The dangers of thinking with one's stomach [1]

Written by **Whig** [2] | Wednesday 22 February 2012

Perhaps April Fool?s day has come early? In a gift for comedy writers everywhere, Eric Pickles wants us to have a 'big lunch [3]' for community cohesion. More still ? Pickles wants to introduce a ?curry college [4]? to promote integration!

Joking aside, there are some serious issues here. The Secretary of State for Communities - that meaningless Blairite catch-all ? wants the state to promote social integration and has introduced, inevitably, a strategy to do so. Unlike Labour, however, the Conservatives are seeking to promote integrationism rather than multiculturalism. Naturally, this has outraged leftist cultural groups. It is ironic to note that multiculturalism started life in the Netherlands as a response to post-war immigration, encouraged as a solution to labour shortages rather like the German guest worker schemes. Immigrants were to keep their culture as they were ultimately intended to return home.

The argument between multiculturalism and integrationism is a misleading one. Government cannot create or promote cultural cohesion by any mechanism and, more importantly, it is not its duty to do so. This seems to run counter to this government?s own ?Big Society? agenda. State-led attempts to do so invariably result in artificial, bureaucratic initiatives that have little grounding in reality and are a huge waste of taxpayer?s money. Witness the failures of the Blair and Brown governments to create social cohesion; if they had succeeded we would have no need of further initiatives. We don?t need Gordon Brown telling us what our national historical narrative ought to be ? in a free society there will be an infinite number of differing and possibly contradictory ones, this is healthy. Nor do we need Eric Pickles telling us what society should look like and how it should behave.

At worst, state attempts to promote cultural and social homogeneity result in the aggressive nationalism that plagued Europe in the 20th century and beyond ? witness Putin?s Russia or Serbia in the 1990s. Moreover, the state very often promotes social tensions between immigrants and ?indigenous? groups as it creates zero-sum games over welfare and housing [5] and thereby conflict. This is typical of state interventionism: on the one hand it creates a problem, on the other it attempts (and fails) to solve the problem using additional spending and bureaucracy. At the same time it creates a host of client organisations who are dependent on such funding for their existence and will protest bitterly if such funding is withdrawn.

The state should not be attempting to tell people what their culture and heritage ought to be and how they ought to relate to each other; it is best left to trial and error to find out. As David Hume observed in the eighteenth century, the English were much less culturally and socially homogeneous than other European nations. Relative to the French or the Spanish, individuals were freer to expresses themselves via standards of dress and taste and a lacked a centrally dictated sense of belief and national identity:

> *But the English government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such.*

As a result, society was much more coherent, stable and economically productive as interest groups were not set up in positions of exclusive privilege and antagonism.

In the contemporary context, as Mark Pennington and John Meadowcroft show [6], we need to ?rescue social capital from social democracy.? The building of ?social capital? is best left to free interaction and civil society. The tendency of government, as with economic capital, is to consume the existing and distort the process of formation of new social capital.

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