

Straits Times Feb 6, 2011

British PM says multiculturalism has failed



It is Mr Cameron's first major speech on Islamist extremism, an issue of major concern for governments here ever since four home-grown suicide bombers attacked the London transport system in 2005, killing 52 people -- PHOTO: REUTERS

Munich - Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday condemned Britain's long-standing policy of multiculturalism as a failure, saying it undermined community relations.

He defined 'state multiculturalism' as 'the idea that we should respect different cultures within Britain to the point of allowing them – indeed encouraging them - to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream.'

'State multiculturalism is a wrong-headed doctrine that has had disastrous results. It has fostered difference between communities,' the Conservative leader said in a speech to the Munich Security Conference.

"And it has stopped us from strengthening our collective identity. Indeed, it has deliberately weakened it."

It was his first major speech on Islamist extremism, an issue of major concern for British governments since four home-grown suicide bombers attacked the London transport system in 2005, killing 52 people.

'If we are to defeat this threat, I believe it's time to turn the page on the failed policies of the past,' he said.

The speech came as thousands of supporters of a British far-right group rallied in Luton, north of London, which has emerged as a flashpoint between radical Islam and Britain's far-right.

Large numbers of police were deployed to quell possible violence as supporters of the English Defence League, a group which says it is against militant Islam, took to the streets.

Counter-demonstrations were also under way by a group called Unite Against Fascism and sections of the town's large Muslim community, stoking fears of clashes.

The Prime Minister, who took power in May last year, argued that state policies that have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives had resulted in a lack of national identity in Britain which had made some young Muslims turn to extremist ideology.

'Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism,' he said.

'A passively tolerant society says to its citizens: as long as you obey the law, we will leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values.

'A genuinely liberal country does much more. It believes in certain values and actively promotes them.'

Mr Cameron distinguished between Islam the religion and the political ideology of Islamist extremism, saying they 'are not the same thing'.

But Muslim groups in Britain reacted with a mixture of disappointment and outrage.

'It is disappointing,' Mr Faisal Hanjra, assistant secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, told BBC radio, adding that it did not appear to mark a shift in the approach to tackling terrorism.

'Again it just seems the Muslim community is very much in the spotlight, being treated as part of the problem as opposed to part of the solution.'

Mr Mohammed Shafiq, chief executive of British Muslim welfare group the Ramadhan Foundation, added: 'Singling out Muslims as he has done feeds the hysteria and paranoia about Islam and Muslims.'

Source: http://www.straitstimes.com/News/World/Story/STISStory_631846.htm