

The 2012 London Olympics proved that great things can be achieved when we work together towards a clear and shared purpose, says **Professor Ted Cantle**. We should seek to sustain this legacy by embracing difference instead of fearing it

The spirit of togetherness

The London Olympics and Paralympics were a huge success and in more ways than we might think. They were built and ready on time, the Olympic Park was a delight, the Gamesmakers spread pure joy, the opening and closing ceremonies were admired the world over and Team GB won more medals than ever before. Even the most cynical among us found that our hearts swelled with pride.

Great things can be achieved when we work together towards a clear and shared purpose. But the Games did even more than this – we forgot that Mo Farah was a migrant of Muslim and Somalian origin, we did not notice that Jess Ennis was of mixed race, or that Lee Pearson was gay and we saw beyond the disability of Ellie Simmonds and David Weir. And the Paralympians made us focus on capability, not disability. The features of commonality at last trumped those of difference.

We also remembered that we are global citizens, cheering on the athletes of all nations in a friendly and appreciative way. We saw the excellence and success that can be achieved when we celebrate our differences and develop our common humanity at the same time. It made us all begin to think differently about ourselves, our friends and our place in a global society.

Two think tanks – the iCoCo Foundation and Tomorrow's Company – brought together 100 or so colleagues at the end of last year and asked them "how do we turn these positive attitudes into positive change"?

The group first decided on some general principles to guide the change, including accepting that protecting what makes us different does not stop us from valuing what makes us the same, as part of a national and global community.

This clearly goes well beyond the preserve of

sport. All public services need to reconfigure services across communities and especially to avoid targeting and separating groups in the name of cultural sensitivity when people need to develop exactly these cultural navigational skills for themselves. Separate provision also completely undermines opportunities to build shared purpose and to develop empathy and understanding of others.

Perhaps the most difficult of service areas is education, where local authorities are rapidly losing their powers. They will need to wield whatever influence they can to persuade schools to make admission policies more inclusive, reach across faith and ethnic divisions and re-draw catchment areas – and even to merge segregated schools together, as Oldham MBC has done.

Education does have a wider role to build intercultural competence on an unprecedented scale and to ensure that younger people in particular have the skills to prosper in our globalised and super-diverse communities.

Public agencies must also avoid seeking representation from every identity, which only serves to prop up the position of the self-appointed leaders – or gatekeepers – of different communities.

Funding for separate community centres, youth, elderly care schemes and the like also only serves to emphasise difference, to keep minorities out of mainstream provision and maintain the pretence of homogenous minority communities. We have to stop rewarding difference – and in the spirit of the Olympics, reward what we have in common.

None of this is to suggest that equalities programmes should be stopped; we still need to tackle disadvantage. But remedial programmes now need to be based on need and to focus on individ-



SHARED PURPOSE: "we forgot that Mo Farah was a migrant of Somalian origin, we did not notice that Jess Ennis was of mixed race, or that Lee Pearson was gay..."

uals and the barriers they face in common with others, rather than on whole communities, treating them as a dependent group.

In fact, public agencies have to promote a sense of unity and a positive vision of our future selves much more vigorously, respecting our differences but valuing our sameness, as it is our sameness that makes us a society.

Most of all, we need a new intercultural narrative, to replace the outmoded notion of multiculturalism which is still stuck in the 1960s and has not responded to the challenges of globalisation and super-diversity.

Multiculturalism maintains a simplistic notion of a community based upon fixed ideas of race, faith and nationality, whereas we now need to develop a new concept of identity, which is dynamic and embraces all aspects of difference and reflects an outward and global perspective – exactly what the Olympics and Paralympics offered us.

The world is in a state of major transition. We are already part of the global community and need to think and act accordingly. We are now firmly in an era of super-diversity and globalisation. The Olympics and Paralympics helped us to recognise this new reality. It created a new spirit of togetherness that transcended ethnicity, faith, nationality and disability. We must sustain this legacy and develop an intercultural future, embracing difference rather than fearing it.

Professor Ted Cantle is chairman of the iCoCo Foundation which promotes interculturalism and community cohesion

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