

Boris Johnson on Immigrants Who “Have Helped to Make Our National Culture”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Among the speeches Boris Johnson has been giving to Conservative Party gatherings as part of his campaign to become the next prime minister, one was of special interest because of what he said, and did not say, about immigrants to Great Britain.

In [remarks](#) at a Conservative Party hustings on July 12, Boris Johnson hailed British Jews as one of the immigrant groups who “adapted and they have made their lives and they have helped to make our national culture.”

“That’s what I want for our country, I want everybody who comes here and makes their lives here to be and to feel British,” he said.

In addition to Jewish immigrants, Johnson singled out two other groups of immigrants – French Huguenots and Bangladeshis – for their contributions to British life and culture. It was a deliberate attempt to include adherents of all three monotheisms, Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Johnson also said that it was important for immigrants to learn English, in order to be fully integrated better into British life. He complained this was not always the case; that some immigrants were not learning English. When he added that he wanted English to be spoken everywhere in the U.K., that last comment infuriated some Scottish and Welsh representatives, though of course he had not had them in mind when he made his remarks; the Welsh and Scots are indigenes, not immigrants. Gaelic and Welsh are native to the British isles, and their speakers also know English.

The SNP's Angus MacNeil, who speaks Gaelic and represents Na h-Eileanan an Iar, said: "The utter arrogance of Boris Johnson is yet again apparent.

"I am delighted that there are places in the current UK where English is not spoken – some of my constituents friends and neighbors would think I was weird if I spoke to them in English rather than Gaelic.

"I'm furious with Boris, displaying the imperialist mindset that deliberately tried to erase the native Celtic languages of these islands in favour of the Germanic import of English.

"This barb is aimed of course at others who have arrived more recently than the English language to these shores but we should celebrate multilingualism and foster the speaking of many languages and ignore the racist dog whistles of Boris."

æPlaid Cymru MP Jonathan Edwards said: "The crass, dog-whistle, anti-immigrant sentiment of Mr Johnson's comments is only matched by its stupidity.

Why is it “anti-immigrant” of Boris Johnson to praise three groups of immigrants – Jews, Bangladeshis, Huguenots? Is anything less than wholesale praise of all immigrants unacceptable?

“It just proves that Wales isn’t even an afterthought to him.

“Today’s latest gaffe, only reaffirms the fact that this leadership contest is one of the best adverts for Welsh independence imaginable.”

Of course, Johnson was being willfully misunderstood by the Scottish and Welsh nationalists. His target was not the indigenous Welsh and Scots, but those immigrant communities where people do not learn English, live in self-created ghettos where outsiders are not welcome, and where integration into the larger society is discouraged. This applies to only one immigrant group: Muslims, who have tended to live together in neighborhoods where non-Muslims, who are made to feel unwelcome, then move out. In these areas, there is no need to learn more than a smattering of English for daily living: the shops, the restaurants, the groceries, the barbers, the clothing stores, the garages, are places where only Urdu or Bengali need be used. Johnson wants to make these immigrants learn English as a way, so he seems to hope, to help them to integrate “fully” into British life.

What Johnson did not ask is whether there might be something else, other than a lack of English, that helps explain the inability, or unwillingness, of Muslim immigrants to integrate. He needs to know that the Qur’an tells Muslims not to take Jews and Christians as friends, “for they are friends only with each other.” (5:51) The Qur’an also tells Muslims that they are the “best of peoples” (3:110) while non-Muslims are the “worst of created beings” (98:6). Surely this inculcated distrust and contempt for Unbelievers is more than enough to explain the unwillingness of Muslims to truly

integrate. What's more, Muslims are told not just avoid taking Jews and Christians as friends, and to despise them, but also to fight them. Still worse, 109 Qur'anic verses tell Muslims to wage violent Jihad against Unbelievers, to "fight" and to "kill" and to "smite at the necks of" and "to strike terror in the hearts of" Unbelievers. Given those unambiguous commands, how could a true Believer in Islam possibly want to integrate into a polity created by the "most vile of created beings," the Unbelievers? Perhaps Johnson does not yet know the Qur'an sufficiently to grasp the significance of these verses. Or perhaps he does know these verses all too well, but remains reluctant to discuss them in public, given the hysterical outcry from Muslims that would result, accusing him of "Islamophobia" and "racism" for daring to bring up Qur'anic verses that, we will be told with a great show of wounded sincerity, "Boris Johnson simply doesn't understand. He doesn't realize that all those verses apply only to enemies of the Muslims from nearly 1,400 years ago, and have nothing to do with attitudes today. He is creating rancor, and spreading racist falsehoods that can only benefit the far-right."

As for the three groups Johnson cited as immigrant success stories, he was not quite accurate about the Jews, whom he described as having arrived after fleeing from Tsarist Russia. British Jews go much farther back than that. There were Jews in Britain who arrived with William the Conqueror and the Norman Conquest in 1066; a few may even have come with the Romans centuries earlier. They were certainly in England in 1290, when they were expelled by Edward I (who promptly took possession of all the property they left behind, which was likely the main motive for the expulsion), and they returned in 1656 when England was governed by Oliver Cromwell.

When Johnson singles out three immigrant groups – Jews, Bangladeshis, Huguenots – for their contributions to British life, they are impliedly similar in the significance of their contributions. But they are not. Let's leave aside, in this

discussion, as far too remote in time, the French Huguenots who fled to England after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Let's see why Johnson is so enthusiastic about Jewish immigrants as a great success story. You can study the impressive list [here](#) of celebrated British Jews. Take a long look. You will find find endless numbers of well-known academics, statesmen, artists, writers, philosophers, musicians, inventors, judges, as well as financiers and businessmen. And even that astonishing list is far from complete, for it does not include figures from before the 19th century.

Now take a look [here](#) at the Bangladeshis who, according to Boris Johnson, have made notable contributions to British life. Four novelists, a few television presenters, several restaurateurs, a kickboxing champion, two people who had minor roles in the Harry Potter movies, a hip-hop artist, the British High Commissioner for Bangladesh, a cook known for his "curry hell," another who founded the British Curry Awards, the first elected mayor of Tower Hamlets (who was later removed for electoral irregularities), the head of the Muslim Council, a businessman who was also a contestant on The Apprentice. Sports stars, especially cricketers. Now go back to the list of British Jews. Compare. Contrast. 'Nuff said.

I wondered why Boris Johnson singled out this particular group of Muslims – those with roots in Bangladesh – for his approbation as model immigrants. Why Bangladeshis? Why not Muslims from elsewhere? I naturally looked at the online list of "notable" British Arabs, and found exactly five names:

Lowkey, musician

Shadia Mansour, musician

Julia Sawalha, actress

Zaha Hadid, architect

Jade Thirlwall, member of Little Mix (half Arab)

That's it. Five names, and only two of them known outside the U.K.: Julia Sawalha (for her roles in BBC TV dramas), and the internationally-known architect, Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid.

Then I looked for notable British Pakistanis. The Wikipedia list was a good deal longer than that for British Arabs. Writers, artists, politicians were all listed, but only two dozen were recognizable. Among them, the half-dozen best known are Hanif Kureishi, the writer, Sajid Javid, the Home Secretary, Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, Razia Iqbal, a presenter for the BBC, M.P. Raz Shah, and Baroness Warsi, a member of the House of Lords. There were a great many unknowns from the lesser media, politicians equally unknown, though they sat in Parliament or were Lord Mayors.

There were four people listed under "Militants" – three of them took part in the 7/7/2005 bombing, the fourth was "sentenced under the Terrorism Act 2000."

Under "Science and Medicine," I found the following seven names of "prominent" British-Pakistanis:

Haroon Ahmed – prominent scientist in the fields of microelectronics and electrical engineering

Qanta Ahmed – physician specializing in sleep disorders. She is also an author and a newspaper columnist

Rozina Ali – microvascular reconstructive plastic surgeon and consultant with a specialist interest in breast reconstruction; television presenter

Nadia Bukhari – pharmacist and youngest female fellow of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society; an honour bestowed to those who have achieved excellence and distinction in their pharmacy

career.

Hasnat Khan – heart and lung surgeon who was romantically involved with Diana, Princess of Wales

Mohammad Naseem – qualified GP and the chairman of the Birmingham Mosque Trust

Asim Shahmalak – hair transplant surgeon and broadcaster, and proponent of such surgery; in 2009, he performed the UK's first eyelash transplant

All but one seem to have become “notables” not because of serious contributions, as researchers or practitioners, to science or medicine, but because they are celebrities of a kind – prominent in the media, connected to the royals, or high up in a local mosque. Though the category is “Science and Medicine,” only one of those listed – Haroon Ahmed – is in physics; all the others are in medicine. Haroon Khan's claim to fame has nothing to do with his professional abilities, but only to the fact that he was the lover of Princess Diana. Mohammad Naseem is a “qualified GP” – in other words, an ordinary General Practitioner, no different from tens of thousands of other GPs; he made the list not for any contributions to medicine, but because he is also “the chairman of the Birmingham Mosque Trusts.” Qanta Ahmed “specializes in sleep disorders,” but has made the list because she is a columnist. Rozina Ali is interested in “breast reconstruction,” but her main claim to fame is as “a television presenter.” Nadia Bukhari is famous for being the youngest female fellow of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society; a pharmacist, not a scientist, and her chief claim to fame is her youth. Asim Shahmalak is a plastic surgeon; his specialty is “hair transplant” and he is a broadcaster. Shahmalak's “hair transplants” and Ali's “breast reconstructions” (presumably, breast enlargements) are not so much medicine as cosmetic surgery, where there is lots of money to be made. No cardiologists, no oncologists, no pathologists, no kidney

specialists, and not a single researcher among them – just hair transplants, breast reconstruction, a young pharmacist, a GP of no apparent distinction, and someone listed not for his contributions to medicine but only for his link to Princess Di.

As for British Pakistanis in the Humanities, the list is similarly unimpressive:

Khizar Humayun Ansari OBE – He is the director of the Centre for Minority Studies at the University of London, known for his work in the field of race and ethnic relations.

So Ansari is not the kind of historian that you and I would recognize as legitimate; he lives, and thrives, in that brand-new self-contained world of race and ethnicity studies, sex and gender and queer studies, and “intersectionality” studies with all of the above – all those things that have made academic life today so often depressing and absurd.

Sara Ahmed – former professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London and academic working at the intersection of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory and postcolonialism.

See comment on Khizar Human Ansari above; it applies with equal force to Sara Ahmed.

Tariq Ali – academic, historian and novelist.

A leftist, a former Trotskyite, still a great supporter of Cuba and of the “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela. No fan of the West, with a special unsurprising dislike of the United States, and of Israel. He’s a great fan of Che Guevara and Edward Said. You get the picture. His wife, unsurprisingly, is the editor of the New Left Review.

Sarah Ansari – professor of history at Royal Holloway, University of London

Judging by her wikipedia entry, she is a serious historian of south Asia, especially of Pakistan.

Yasmin Khan – historian of British India and Associate Professor of History at The University of Oxford.

Again, thankfully, a no-nonsense historian of British India in the 20th century.

Ziauddin Sardar – scholar, writer and cultural critic.

According to Sardar himself, his special fields of interest are “Islam, Islamic Science, Futures, Postmodernism and Transmodernity, identity and multiculturalism and Postnormal Times.” He also spent five years in Saudi Arabia studying the Hajj. In his journalism, he’s a stout defender of the faith.

Shabbir Akhtar – philosopher

Akhtar’s fields of interest are “political Islam, Quranic interpretation, revival of philosophical discourse in Islam, inter-faith dialogue as well as Islamic readings of the New Testament.”

Mona Siddiqui – professor and journalist

Siddiqui is a professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding at the University of Glasgow, as well a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4, The Times, The Scotsman, The Guardian and The Herald. As that regular contributor, her sole subject of interest is – give a wild guess – Islam.

Out of the millions of British Pakistanis, the list of notable contributors to the Humanities consists of eight names. On closer inspection, one realizes that six of the eight listed are people trapped within the mental confines of Islam or of the academic fashions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, queer and, of course, “intersectionality” studies. Only two of them, Sarah Ansari and Yasmin Khan, come across – if you look into their writings – as serious historians of south Asia.

Boris Johnson wanted to offer an example of Muslim immigrants who had done well, who had made notable contributions to British life, who “had helped to make our national culture,” just as Jewish immigrants had managed to do. He may not have realized that by inviting comparison with Jewish immigrants, he had done British Bangladeshis no favors. For whether you look at British Bangladeshis, British Arabs, or British Pakistanis, they suffer by that comparison. And should intrepid journalists, intrigued by Johnson’s remark on Jewish, Huguenot, and Bangladeshi immigrants, do some investigating and comparing of immigrant achievements on their own, the results would likely be too embarrassing or impliedly “islamophobic” to publish.

How have British Bangladeshis “helped to make our [British] national culture”? They have had a permanent effect on cuisine – the curry takeaways on every second street – but what else can be claimed as a Bangladeshi contribution to British national culture? Where are the intellectual and artistic contributions from British Bangladeshis that have changed the “national culture” of Great Britain?

What Boris Johnson might have said, as a general proposition about immigration, is this:

“Immigrants are welcome to enter our country, in reasonable numbers, as long as they are willing and able to integrate into our society. Never before have we in Britain had immigrants arrive, unbidden, in such numbers, mainly from societies outside the West. Obviously there have been problems with such immigrants that cannot be ignored; whistling in the dark is not a policy. If certain groups of immigrants find that they cannot, or do not wish, as a matter of deep belief, to integrate into our society, and would instead like us to change to accommodate them, then it makes sense to reconsider their presence here. Integration requires that immigrants not shut themselves off from the larger society, not preach dislike or hatred of those among whom they have been allowed

to settle and from whom they have received such generous support. It means accepting our system of parliamentary democracy. It means upholding the equality of men and women instead of promoting misogyny. Above all, it means supporting the freedom of speech, that is, the right to express one's views, including the right to criticize or mock deep beliefs, political or religious, without being threatened. In the democracies of the West, these rights must always be non-negotiable."

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