

Beyond Gatekeeper Community Leaders 'Making Diversity Less Divisive'

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Local authorities and other public agencies have been complicit in disempowering ethnic minority communities by supporting a series of self-appointed community leaders who act as the 'gatekeepers' of their communities. In many cases, this process has been well intentioned and represented an attempt to 'reach out' to communities which they knew little about. However, the negative impact has been profound and at a time when diversity is the new normal, it is time to move on and develop more [intercultural](#) approaches.

Some local authorities were well aware of the way in which the self-appointed community leaders had become self-serving. They were nevertheless happy that they kept control of their communities, being an easy conduit for all communications. It became accepted by community members that if you want to know what is going on, or to get access to the corridors of power, you would have to go through your own community leader. Community members were not encouraged to advocate on their own behalf or build up their own knowledge and skills – they were in a dependent relationship. Of course, better community leaders were willing to adopt more of a 'gateway' style but their status – and frequently their salary – depended upon maintaining their position of power.

Local authorities – and particularly some elected members also found that 'gatekeeper' community leaders can suit their purposes too. They dispense with all of the messy intra-community politics. One dominant view is much easier to manage. And sometimes political deals have been done to deliver the votes from most members of that community. The promise of funding, a new project, or community centre may well be enough. As [Kenan Malik](#) puts it community leaders' have achieved their positions largely because the state needs such people to do business with'. He goes further and, drawing

upon experience in Birmingham, Kenan suggests that ‘the logic of such identity politics (is that) it undermines the possibilities of social change by subordinating political goals to the demands of ethnic identity’ – this is real disempowerment.

It perhaps took the Prevent agenda to make local authorities realize that treating one group (in that case the Muslim communities) as one identity was a mistake. In fact some local authorities protested about the way in which the Government had used Prevent to turn British Muslims into a ‘suspect community’. But, the Government approach prevailed, largely because they had the money to dispense and were apparently happy to treat Muslims as one homogenous group. And the irony of the Prevent agenda was that it reinforced the role of religious leaders and bolstered their credentials rather than contesting extremist views and giving voice to diversity.

And this ‘homogenising’ of minorities still takes place through the funding and support to single identity groups. Again, [Kenan Malik](#) destroys any notion that any one person could possibly represent one or more minority interests, but we also need to bear in mind that most community leaders are usually male and from the older generation. Not only is the diversity within groups in terms of ethnicity and faith often unrecognized, but is further compounded by gender and age.

Further, minority councillors and officers are often typecast because of their heritage and it is assumed that they will represent the views of their community. Unlike majority councilors and officers they are not required to reflect the aspirations of all residents in their area. This typecasting can push them into a gatekeeper role and again minority communities are disempowered.

Single identity politics not only denies the diversity within groups but also helps to create boundaries, reinforcing divisions and heightening differences with others – inevitably a threat to [community cohesion](#).

Local authorities now need to have a much more sophisticated understanding of the composition of their communities. They need to ensure that they hear many voices and get beyond the usual suspects and ensure that they are helping ‘gateway’ community leaders to flourish and undermine the dependency relationship of the

gatekeepers. it also means no longer channeling representation and service provision through single identity or umbrella minority organisations as this has meant that the officers and members responsible for mainstream provision are less likely to adapt their services to that diversity and abrogate responsibility to the specialists.

We need to move on from the multicultural policies which we have been stuck with since the 1960s and develop the concept of [interculturalism](#), with policies which are appropriate for the era of globalization and diversity.

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