

# Toleration and citizenship

In this second article following up Issue 6.1 of the Journal, **Bernard Crick** responds to points made by Clare Ramsaran in 'An intolerable situation?'

In the previous issue of the Journal, Clare Ramsaran, the education officer of Charter88, protested about the frequent use of the concept of 'tolerance' and 'toleration' in citizenship literature, especially in the report of the advisory group (which I chaired) on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools (QCA 1998). It was this report which led to the Government's decision that Citizenship would be part of the national curriculum for secondary schools from September 2002 (giving a sensible time to prepare). She thinks that the term works against equality of respect, being too often condescending and not treating minorities as equals. Charter88, she reminds us, pointed out in evidence to the Advisory Group that:

*The term is seen to imply an acceptance of the power difference between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated, rather than seeing the difference itself as intolerable. This implicit assumption undermines the very encouraging work in the rest of the paper.*

As a patron of Charter88 and a founding member I don't know whether to thank her for the qualified mark. To generalise as she does is confusing. Some differences in power relations are intolerable (oppression, autocracy, authoritarian behaviour even in democracies etc), but others are natural (abilities are not equal, alas – is Charter88 against all assessment, examinations and appointments on merit?) and some differences of power, while social constructs, are necessary and sensible: elected parliaments, assemblies and councils should have more power and authority than small sects or even big national lobbies.

To speak of 'small sects', cautiously without specifying: one may find some tolerable, others not. To justify saying 'intolerable' always means invoking criteria other than power relations alone. I personally, for example, (and I am a humanist, a non-believer), find the views of some fundamentalists (say, both Christian and Muslim) intolerable; but usually that only means that intellectually I neither share nor respect their views, and may criticise them. However, they have to go pretty far before invoking a case to proscribe them by law – except that certain practices (for example, the banning of the teaching of evolution in some American States, or – an easy example – the Taliban's laws on the proper place of women) would indeed be illegal in this country and most others. Put this in terms of human rights, if you wish. There are some actions we should never tolerate even in law, and many that no individual need tolerate either by expressing agreement or by cowardly silence, so long as she or he does not try to suppress them. That is my personal attitude, for instance, to pornography: most of it needs

condemnation or mockery, but this does not necessarily imply legal action.

Political philosophers have taken the view that to say one 'tolerates' something is, indeed, to say that one disapproves of it, but for various reasons (of principle or of prudence) one limits one's reactions. I hope Clare Ramsaran will not think I am trivialising to say that I emphatically do not tolerate any smoking in my home, but in public places my attitude is, indeed has to be, flexible (especially as I like jazz). In any society where there are differences of values and interests, toleration is an essential civilised virtue. The converse of toleration is not intolerance, but is permissiveness: that anything goes, to think it wrong to make moral judgements or to criticise any view that is sincerely held.

What we actually said in the Citizenship Report was this: we quoted with approval from *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage* (Policy Studies Institute, 1997):

*an explicit idea of multi-cultural citizenship needs to be formulated for Britain... A more plural approach to racial disadvantage requires forms of citizenship which are sensitive to ethnic diversity and offer respect both to individuals and to the social groups to which they belong.*

But we then said (the offending paragraph to the puritanism of Charter88's officials):

*Majorities must respect, understand and tolerate minorities and minorities must learn and respect the laws, codes and conventions as much as the majority – not merely because it is useful for them to do so, but because this process helps foster common citizenship. This gives a special importance to citizenship education, for these matters of national identity in a pluralistic society are complex and should never be taken for granted. We all need to learn more about each other.*

We need to respect individuals equally, but heaven forbid we should be admonished to value all practices equally. Racial prejudice is not promoted by obscuring real and valued cultural and ethnic differences. We have to move through toleration to full acceptance, indeed, of the equal worth of all other individuals; but such a stage cannot be skipped by nice, politically correct words. For full acceptance does not mean valuing all views and cultures equally, but simply not discriminating on irrelevant and dehumanising grounds.

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