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For millions of people all over the world, Britain is the land of tradition, the Royal Family, Beefeaters, Bobbies on the beat and, above all, white people. In much of middle America, it comes as a shock for them to hear that there any black people in Britain at all. But even if people can get their head around the idea that an afroamerican might be British, the notion that he could be an MP often perplexes them.

An MP? Surely, one can see their eyes say, a British MP must be white. There are many lifetimes of war, conquest, history, literature, culture and myth behind the idea that Britain is a racially pure society. And in the study of history, myth is just as important as reality. But the racial purity of the British has always been a myth.

From the days when the Norman French invaded Anglo-Saxon Britain, the British have been a culturally diverse nation. But because the different nationalities shared a common skin colour, it was possible to ignore the racial diversity, which always existed in the British Isles. And even if one takes race to mean what it is often commonly meant to imply - skin colour- there have been black people in Britain for centuries. The earliest blacks in Britain were probably black Roman centurions that came over hundreds of years before Christ. But even in Elizabethan times, there were numbers of blacks in Britain. So much so that Elizabeth I issued a proclamation complaining about them. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, black people make fleeting appearances in the political and cultural narrative of the British Isles. Black people can be seen as servants in the prints of Hogarth. And in many paintings of the era. In Thackeray's "Vanity Fair", Ms Schwartz, the West Indian heiress is obviously supposed to be of mixed race. She is gently mocked but her colour is not otherwise remarked on.

British schoolchildren are taught about the abolition of slavery. They hear less about the key role that slavery played in the British economy in the eighteenth century. Britain was the center of the triangular traffic whereby British ships took goods to Africa which were exchanged for slaves which the same British ships transported to the Caribbean and North America before returning home. The majority of these slaves worked in the plantations of the Caribbean and North America. But some came to Britain to be personal household servants. Over time, they inter-married with native born Britons. It would be interesting to know how many British people who consider themselves racially pure have an African slave generations back in their family. And, of course, between the wars, black seamen turned ports like Liverpool and Cardiff into multi-racial areas. Yet there was tendency for the black areas of these seaports to be cut off from the rest of the city. It was possible until not so long ago to visit Liverpool for the day and not be aware it had a sizeable black community. Such was the de facto segregation that still existed.

So in the literal sense, multi-racialism is nothing new. Britain has always been a multi-racial society. What is new is the visibility of its racial diversity. And what is newer still is a willingness to accept that all the races can have parity of esteem. For a long time, even when it was acknowledged that there were people of different racial origin within the British Isles, there was an assumption that the white race and culture was, and should, be dominant.

The creed of racial superiority was very much part and parcel of the culture of the empire. The British Empire was built on a theory of racial inferiority. The great Victorian writer and poet, Rudyard Kipling, wrote extensively on the supposed superiority of the British and talked about "lesser breeds without the law". It was the alleged superiority of the non-white races that supposedly legitimized taking over their countries and subordinating them to second class status. So even until quite recently British text books talked about Europeans "discovering " countries like America, Australia and the source of rivers like the Nile. Whereas in fact there were plenty of non-white people who were in America and Australia all along who knew perfectly well where the source of the Nile was. And until recently writers talked about the Europeans bringing civilization to Africa and the Indian sub-continent. As if these countries had not seen highly sophisticated Empires and societies long before the Europeans came. When you read in the old textbooks about the supposedly civilizing mission of the British, one is reminded of the comment of Gandhi. He was asked what he thought about British civilization. He paused for a long time and then said thoughtfully "It would be a good idea". So fixed in the British mind, was the racial inferiority of the people whose lands they took over that for a long time archaeologists believed that the sculpture and carvings of the city of Benin in Nigeria could not have been done by black people. And similarly that the great 'lost' city of Zimbabwe in southern Africa could not have been built by black men. In direct line of descent of that kind of thinking is Prince Phillip's idea that poor quality electrical work must have been done by Indians.

Racial stereotyping echoes through British literature and culture almost to the present day. And for some time, assumptions of racial inferiority coloured mainstream British perception of non-white culture and art. The Notting Hill Street Carnival is the biggest street festival and a miracle of creativity with costumes that take months to sew and wonderful music and dance. But it is only recently that mainstream press has reported it as anything other than a law and order issue.

However, in recent years, people have begun to acknowledge the presence of non-white people in Britain in a positive way. And even to talk about Britain as a multi-racial Society. Although there are some people who would resist this description and pretend Britain's continuing ethnic diversity doesn't exit and insist on Britain being described as a European or white country. But although the phrase multi-racial society is used quite frequently, a genuinely multi-racial society with genuine parity of esteem is quite difficult to achieve. The Caribbean is often cited as a part of the world where you can find multi-racialism in action. The national motto of Jamaica for instance is "Out of Many, One People". However, it is noticeable that even in these supposed bastions of harmonious multi-racialism, tensions have arisen between different races. In Trinidad, for instance, the archetypal multi-racial island in the sun, there is bitter rivalry between the Asian and African-Caribbean community. The issue is equality. Where one ethnic group is demonstrably subordinate to another, it is idle to talk about multi-racialism because in reality one culture is dominant. Furthermore, the political attractions of playing the race card are often irresistible, multi-racialism just doesn't have the same visceral appeal to popular sentiment.

But multi-racialism is a tricky balance to achieve. On the one hand, there has to be a measure of economic equality and genuine parity of esteem. But on the other, it should not mean obliterating differences or pretending differences do not exist. Britain would be the poorer without its different races and their different cultural traditions. But it would also be a mistake to try and iron out these differences in the name of multi-racialism. Of course, a vexed question is of the relative merit of different cultures and cultural traditions. It is very difficult in these cases to distinguish where objective judgement starts and prejudice begins. In European societies, the bias tends to be that European culture and tradition are necessarily superior. But in the words of the American blues songs "It ain't necessarily so."

But with all the difficulties in practice, multi-racialism is still an ideal worth striving for. Because you can look around and see where ethnic tensions and rivalry can lead. The civil wars in Africa get plenty of coverage. One of the original ethnic conflicts was the Ibo insurrection in Biafra in Nigeria. But the fighting in Yugoslavia is just as much an ethnic conflict as any African bush war. And the prospects in Yugoslavia are a nightmare. Serbs, Croats and Muslims are so intermarried and intermixed that Yugoslavia seems destined to shatter into a multiplicity of mini-statelets. All ethically pure in themselves but in almost every other way, unsustainable as modern nation states. So a multi-racial society is not just a rosy and possibly unrealistic ideal. It is vital to understand how a multi-racial society can be made to work if we are going to avoid further turmoil across great swathes of Africa, Asia and Central Europe.

To have a genuinely multi-racial society there needs to be genuine economic equality between the races. It's unbelievable that one can talk about a multi-racial Britain or anywhere else unless there is a measure of economic empowerment for all groups within Society. This means making sure that there is genuine equality of opportunity in education for all races. And that the barriers for black and ethnic minority advancement in business and in the profession are taken down. But economic empowerment for minorities is a necessary precondition but not sufficient to bring about a genuinely multi-racial society. Because nationhood and society is as much about ideas as anything else, the role of culture, literature, philosophy and the arts in building a multi-racial society is key. The first step is that the influence of black and ethnic minorities in the culture of a country like Britain is properly acknowledged.

There is no doubt the history of twentieth century popular music is very much the history of African music as it has been mediated through North America. There is almost no sort of pop music that doesn't owe something to black American influence. And in art, the influence of African art has long been acknowledged on modern abstract painters like Picasso. More recently, the literary establishment has been willing to acknowledge the contribution of black and ethnic minority writers like Ben Okri, Alice Walker, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Arundathi Roy, Salman Rushdie and Nobel prize winning Toni Morrison. And at the level of popular culture, different races have enriched British life greatly.

There is no doubt that the presence of ethnic minorities in Britain and much more foreign travel have transformed the British diet for the better. Noticeably fish and chips have been overtaken by curry as the most popular British takeaway. For many years, Britons have got used to seeing black athletes like Linford Christie representing them internationally. And much of the famous "Cool Britannia" that mix of music and fashion, which is admired internationally, derives from different ethnic street styles. We are also seeing an unprecedented level of intermarriage between the races. It is noticeably more common to see mixed race couples in Britain than in the U.S., which has had a larger black population for longer. There can be no doubt that as more and more British either have a black person in their family or at least knows someone that has a black person in their family, ideas about the desirability of racial purity will have to be examined by even the most die hard conservative.

So multi-racialism is easy to talk about but hard to achieve. Yet as we have approached the end of a millennium, Britain is a more open, more multi-racial society than ever before. And one where different races and cultural influences are beginning to be positively acknowledged and given equal respect. British society have come some way but there is still further to go. Martin Luther King dreamed of an America where a man's character would be more important than the colour of their skin. The indication of Britain's becoming a genuinely multi-racial society is when the skin colour of a British MP is no more significant than the colour of their eyes.

While preparing the essay the following publications and resources were used:

1. **Diane Abbott, MP.** Multi-racialism in Britain Oxford, 1995.
2. **R. Rees Davies, M.A., D.Phil.** The Matter of Britain and the Matter of England, Oxford, 1996

Internet resources:

1. www.bbc.co.uk/history
2. www.planet-britain.com