

Opinion **Rishi Sunak**

## We must not be complacent about Britain's multicultural democracy

In an increasingly ethno-nationalist world, a diverse government is something to celebrate

**SUNNY HUNDAL**



Rishi Sunak, the first non-white UK prime minister, speaks to a hospital patient in Croydon © Leon Neal/Pool/Reuters

**Sunny Hundal** OCTOBER 29 2022

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*The author is a TV presenter and writer*

With typical understatement, Britain's first non-white and Hindu prime minister has arrived to little fanfare. Most Conservatives welcomed him but said his background was irrelevant. Many on the left cautiously celebrated the broken glass ceiling, but said he was too rich to be representative.

However, there is an important global context missing from this debate. Rishi Sunak has been tasked with leading the country, despite his brown skin and Hindu beliefs, because Britain is increasingly comfortable with being a multicultural democracy. We are becoming a nation where different races, faiths and gender identities are embraced. We still argue over our differences and there are many biases to be tackled, but our diversity is increasingly, and rightly, regarded as a strength.

Some on the left see this as unremarkable, but it really isn't. Most of our ideological brethren across Europe and east Asia pay lip-service to diversity but resist it fiercely in practice. Worse, about 70 per cent of people worldwide live under dictatorships. Multicultural democracies are a minority within a minority.

Most of the world is, in fact, rejecting these ideals. They see us arguing over our differences and are repelled. They think social diversity leads to political paralysis and decay. Moreover, they resent us for pushing our values on them.

One of the leaders of this movement is Russian president Vladimir Putin, who has been open about his feelings for years. "In many [western] countries today, moral and ethical norms are being reconsidered; national traditions, differences in nation and culture are being erased," he [told a journalist](#) a few years ago, adding that more people are coming around to Russia's "defence of traditional values".

When passing Russia's anti-gay law a few years ago, [he said](#) the country's "traditional family values" were the foundation of its greatness and a bulwark against "so-called tolerance — genderless and infertile".

Putin's crusade against social liberalism has earned him followers the world over. "Time to wake up from blind faith in the western system," said a 2020 commentary in the state-run China Education News. "Vicious partisan fighting has worsened in certain western countries, social fissures have deepened, and a severe social crisis is brewing." Another prominent US conservative asked: [has Russia become the world's new moral leader?](#)

Modern authoritarians believe diversity leads to conflict and decay. They want nations that put their own tribes first. For Putin this means white heterosexual Russians, for the Chinese Communist party it means protecting and enforcing Han culture and language. For Muslim-majority countries it means putting Muslims first, while for India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party it means putting Hindus first.

Multicultural democracies are a unique social experiment and it is in our interest to make them work. At some point, Americans will have to end the vicious spiral of polarisation in their country. Canada and Britain have so far avoided that fate but we can't assume our project will succeed or that the presence of one minority leader represents a broader truth about society.

It's important we accept that multiculturalism isn't easy. Maintaining social cohesion is hard work and easily derailed. Our social media-driven environment — which rewards exaggerating differences and dunking on small dissimilarities — makes it even more difficult.

There is no reason why multicultural democracies should be the norm. But this is the world I want to live in and fight for. So yes, Sunak's premiership is hugely symbolic in a global context. One day, we may look back and see it as the sign of a nation confident in its own skin. Or we may lament it as a failed experiment. I very much hope it's the former.

**Letter in response to this article:**

*[Multiculturalism has proved its value in society](#) / [From Edward Watson, Letcombe Bassett, Oxfordshire, UK](#)*

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