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Report on the UK round table

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The first national round table in the Ford Foundation funded project 'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The European Common Good' was held in the UK on 21-23 April 2007, under the auspices of the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) and the British independent think tank Demos. The purpose of the round table, as defined in the project's manifesto was to bring together a carefully chosen group of opinion-formers and academics to foster a frank and in-depth 'off the record' exchange of views on the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist within each minority or majority group; in other words, those factors which had led to a weakened common public space.

It is of course very difficult for the person who conceived the entire project, and planned the round table programme to write an 'objective' report on the round table's outcome. I trust that my non-British astigmatism will compensate for my deep involvement in the very shape of the project. I can only hope this will contribute to a more detached reading of the proceedings. I hope the British participants will feel challenged by this summary, much as I was throughout the entire two days of debates. Nevertheless, when reading what follows, please bear in mind this personal *caveat*.

Preliminary remarks on the round table

The British round table included sixteen participants (two more were unable to come at the very last minute), constituting a very diverse group both in terms of their professional activities (academics, writers, journalists, policymakers), as well as their ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. The participants ranged in age from their early 30s to their early 60s and this inter-generational composition allowed for quite different readings of the British situation. To further offer a 'different' European angle on the British case, a Swedish participant was included beyond my own French-based presence.

Finally, one last procedural comment before sum-

marizing the round table debates. The participants, most of whom did not know each other previously, were able to transcend very quickly any formal 'identities' to form a lively and highly convivial group at ease with each other. They fully implemented the Project's call for a frank and in-depth exchange of views. And in an unusual form of thoroughness, they adhered to the round table's programme, tackling head-on its heavy load of critical questions.

The debates

The discussions were characterized by a great deal of openness and very little ideological stiffness, in what many could call a perfect proof of British pragmatism. Many speakers openly claimed that theirs was a partially incoherent, even fuzzy, description of society, something they considered normal given the complexity of the issues at hand. As a result, the group as a whole was able both to deliver searing critiques of British institutions and equally strong criticisms of many civil society players, including the minorities themselves, without ever claiming that the country was in dire straits or submerged by a crisis of the commonweal. Most accepted the vision whereby the UK was quite good at 'muddling through', thus avoiding major crises. Its *ad hoc* handling of social issues, while often criticized, was also considered as a plus in the country's ability to avoid all out identity wars. The only, often repeated, question was whether these debates were really relevant to the proverbial 'man in the street', but there was a rhetorical quality to the question which did not prevent those who asked it from participating fully in such a potentially elitist debate.

Such shared global feelings did not imply that there were no major differences of opinion and even profound political disagreements within the group. Clear political, cultural and even generational differences emerged on every single major issue addressed during the round table. Yet the participants could not be lined up systematically in one coherent camp against another. Their positions changed in function of the issues at hand and were thus, taken individually, far richer and more nuanced than, one assumes, would have been the case in other far more ideologically divided national contexts. Indeed, every single participant considered Britain to

be far better off than any other European country on all issues linked to the *res publica*. This effectively meant that the 'European factor', which will undoubtedly play an important positive or negative role in the other national round tables, was most notably absent from the British one. It was a non-issue, and as such must be underlined.

I shall summarize the debates by examining how the group chose to dwell on a series of key concepts: the 'Britishness' and integration debate; the government, civil society and the state debate; issues of national security; multiculturalism; identity politics; the media; citizenship and secularism; ethnic communities and faith communities and their representatives; and finally, the *res publica* itself.

The 'Britishness' and integration debate

The majority of the participants considered this to be a false and unhealthy debate since it tried to define who was 'British' by cultural exclusion. Others claimed that it was a bad debate because it sought to impose on different groups 'values' that were most closely linked to the mindset of the governing 'white middle classes.' This reference to the 'white middle classes' was to occur repeatedly throughout all the round table sessions and was used both by the white and black participants, but not, interestingly, by the Jews, Muslims or Sikhs present...as though the white/black fault line based on past slavery and anti-black racism had its own unique, ongoing, powerful tension irrespective of Britain's larger multicultural debates.

This debate was also intertwined with the debate over fair distribution of national resources and social justice. When one participant emphasized the fact that there was an increasingly alienated and poor white underclass, the 'ethnic English', who had no recognized identity and who chafed at what they considered to be government favouritism toward other ethnic minorities, others were irritated by this reference, even though he had made it quite clear that there was an inexorable difference between voluntary and ascribed identities. Similarly, the idea that there was significant racism vis-à-vis the new eastern European immigrants was not picked up in the debate as though racism with a

capital 'R' was above all the historical appendage of the blacks.

It was thus quite interesting to observe that those who favoured the 'Britishness' debate were the Muslims and the Sikh in the round table, who never invoked racial categories, and who felt they blurred as much as they clarified precisely because of the presence of poor marginalized whites. These supporters of 'Britishness' argued that it was important to refer to common national values that were also universal, whereas the opponents of the idea had specifically tried to show that 'Britishness' could only convey a national bias, because there could only be a tension between 'Ethnos' and 'Demos'.

A similar divide characterized the debate over 'integration', with once again the blacks, and some whites present considering the term insulting and irrelevant to their lives, since they did not wish to be 'integrated' as if they had been defective or amputated parts of British society. The other participants, irrespective of their Jewish, Muslim, or Sikh identities, were more nuanced in their acceptance of the term, which they considered to be more neutral and hence better than the previous political references to 'tolerance' and 'assimilation.' One participant stressed that 'integration' applied to all citizens alike, since the goal was to create an 'integrated' and therefore functioning society, in which everyone had to chip in, not just minorities trying to imitate majorities. Most felt that there was a need for a word to describe the desire to 'belong' in the wider society, and that, for the time being, 'integration' would have to do, for lack of any better alternative.

Government, civil society and the state

From the very first session on 'The condition of Britain today' until the end of the round table, many of the participants spoke of 'the government' in a very detached manner. It came as somewhat of a surprise to my 'continental' European eyes that, with respect to this topic, party politics and parliamentary decisions were never mentioned. No names of political leaders were pronounced and classical notions such as 'Left' and 'Right' were only rarely used. The 'government' thus came

through as an abstract impersonal entity whose presence seemed to matter only when it manifested itself, often incoherently, at the local level. This clearly shared attitude could not simply be attributed to the advantages of 'ad hoc-ing' but carried with it an undercurrent of implicit, if not explicit, political alienation from the British state system, which was, perhaps, what the non-British participants (the Swedish intellectual and myself) noted most.

Conversely, civil society was referred to far more often in a positive manner, as an ideal to be pursued, and as the level where conflicts could be solved, and where activists had to take responsibility rather than assuming 'government' was in charge of the 'common good'. This stance was shared by all the participants who were affiliated with the policy making and foundation sector. But once again, 'civil society' in this context was very loosely defined, as a sum of individual and collective community initiatives, and without its conceptual alter ego (at least as perceived in continental Europe), i.e., the State. The State was even more absent from the debates than 'government'. It simply did not exist as a category, even though in pure political terms, it had the responsibility for ensuring the equality of all of its citizens and the fair distribution of national resources and justice. The round table as a whole was quite 'British' in somehow not dwelling on the complex equilibrium of a constitutional monarchy without a constitution.

Significantly, when the Swedish participant commented that the space of civil society was created by eroding the space of the state, community groups, and the market (by which he meant private economic forces), he was not understood by the British participants, who did not see the market as in any way a hostile force with respect to community life or a future civil society, but rather as one of its most important underpinnings.

Some of the younger participants, however, did seem to plead for a stronger state that would take on its classical responsibilities. One even mentioned the need for a Bill of Rights. A specialist of citizenship stressed the fact that Britain historically confused the reference to 'civic' with the reference to 'civil', so that there could be no clear hierarchies

of belonging, in a country deprived of federalism and where devolution simply added yet another layer of identity without streamlining any. Yet, devolution, even when mentioned, was not considered an important factor in the *res publica* debates.

On the whole, this entire topic was treated in ways that proved the degree to which historical and political traditions live on powerfully. The debate on government, civil society and the state made a non-Briton, whether European or American, feel that he or she had entered a very different land. Such burning questions lost their edge in the context of the British round table and seemed to provoke very little passion. The whole issue seemed best relegated to the British art of 'ad hoc-ery.'

Issues of national security

In what could only be striking for a non-British observer, 9/11 was briefly mentioned as the given that had changed many debates on British identity, but the home-grown London suicide bombings of 7 July 2005 were barely evoked. They were treated as a 'local' fallout of 9/11 and not as the 'wake up call' on British multiculturalism that most foreign analysts, myself included, had instead chosen to emphasize. Two younger participants did refer to the terrorist attacks as part of an ongoing danger to British society. The others, at least from my outsider's perspective, seemed to skirt the issue for a mixture of reasons. For those who could be considered as older multiculturalists, there was a feeling that to dwell on 7/7 could only encourage Islamophobia and the anti-immigrant positions of British conservatives, when it was instead their responsibility to defuse such 'provocations'. One also had the impression that for the other minority groups, 7/7 was a way of paying too much attention to the Muslims to the detriment of other groups, be they blacks or poor whites. There were also those who sought to relativize the issue by pointing to past terrorism on British soil, whether Irish or anarchist. Either way, it seemed as though the threat of terrorism was mainly perceived in function of the enemies who used it rather than as a very real danger that required any rethinking of national 'belonging', or a collective national response in terms of shared democratic values.

Speaking again as an outsider, I had the impression that the reference to '7/7' was a difficult one to handle for the group as a whole: perhaps because it was a pain best left to heal in silence, or because the 'Britishness' debate that followed the bombings had somehow distorted the ability to evoke in a politically non-controversial manner any kind of national 'cohesion'. Only one participant referred to the ongoing danger of Muslim terrorism, and to the fact that there was an 'enemy' within, but his Cassandra-like pronouncement did not generate an ongoing debate.

What caused concern for most of the participants was Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq, and the possible repercussions it had on its Muslim communities. Here also, however, some younger voices stressed that problems of Muslim adaptation to British and Western ideals of democracy, and Muslim extremism on British soil should not be excused away through the war, but squarely confronted, since these extremes well pre-dated both the war in Iraq and 9/11. But the war was also subsumed under the category of the many failures of a distant 'government' without any expressed feeling that the imminent stepping down of Tony Blair (never mentioned) might change the British political landscape.

Multiculturalism

Even without the 7/7 reference, multiculturalism was clearly the topic that provoked the greatest passion in this quite moderate round table. I would be tempted to say that this was the topic where generational differences were the most visible. The post-war generation was the one which defended multiculturalism most strongly as a philosophical and political ideal. It was old enough to remember when multiculturalism had been the fruit of deliberate government policy, as a way of allowing different communities to live in harmony before they moved on to a greater national unity.

For those who were younger and moving into positions of power, multiculturalism was no longer an ideal but a very workable 'ad hoc' tool from which they benefited and which they considered to be a good glue for a disparate country, especially for blacks. It was among the youngest that the appeal

of multiculturalism seemed to be waning. One participant went so far as to refer to it as something so ever present and bland that talking about it was like talking 'about the weather'. Another participant felt that the time had come to think more in terms of civil society, with its many cross-cultural organizations, rather than in terms of a multicultural society with clearly defined identity communities. Yet another stressed that multiculturalism by now had only perverse consequences, since it empowered well established community leaders to keep their communities in a static mould to ensure their own personal power.

These younger critics felt that 'the government' played with multiculturalism as a convenient way of finding single interlocutors rather than allowing independent and critical voices to emerge with their more varied and *res publica* demands. The result was that people were 'boxed' into hermetic categories and entire groups such as Muslim women, according to one participant, were caught between the government's desire to promote equality and its equally strong desire to preserve different cultural identities, thus sacrificing women's rights to universal principles and multiple loyalties in the process. Another participant added that such identity politics were increasingly unable to cope with mixed race populations.

What emerged from this round table were the profoundly inevitable transformations linked to the passing of time. The multicultural ideal of a first (white) generation of reformers became the everyday reality of the second generation (where blacks mainly benefited). and the old dysfunctional static system of the third generation (with its problems for Muslim or Sikh identities), which considered that multiculturalism ultimately treated ethnic minorities in a patronizing manner, and caused as many problems as it 'solved', since it had become the entrenched political norm, one that had to be fought to instigate major change.

Some felt that multiculturalism should be praised as a 'living experience' and condemned as state policy. Some stressed that it was the 'ism' in the word that should be eliminated, leaving an adjective 'multicultural' as a more neutral defining term. Yet others went so far as to stress that the very idea of

multiculturalism should be abandoned since it was hurting the ethnic minorities that were supposed to benefit from it, in what one participant called the 'soft racism of lowered expectations.'

Identity politics

There was just as much debate concerning the lived experience of 'identity politics.' The discussion pitched, once again, those who found identity politics to be useful and pragmatic against the newer voices who chose to stress the new dangers lurking behind such identity politics. Even though many felt that Britain could muddle through toward new solutions, others stressed that the time had come for a cleaner break with the past. It did not matter how positive the original identity politics had been; one now had to deal with the practical consequences of evolving concepts, especially their increasingly perverse effects. The current danger was that identity politics was 'essentializing' both the members of given identity groups as well as those on the outside.

More than one participant spoke about the 'dark side' of identity politics, foremost among which was the unacknowledged inherent racism of many ethnic minorities, be it black and Muslim antisemitism, black and Jewish Islamophobia, or even anti-white racism. They stressed that multiculturalism was increasingly trapping people in sterile boxes, preventing the birth of more complex multiple identities and even stultifying national debates. This was particularly true in the realm of competition for social and state resources. Jews and Hindi were envied by both blacks and Muslims, and many whites felt left out or discriminated against, particularly in the realm of housing. The result was that each group sought 'victim status' to maximize its collective bargaining for privileges. And the failing or absent state was not able to cut its way through this imbroglio. Above all it was unable to take 'sub-narratives' into account.

Some participants lashed out against the entrenched power of established communities, arguing that institutional representations should transform themselves into 'lobbies' and stop pretending that they were truly representative bodies. Unfortunately there was an unholy alliance between

such bodies and 'the government', since both considered alternative voices either as a distraction against group 'unity' or as a hindrance in coherent state-endorsed multicultural policy. Some of these alternative voices, coming from Jewish, Muslim and Sikh identities, were present in the round table and all stressed the need for the state to stop legitimizing identity 'black boxes.'

It was in this context that the issue of problematic ethnic minority positions arose most visibly, with one reference in particular, to the Muslim Council of Britain and its hard line stances, for instance choosing not to attend Holocaust Remembrance Day activities. The consensus on this front was that one had to engage with the more radical elements to slowly bring them into the fold. It remained unclear, however, whether one did so as 'one brother within the community toward another brother' or by referring to external national or universal principles. The assumption on the issue of the MCB was that if the state intervened too dramatically by cutting the Council's funds, the MCB, which was increasingly turning to UK funding sources, could always go back to getting money outside of the UK—a far more dangerous move. Another Muslim voice stressed instead that one had to openly combat the radical fringe whose ideas and values were totally incompatible with democratic and multicultural ideals.

What was significant from an outsider's perspective was the fact that the debate did not become a general one, but remained confined to those who were ethnically or religiously concerned by the issue.

Most participants seemed to think that identity politics would gradually dissolve into new forms of belonging at the very local and at a more regional level. They all stressed ethnic minorities had no trouble claiming that they were 'black Welsh' or 'Scottish Muslim', with some slowly accepting the notion of being 'British', but no one seemed willing to accept the idea of being hyphenated 'English.' The other identities were deemed compatible with ethnic belonging since they all shared a similar cultural and ethnic opposition to powerful 'England'. Many participants stressed that such a shift from local to national identity away from purely ethnic politics had already happened during past immi-

grant waves, be they Irish or Jewish, and that the same would occur with the new immigrants.

The media

Relatively little time was spent on this crucial issue, except to debate whether there should be a vibrant ethnic minority media. Those who argued on its behalf felt that it was the proper vehicle with which to debate identity issues and to break official representative monopolies. They saw such organs as important stations on the way to national debates. Others instead felt it was a political 'distraction' that prevented groups from truly entering mainstream debates. Reference to the powerful role Jewish media played in showing community dissent and in relaying Jewish concerns into the wider media did not provoke much comment.

The younger advocates of multiple identities and the breaking of boxes felt that the 'left-wing media' (one of the rare moments when the notion of 'left' was invoked) were responsible for the hiding of the 'dark side' of identity politics, because they were battling the conservative camp. Some went so far as saying that the left-wing media were condescending and did not want to disturb their 'patronizing' use of ethnic minorities, whose real problems they often ignored.

As with all things, internet and blogs were referred to as both liberating and dangerous communications vehicles, but more emphasis was put on their potential to dissolve identity boxes and allow new voices to come forth in more committed civil society debates. Minority media ties with the market were seen as a plus, particularly by eliminating the need for an increasingly paralyzing government support.

Citizenship and secularism

The solution to the identity politics quagmire, according to one participant, was to stress a relatively new concept in the British debate, that of 'citizenship', in a country where people were traditionally defined as 'subjects' of the Crown. Not all agreed that this semantic change and its extension in citizenship education could produce much in and by itself. Some argued that citizenship still had an 'Athenian sound' to it, with its effective omission

of anyone who was not a white man. Citizenship education was then defended as being for all, not just immigrants, and that it set the bases for a new integrative society. Others felt that this ambitious education programme was perhaps too 'elitist' in formulation and that it could only fall foul of community organizations and their faith schools. A lively debate ensued on whether the problem with faith schools was the fact that they were linked to a given faith, or whether the problem resided instead in the fact that many of them were 'mono-cultural', with children of only one social stratum in attendance. But this, of course, presupposed that faith schools be open to far wider enrolment than just their own self-defined religious group, something that, from an outsider's perspective, seemed less clear with respect to Jewish and Muslim schools, with only Christian schools being truly open.

Secularism and the issue of faith schools were addressed all too briefly, with the religious voices present making a case for religion being included in the wider secular space, and with others arguing that it should be kept out. The religious voices argued for 'less religion, and more of the right type of religion', citing that often it was the lay voices which were politically radical, not the truly religious ones which tended to be moderate. One lay voice stressed that for many identity groups, to be secular was equated as being without morality or values. Another voice excoriated the liberal elites for being blinded by their hatred of religion into failing to understand its importance in a new age. Others chose to stress its pernicious effects in the public sphere. One participant summed up the tensions most cogently by saying that the public sphere should not be 'identity-blind' nor 'identity-driven', but 'identity-aware'.

One had the impression that, as with citizenship, secularism was a new 'animal' in the British political zoo, and that battle lines, as well as convincing arguments on both sides, were still in formation (compared to the far more developed debate in France). Fuzziness seemed to prevail, with remarkably little said about the fact that the UK still possessed an established religion.

Clearly this remained a field with much left to explore.

The *res publica*

Despite some initial fears among the round table organizers that the British participants would not feel at ease with the concept of the *res publica*, all participants seemed to feel at home with the concept and assumed it to mean something more than just 'living together'. One participant was clear in defining it as 'an idea of the common good based on a common space, defined by certain values and principles that is inclusive of everyone irrespective of their cultural, religious, ethnic or other identities.' Those who felt that there was a specific Muslim fundamentalist danger were willing to specify the nature of the common values as a cross between 'Britishness' and universal values. Another participant suggested a definition of the *res publica* as the equivalent of a family surname which did not mean that much by itself until it was given full meaning and individual identity by the person's first name.

There was agreement that this 'common space' had to be built, and that it was an ideal that could only exist in the future. There was no 'rebuilding' possible since it had not existed in the past. The need for such a space was deemed to be increasingly acute because identity considerations had reached their limits. One participant stressed that they had led to the following impasse, that identity was now perceived as the only qualifier to competence: a white person was not deemed capable of 'representing' the interests or feelings of a non-white person, with dangerous consequences for the very idea of democratic representation.

Another participant felt that the best way of forging such a *res publica* spirit lay in educating all groups to the sufferings of the other groups, so that each could understand their problems and work together towards common goals. Many concurred in the belief that change was indeed being inaugurated but that it would take time. The first step lay in stopping the idea that 'victimhood' was a powerful motor for social and political clout. Another participant made a powerful argument for the return to the notion of 'universal human rights' as a common goal that could counter identity politics, and transcend the old Church/Enlightenment divide.

On the whole, with the exception of the participant who stressed the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism for all of society, the rest of the group felt that time was on their side, and that one could be moderately optimistic about the future, with one participant even claiming that there were blacks who felt perfectly comfortable with the idea of calling themselves 'black English'.

The two-day round table ended just when the participants had begun to dig more deeply into their respective differences. They acknowledged that there were divisions which were worth exploring even within the progressive moderate camp, and that there was no conservative 'foe' on the other side. At the very end of the round table, one participant even felt that there were some Tory recommendations that made more sense than Labour ones for his identity group, finally breaking the silence over party associations. The political words were beginning to come out....just as the round table ended, making calls for further meetings, with wider identity groups and representatives from different political families even more pertinent.

Beyond the round table

I came away from the round table with the feeling that the moment was truly ripe in the UK for further reflection on the *res publica*. Without necessarily using this term, all the concerns of each participant pointed in its direction, since everyone seemed to be sketching an alternative space to the multicultural idea. The round table thus marked a beginning of a reflection that corresponded to a changing *Zeitgeist*. The *res publica* ideal seemed able to federate concerns linked to social cohesion, transcending identities, the need to avoid 'essentialization' of identities, overcoming old political cleavages, opening up to the 'other side', moving from consumers to citizens and a general clearing of the air in an often too silently polite British context.

More importantly, the participants all agreed that they had begun a useful process of re-examining most of the conventional words of political dialogue, and that this reflection should be pursued, particularly with respect to the term 'ethnic'. There was a shared feeling that many important issues

(for instance secularism, citizenship, alternative voices, or the role of religion in public life) had been touched upon too briefly and that further meetings should be devoted to a deeper investigation of these terms and issues. The confusion on these issues, which everyone seemed to openly admit, was deemed to be the right beginning for these future discussions. One participant suggested that a lexicon be slowly built up from these discussions, to which another immediately replied that mapping the current 'lexiconfusion' would be the most efficient way of carrying further the debate.

The 'Where to next?' issue is currently being discussed. Promising suggestions include:

- The setting up of further round tables, perhaps with a clearer intellectual/policymaking distinction.
- The flagging of debates and conferences with the '*res publica*' imprint in already existing JPR and Demos calendars, to spread the initiative.
- The spreading of the concept in blogs, editorials, and in future activities, which are in the process of being defined.
- The creation of a *res publica* network among the participants, a network expanded to include those who could not attend the original round table and also new voices. This network can be pragmatically built bottom-up, with ever growing use of the *res publica* term.
- The possible creation of *res publica* debates bringing together different student organizations in a few universities where multiculturalism is prevalent, to begin to embed the issues in a living as opposed to intellectual context.

The British round table thus marked a most promising beginning for the entire pan-European Project.

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The programme for this round table is available online at:

http://www.jpr.org.uk/common-good-in-europe/downloads/round_table_uk_programme.pdf