

Tower Hamlets and the Dangers of Communal Politics

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Last week, the accountancy firm PwC, in its audit of Tower Hamlets Council and its Mayor, Lutfur Rahman, catalogued very serious failings. The case sheds light on a troubling phenomenon: communal politics. We are well aware of the divisive, sectarian politics of Northern Ireland where voting on the basis of religious identity is the accepted norm and no mainstream party wishes to see it replicated in mainland Britain. However, with the embedding in of multiculturalism and its variant multifaithism, communal, sectarian politics are also becoming prevalent in many towns and cities with significant religious-ethnic minority communities. In other words, many candidates now seek votes from those of, and people vote on the basis of, their religion, ethnicity, and country of origin, rather than on political ideology.

This is precisely what has come to pass in Tower Hamlets. The bedrock of Mayor Lutfur Rahman's support comes from his fellow Muslim Bangladeshis who comprise about a third of the population of Tower Hamlets but about two-thirds of those who turned out to vote in the mayoral election were from his own Bangladeshi community, resulting in his victory. In accordance with the communal nature of his politics, all members of his cabinet have also been Bangladeshis. What he proceeded to do is a classic case of what Americans term 'pork barrel politics' where government funds are allocated to certain favoured sections of society in exchange for political support; which means that unfavoured groups lose out. It is a form of political corruption.

Panorama's investigation (confirmed by the PwC audit) showed that council officers had proposed that Bangladeshi and Somali (likewise Sunni Muslim) groups receive £1.5m but its review of 362 grants approved by the mayor found that he increased funding to these groups by nearly two-and-a-half times - to £3.6m. The additional £2.1m came from the council's reserves in combination with a 25 per cent reduction in grants to other organisations; a clear instance of communal, pork barrel politics. It transpires that £3m was granted for 'faith heritage', mostly to mosques. Whereas the previous Labour administration funded religious groups for social services - itself problematic - Mr Rahman makes no such demands. A grave consequence of such communal politics is that non-religious groups that cater for all sections of the borough are starved of funds or crowded out. This is quite contrary to the goal of achieving 'One Tower Hamlets', Mayor Rahman's slogan.

Lutfur Rahman's is indeed an egregious case but the phenomenon of pork barrel politics afflicts the major parties also. The embrace of 'multiculturalism' launched a divisive dynamic, particularly in local communities, whereby many urban councils began to channel funds and resources to various ethnic, national and, more recently, faith communities in return for votes. A by-product of this is the accentuation of tensions between different communities who increasingly identify themselves in terms of faith. Indeed both the present and previous governments have recognised communal strains, and all are agreed on the importance of 'community cohesion' yet they have increasingly allocated funds to various 'faith communities'; a natural corollary given their belief that Britain is a multi-faith society. But, by so doing, they are adding to the problem of 'divisive community politics' highlighted by Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, with respect to Tower Hamlets.

Given the rising proportion of religious-ethnic minorities, and the high levels of segregation along communal lines in neighbourhoods of many towns and cities, the results of many parliamentary seats are now determined by the communal vote. There is, then, naturally the temptation on the part of the major political parties to appeal to groups on the basis of their ethnicity or religion. But this would be a grave mistake as it would pull the country even more down the spiral of communal politics and against the goal of social cohesion.

The 'Trojan Horse' plot in Birmingham - where a number of schools have been targeted for takeover by Islamic extremists - is yet another instance of the problems now arising. But is this really surprising given the governments' stress of Britain being a multifaith society (with the imprimatur of a Minister for Faith and Communities) and its green light to more faith schools, and religious free schools? The very same Eric Pickles who is rightly concerned by divisive community politics in Tower Hamlets supports these deeply divisive and damaging schools and, moreover, continuously rails against secularism, the one principle that can forge together commonalities among disparate groups. As one Bangladeshi ex-Labour councillor Helal Rahman in the Panorama programme correctly stated, rather than uniting, faith divides people; especially so where identities based on faith trump all others.

This is a lesson that Mr Pickles and his government, as well as the opposition, needs to grasp with alacrity and start to work together to undo the harm that has already been done. Otherwise, we can expect communal, pork barrel politics to increasingly become the norm and so more of the likes of Luftur Rahman running councils and unwelcome Trojan Horses appearing in schools and elsewhere.

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