

Talking the Same Language

Thought for the Day

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In the kaleidoscope of images from Egypt's velvet revolution, one picture particularly caught my eye. That was of protesters in Alexandria waving signs with just one word – "Go!" – but in two languages, Arabic and Hebrew. My first thought was what a wonderful multicultural image this was, but actually it was the very opposite. Aimed at Mubarak, it was the embodiment of the dominant conspiracy theory, that he was a puppet of the United States, and so of Israel, so should be addressed in their language!

By coincidence – not conspiracy! – at the same time, David Cameron was in Germany, echoing the statement by Angela Merkel at the end of last year that multiculturalism has failed. But I don't recognise multi-*anything* in what they attacked. Think about it: if you paint a multi-coloured pattern on your walls, that doesn't mean segregated patches of different colours, but one pattern made up of many colours. A multi-faith service doesn't consist of different religions going off to do their own thing in different places, but one integrated event in which we all participate. So why does the Prime Minister think that multiculturalism results in "segregated communities"?

Perhaps it's true that we speak a different language in Scotland! Here, all political parties share a belief in one Scotland of many cultures: the idea that it's possible to be integrated without losing one's identity, that communities can be individually distinct but combine to hold society together. That, for me, is multiculturalism!

This is all the more true in an era of globalisation: nations and states are not in silos either – we see each other's news in real time, but even if a picture is worth a thousand words, words matter too. That's why it beggars belief that some so-called educationalists should contemplate cutting foreign languages from the syllabus. We need to talk to one another in order to understand one another – even the Alexandrian protesters understood that!

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