on the question of earned entitlement there have been studies which show I think that people have a sense of fairness which is very important when it's a matter of what people can justly claim to be entitled to. And the idea of contributing and then drawing seems to be essential to that idea of fairness.

**NW:**

*Well if that's true, you might expect that as societies become more multicultural there's a breakdown of trust and a reluctance to make redistributions via the Welfare State.*

**DM:**

I think there is some evidence for that. It's not that the Welfare State as a whole is shrinking: as a proportion of GDP it tends to remain constant over time even possibly grow a bit. But a lot of that I think is for example in the form of increased expenditure on health, which is often aimed at people very late in life. And the actual of redistributive element, the idea of lessening the inequalities that derive from earnings in the market through redistribution, that I think is both attenuated in practice, but also, I think, there's evidence that people are less committed to it in principle. I mean, there's some interesting data which shows for example that young

people are much less likely than older people to think that it's job of government to reduce inequalities and income. So there seems to be a weakening of that commitment to greater material equality on the part of young people.

**NW:**

*There's obviously a lot been going on since the Second World War, so couldn't that have been caused by something other than multiculturalism?*

**DM:**

Yes, certainly. I mean it's going to be a complicated picture isn't it? Changes in the economy, globalisation, all of these factors are going to be part of the story. But I think a sense that the society's becoming more diverse or divided, there's less of a feeling of solidarity within in, it's going to be part of the picture here. So if we're going to, as we are, to live in a society that is multicultural and we want it to be successful, now I think we have to begin thinking about how we counteract some of these effects of multiculturalism itself.

**NW:**

*It seems to me there are different sorts of groups within a multicultural society: some cultural groups exist because they've existed in a particular geographical location for many centuries, others are immigrant groups who quite quickly form a group in a particular place. Now, are they all treated the same in this argument?*

**DM:**

There are important differences here. I mean we've got to look at it from the point of view of the sources of solidarity. With the case of national minority groups there has been a feeling of togetherness and solidarity that transcends the differences between them. I think this is less the case with immigrant minority groups, though, of course, these things are not set in stone. I suppose that one possible effect of the devolution arrangements, increasing sense of separateness by national minorities, might be that in future the forms of redistribution that have so far occurred across these boundaries will become problematic too. I think there's some evidence, for example, in a case like Belgium where the cleavage between the national groups is getting quite deep, that it's accompanied by increasing reluctance to redistribute across that boundary. I think it hasn't happened here yet, but one does wonder a bit about whether for example these very different policy decisions that Scots are taking may at some point make people in England, for example, begin to wonder about whether they should redistributing in favour of Scotland to the extent that they have been.

**NW:**

*Underneath all this is this question about the source of solidarity: what it is that makes us feel part of a common group, even accepting differences within that group. Now, from what you've been saying there seem to be facts about human psychology which it make it very difficult for multiculturalism to work in terms of redistribution. Is that just something we have to stick with or is there some way out here?*

**DM:**

We have to work to some extent with the facts of human psychology, though I think it's also important that when it's a matter of identity there's a lot of scope for change and development. And what's clearly key is that a multicultural society must also be able to develop an inclusive identity. Now that is not an easy thing to do partly because the strongest identities tend to also be the ones that have the thickest cultural content to them, and this can often be therefore exclusive for cultural minorities. What we're currently wrestling with, I think, is how to develop inclusive forms of identity that can accommodate human psychology without making these identities so thin that they don't actually create the kind of solidarity that we're looking for.

**NW:**

*You mentioned a 'thick' cultural identity, what does that mean?*

**DM:**

Well I suppose it means something that's laden with a lot of cultural references that probably actually can only come to you as a result of having lived in a society for a long time, possibly

even being descended from people who've already lived there for generations. So it would be things particularly like religious identification, also reference points in popular culture or high culture that might not be shared by people who've only moved to the society more recently. That's what I mean by I think a thick cultural identity.

A thin identity would be made up more of elements like certain kinds of principles for example, liberal principles, principles of fairness and equality. Language also can be seen as a relatively thin form of identification given that people are able to learn new languages and therefore can adapt in that way without having deep roots in the society. So these are the kinds of things that together can make up a thinner identity that's going to be possible in a multicultural society.

**NW:**

*And does most of the activity that you're talking about occur in education? I can't really imagine how else you could create a situation where people can appreciate difference but also feel some sense of solidarity with those people who are different.*

**DM:**

I think probably education is the place where this is most directly relevant. One shouldn't also ignore the fact that just by being in the society, by being exposed, for example, to the media and so on, a lot of identity building goes on almost unnoticed. I think it's important, for example, that institutions like the BBC which are actually quite important transmitters of certain kinds of identity, should continue to play that sort of role. The interest for example in national histories and in tracing ancestors and so on, I think this is all part of the process of building a kind of identity that can be more open to groups in a multicultural society.

**NW:**

*Does that mean that what you're arguing for is that we develop a thin sense of identity which is sufficient for solidarity, or should we be going for a thick sense of identity?*

**DM:**

We should be going for a somewhat thin sense. If it eventually becomes too thin it may not be sufficiently motivating to create the kind of solidarity that we're thinking about. So, it can't be super thin. So it can't just be very, very abstract liberal beliefs in freedom and equality: it has to be somewhat more; it has to be historically, I think, specific to a country. That's why I think, for example, that some element of history, even perhaps some aspects of culture, should be included. Maybe the key is to think about different ways in which groups can contribute to an identity without becoming identical to each other.

So for example, different versions of national history can be developed and discussed and debated between groups. So there needn't be a single story but there can be common points of reference that all groups can recognise and see as part of their identity.

**NW:**

*You might think that multiculturalism of an isolationist kind is quite effective in undermining the Welfare State, and critics of the Welfare State might be quite glad, surprisingly, to embrace this kind of multiculturalism.*

**DM:**

I can see that certainly as a possibility, obviously it's not one that you see expressed very openly by people on the right who tend to be rather anti-multicultural. But I think the logic of what you say is correct, that if you a society that was incredibly diverse, there were no attempts to integrate people between their groups, then I think the likely effect would be a shrinking back of the state and people would actually just see it as providing very basic forms of law and order and not much else. From a right wing point of view, I suppose, that would be one way to achieve that goal, if that's what you wanted to achieve.

**NW:**

*We've been talking about the sources of solidarity which are ultimately psychological or sociological, or anthropological, I guess. It doesn't follow that because that's the way human*

*beings are that's the way they ought to be. Is there some sense in which we can make ourselves better than our given psychology has made us at the moment?*

**DM:**

Well I think one shouldn't aim for a complete transformation of human psychology. There are certain things that are very deep rooted: for example, notions of reciprocity are very deep-rooted in human beings and one can speculate about whether these may have evolutionary explanations. The idea that you do things for others but in the expectation that they will in turn do them for you, I think that's very deep rooted and it would be a big mistake to try to develop a social system that didn't incorporate that kind of thing. But I think one shouldn't be too constrained by the existing practices that we have because if you look around us, you look at the variety of different societies, different historical periods, you can see that human nature is to some extent flexible, the sort of basic underlying grammar, if you like, is constant. But the actual forms that human life takes are quite variable. So we shouldn't, for example, think that you couldn't have a society which has a lot of solidarity in general but has also quite big cultural divisions between specific groups as well. So I think one shouldn't think that the only possibility would be a kind of completely homogenous society, there would be no evidence to support that conjecture.

**NW:**

*I mean, some people would say that what we ought to do is start with common humanity and just say that we are all human beings. Why can't we have a kind of cosmopolitan approach here?*

**DM:**

I'm not a fan of cosmopolitanism. I think humans also need a kind of narrative which allows them to see their particular lives in the context of something wider. And I'm not really convinced that the world or the cosmos is that kind of a setting. I think we need something more local and more specific. So the challenge, in a way, of multiculturalism is to show that groups whose own cultural background is different can still be incorporated into that kind of relatively specific, relatively local narrative, and there are plenty of good examples when that has happened. So it's not an insuperable problem. But I think that's the way to think about the challenge and not in terms of completely giving up of our specific historical identities.

**NW:**

*David Miller, thank you very much.*

**DM:**

Thank you very much.