

A mega mosque in a suburb that was 90 per cent white 30 years ago and the polite apartheid dividing Britain

- David Goodhart argues that a new patriotism can unite our nation again
- We will have an ethnic minority population of around 25 per cent by 2020
- Goodhart says a confident and inclusive national identity can emerge

By David Goodhart

On Saturday, the leading liberal commentator David Goodhart described the profound effect mass immigration has had on social cohesion. He admitted that, for decades, liberals like him failed to realise its implications. Today, concluding his series, he sets out his vision of how a new Britishness can bind the nation's fractured communities.

Large-scale immigration has created an England that is increasingly full of mysterious and unfamiliar worlds — as I discovered one day sitting in an enormous minareted mosque in a sedate London suburb among thousands of men in Pashtun dress listening to the words of an elderly man.

Mirza Masroor Ahmad is not any old preacher. To a couple of million Muslims of one particular sect, the Ahmadiyans, he is the holiest man on the planet.



New landscape: Merton's mosque, which dominates the skyline of the south London suburb, and can accommodate 10,000 people

The mosque in Merton, which dominates its neighbourhood, replaced an Express Dairies bottling plant which provided a few hundred jobs for local people and lots of milk bottles — an icon of an earlier, more homogenised age.

The symbolism is not lost on the mainly white older residents, who, when I was there researching the effects of mass immigration on British society, did not seem to be embracing diversity with as much enthusiasm as the proponents of multiculturalism think they should.

They are not unusual. Thanks to over-rapid immigration in recent years, Britain is heading for an ethnic minority population of around 25 per cent by the end of this decade.

And in Merton in South-West London, and too many places like it, a polite apartheid reigns: an accommodation rather than an integration. The white population has more or less reluctantly shuffled along the bench and allowed others to sit down.

Since 1980, Merton's minority population has risen from 10 per cent to over 50 per cent today. Its primary schools — which were still majority white as recently as 2003 — are now 64 per cent ethnic minority. The area has become, in the jargon, 'super diverse'.

There is no dominant minority in Merton, which helps to make the changes feel less threatening; but there is not much evidence of a common life being built together either. London is not the happily colour-blind multi-racial city that many people like to imagine.

You can see it in action at weekends in a small park close to Morden station. On a sunny day, the place is usually full but divided along ethnic lines: large groups of Pakistani women picnicking with children, Polish guys drinking beer, young Indian men playing cricket, Africans playing basketball.



Changing: Large-scale and rapid immigration has had an effect on social cohesion, particularly in big British cities

There is quite a large East European group in Merton which tends to keep itself to itself. Several of the more entrepreneurial communities, such as the Indians and Tamils and Iraqi Kurds, create jobs but they invariably go to members of their own community.

Some minorities import historic feuds. Orthodox Muslims in the area are suspicious of the Ahmadiyahs; Tamil youths fight among themselves, as do Somalis; and the historic black (Caribbean and African) versus Asian antipathy is also played out on some streets.

YES, GIVE ASYLUM - BUT NOT FOREVER

There is a strong case for tightening the legal framework for asylum.

According to the UN Refugee Convention, anyone is entitled to asylum if they are being persecuted on grounds of 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'.

These are wide-ranging categories. As Charles Clarke, former Labour Home Secretary, has observed: 'They probably cover hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people.'

But many of the largest groups, such as Somalis, applying to enter Britain and other rich countries as refugees are not facing individual persecution but rather are caught up in regional conflicts, civil wars or natural disasters. They are not the people for whom the Convention was designed.

However, in Britain in recent years, they have often been granted exceptional leave to remain — or what is now called 'humanitarian protection'.

Between 1997 and 2010, about 700,000 asylum seekers arrived in Britain. Less than a third were granted asylum or leave to remain, but three-quarters are believed still to be in the country.

There continue to be serious difficulties in removing this large backlog — because of legal constraints and the reluctance of many countries to take them back.

There is no reason why the leave to remain should be permanent (in theory, in Britain it is reviewed after five years). Civil wars and natural disasters come to an end, and countries need rebuilding.

Rich countries should try to provide shelter from the storm for people badly affected — but then ensure that they return when the storm is over.

Economically, many minority Mertonites are doing pretty well in their enclaves. The Indians and Chinese are doing best of all in school and in jobs, closely tracked by Koreans and Tamils. As in the national picture, the white British are somewhere in the middle.

But not everyone is happy with this situation, whatever the local politicians might claim. To many poorer and older white people, there is a sense of loss.

'We don't like it, but we don't have much choice, do we?' the owner of a hairdressing salon said about competition from a Muslim hair-cutter who had set up shop two doors along.

Poorer working-class whites are doing worst of all in Merton, as in many similar parts of the country. Such people have mainly opted out: they seldom vote, and a lot of the younger people are 'Neets' — not in employment, education or training.

For many of the white people who have remained as the area's personality has changed, the disappearance of familiar mental and physical landmarks has happened too fast — symbolised by that giant Ahmadiya mosque with its capacity for 10,000 worshippers (plus six smaller, mainstream mosques in the borough).

The Ahmadiyahs are model immigrants in many ways. They preach an ecumenical form of Islam and are grateful to be given refuge in this country. They even took out posters on London buses congratulating the Queen on her Diamond Jubilee.

But to many locals, that's not the point. As one man — described as White Heritage Elder Male in the jargon of race relations — told a Merton council focus group: 'We've lost this place to other cultures. It's not English any more.'

Local political leaders will often privately admit to the same concern — though, as in all areas of high minority settlement, they have no choice but to celebrate the new diversity.

And from their vantage point, things do often look more integrated than they really are. For at the gatherings they attend, there will usually be a cross-section of the local minority elites mingling happily together and sharing the same interests and concerns.

(Some cynics note that the places where the deepest common life is being forged between the new and the old tribes of urban England is in the local political class and the drug gangs.)

But what we need to do now is to find a surer way of binding our communities together. One essential tool, I believe, is a national story that everyone can tap into: a story that can underpin a sense of 'emotional citizenship'; a belief that despite many different values and backgrounds, we're also part of the same team.

One of the failings of the separatist multiculturalism that developed in the Seventies and Eighties is that it prevented the emergence of a new sense of Britishness — one that absorbed newcomers while keeping a central place for the traditions of the existing society.

Because no clear national identity was on offer, when new citizens arrived here their own ethnic and religious identities filled the gap, leading to charges that 'They keep themselves to themselves' or 'They don't want to fit in'. Misunderstanding built on misunderstanding, mistrust on mistrust.



Identity: David Goodhart argues that accommodating people of different beliefs does not mean that we have to abandon a sense of national unity

We now need a narrative to inspire and guide us, a new British Dream that encompasses both old and new citizens into this country of ours with its remarkable past.

For historical reasons to do with our imperial past, some parts of the British elite are uncomfortable with the idea of 'nation'.

As a public schoolboy Leftie who was then briefly attracted to Marxism while at university, I considered any expression of attachment to my country as stupid (with the exception of the England cricket and football teams).

Boundaries and borders were for the small-minded and the provincial. They were just so uncool. I now believe this disdain of mine was immature and premature, as well as loftily dismissive of majority opinion.

And a nation state cannot just be a machine for providing individuals with rights, wealth and passports. It needs emotional ballast, too. We need to reinforce the idea of a 'citizen nation' that crosses class and ethnic boundaries.

An unembarrassed and un-chauvinistic attachment to this country — its language, its history, a sense of a common home — has long been the sensible, low-key national feeling of ordinary Britain.

Now, two generations after we stopped being an Empire, the opportunity is here for a benign, confident identity to emerge, which is an aid, not an obstacle, to integrating newcomers.

National feeling is not primarily about institutions but is rooted in everyday life, from sprawling conurbations to small villages; in shared experience and mutual interests; in a certain kind of humour; and in a rich language.

Very few British people think you have to be white to be part of this.

And most minority Britons, especially those born here, do join the 'we', do know something about the history of this country and connect to it, do speak the language as a native, and so on.

They may retain an attachment to other traditions and memories, but there have always been many different, hybrid ways to be English or British.



Immigration problems: British Prime Minister David Cameron and Home Secretary Theresa May, right, visiting the UK Border Agency staff in London

In accommodating people of different backgrounds and beliefs, we do not need to abandon a sense of national history, or our popular democratic 'ownership' of the country we live in. An inclusive and strong national identity is possible.

To develop it, we need a few more stories like the following one. The Labour MP Siobhain McDonagh told me recently of her elderly Irish father sitting in the gallery of the House of Lords shaking his head in pride and disbelief as he watched his other daughter, Margaret, being elevated to the peerage.

He had come to England in the late Forties to work as a labourer, met and married an Irish nurse and they had two daughters.

Both did well. One daughter became an MP, the other became general-secretary of the Labour Party.

And as he watched one of his girls becoming a baroness, he muttered under his breath: 'Only in England ... only in England.'

He was not technically correct — these things happen in other places, too — but they happen here far more than we admit, and it's time that our national story reflected them.

This is not about deference, but gratitude for the best features of an open society. After losing an Empire, perhaps Britain has finally found a role: just being itself.

Adapted from The British Dream by David Goodhart, to be published by Atlantic Books on April 1, 2013 at £20. © David Goodhart. To order a copy for £14 (including p&p), call 0844 472 4157