

## **Beyond 2015: Shaping the future of equality, human rights and social justice (12 and 13 February 2015)**

### **Session 5: Where do we want to be? Future studies – how do we want UK society to look in ten years' time?**

#### **Presentation by Prof. Ziauddin Sardar, The Muslim Institute**

Where do you want to be in 10 years' time? Before we can answer the question of where we want to be, it is probably worth reflecting on where we are. Where we are at the moment is not a very good place to be. Yes of course we have had many successes in terms of equality and human rights legislation in Britain, there are some wonderful organisations doing some great work in the field of human rights and equality. But globally we are in a very bad shape. Part of the problem, I think, is the way we think or imagine about the future. We think of the future as a mighty river that is flowing in a given direction and of course, this river has fixed contours. Every now and again we come across some turbulence, some boulders in the river that we negotiate, find our way past, and occasionally once in a blue moon we may come across a waterfall that takes us to a lower level and then we renegotiate our way towards a well-defined and given future.

In the introduction, the chair said that this session is called "Future study". Well if it is called future study that is the wrong title, It should be 'futures studies' because there is not one future but a multiple futures there. Apart from the problem of thinking of the future like a mighty river, flowing in a given direction with fixed contours is that much of equality and the human rights work we have done emerges from this perception. It emerges from the perception that the future belongs to a particular civilization and culture. And all that is worth doing, all that is important actually comes from this particular civilization and culture and all the other cultures of the world, all the other civilizations, Chinese, Indians, what have you, are all small tributaries that flow into this mighty river that is taking us towards a pre-defined future, of a given civilization of which we are all part and parcel.

If you look at the human rights legislation, you encounter certain problems. Certainly, other cultures and other traditions have been pointing this out for quite some time. There was an article in the

Guardian recently pointing out that in fact human rights legislation has not been very successful, is very cumbersome, it is very ambiguous.

More than that, if you think about it, what has the Human Rights Convention done for the indigenous people of the world? For about 2 or 3 decades I have been involved in various human rights conferences and discussions. Scholars from the Third World, particularly India and south east Asia, for example have been arguing that human rights conventions does not include the notion of group or community rights. And that means that the humanity of certain people is undermined because their notion of what it means to be human, is either connected to a community or to land. What has human rights legislation, for example, done for the indigenous people of Australia whose very notion of being human is related to their land? I was at a huge kind of festival in Australia, Book Festival, a huge church hall with thousands of people, speaking about one of my books and when the ceremony started they had this thing, some indigenous people came along and they said "We are very happy to be in Australia, but how about our land? All this talk about justice and social justice and human rights has no significance for us unless you give us our land," and the Minister came along and said these are wonderful people, aren't they, enriching our culture. Of course they are enriching their culture but they are marginalised by being denied rights to their land. So the idea of group and community rights has been not included in the human right convention and people have fought for it and western scholars and lawyers have come up with wonderful and quite stupendous arguments to say it is not possible, because individualism is a very much western construction.

I can go on, but one of the most common criticisms you come across from India is that human rights does not include the right to survive, basic survival like food, not suffering from hunger, for example. If you are talking about human rights to a people who are basically starving, it doesn't really make sense to talk to them about freedom of expression and their right to participate in democracy and so on, so there is a serious problem, the landscape of human rights and equality is not just going to become worse but it is about to change radically for the simple reason that change now is not the only constant, but we are actually facing accelerating change that we have not experienced in history

before. The change is tremendously rapid, just to give you one example, it took 35 years to sequence the genome of the fly and 50 years to sequence the genomes of human beings, 35 weeks to sequence the genome of the flu virus, and now I was in Chicago last week there is a place there where you can walk in and have your genome sequence within a day, provided you are willing to pay a \$1000. So change is rapid and we know that in terms of computing power, the powers of computer doubles every 2 years. These changes will have profound social and human consequences as well. And at the same time, power is shifting from east to west. We hear about the BRIC countries, Brazil and China, Russia, India, power is definitely shifting towards from what used to be a unipolar world towards a multi civilizational world, where other powers and civilizations will actually have as much economic muscle and in some case political muscle as Europe and US has enjoyed for the last 100 years. That means that the political social landscape is about to change and change quite rapidly. So in this particular situation, the future becomes quite an important topic to focus on.

In particular, the future demands in my opinion one basic idea. That is that conventionally we have assumed there is only one way to be human, the western way. Now, we have to tackle the idea that there is more than one way to be human.

The different way to be human is not simply going to be argued in terms of intellectual discourses and academic thesis. They are also going to be argued in terms of economic and political power. In other words, civilizational power, so one of the most important things we need to do is to get our mind into thinking about what it means to be human and what it means to be human is about to change biologically quite profoundly as well. We have just discovered that certain traditional cultures; I know my own particular culture, have just kind of started a discussion: What is a civic marriage? That is a pretty profound discussion in a traditional Islamic household, more than in a Christian household. If you are not a kind of card carrying atheist, it is difficult to get across. Soon we are going to have even more profound concepts and ideas to wrestle with. What does it mean to have 3 parents for a child? We only have case with one little girl who has 3 parents. Genetic advances are about to

transform our notion of what is the human body, which means we need to adjust or come up with new ideas of what it, means to be human.

So that is the challenge. Now the conventional things that you hear about the future, predictions and forecasts are all based on the assumption that the future is a mighty river. I think I should distinguish between what is a prediction and what is a forecast. Predictions, I am not interested in predictions, they either tend to be right, or totally right or totally wrong. If they are totally right, they are based on some solid piece of science, for example, we can predict when it is going to be the next lunar eclipse, they can predict what time and what year or whatever a particular satellite is going to land on a comet, I mean these sort of predictions we can make, we can even reasonably predict after an exit poll who has won the election. But if the prediction is not based on a solid piece of science, it tends to be a wild guess and is seldom worth paying attention to. Forecasts are somewhat different and a bit more involved and it is something that I am much more interested in.

Forecasts are always based on time, so you forecast this is what is going to happen in the next 4 or 5 years, but they also have two very important components. They have 'what if' statements and a probability attached to them: If this happens, then it is very likely that this will also happen. If that occurs, then the probability is that that will also occur. They are much more sophisticated exercise and you can engage with them a bit more creatively.

We need to get away from conventional ideas of prediction and forecasts, because forecasts basically assume we are starting from now, and this is what the future is going to be like or the possibility of the future, what is the possibility of things occurring in the future. We need a different metaphor. I think the metaphor that we need to move to is to move away from the idea of the future as a mighty river to the future as an ocean. In an ocean, you can of course go in any direction. You can discover many more things because your contours are not defined by the borders of the river, you have open space, and you can go in any direction. That in a sense is pretty frightening idea, that you can virtually shape the future in any way you like provided you have the courage to actually do so. If the future is an ocean, then it has much more pluralistic possibilities it has much more pluralistic and diverse potentials.

But then, if you want to travel in this ocean, you will need to have some understanding of where you want to go, which I think is the subtitle of this particular session, where do we actually want to go? That is where visions come in. Now, visions are your preferred future. It is the future that you actually want to go to. It is important to point out that visions should not be Utopias, because Utopias are of course no place and no people. Visions have to be realistic, they have to be based on certain reality and certain realisable goals, but visions are future that we all, that you prefer, that is where you want to be in 10 years' time.

At this juncture I ask all of you to close your eyes and imagine that you are in 2025. And try and imagine what you see and maybe you can start very simply from getting up in the morning and looking out of the window, although if you look out of the window you are not going to see much human rights and equality, but you can open your eyes, look out of the window and explore what kind of Britain you imagine yourself to be in, but I think it is important to think outside the box of Britain. Britain is not an isolated country, we live in a globalised world and Britain is deeply connected not just to Europe but the rest of the world and what happens to the rest of the world has profound consequences for Britain, so maybe your vision ought to be a bit bigger than just simply the vision of Britain. Maybe it should be a vision of what a good society would be like in a globalised world. What does it mean to be human, when we have so many genetic advances and so many technological changes? And how does your vision incorporate the idea that there is more than one way to be human.

The next session is called how do we get there? But let me just present a very briefly one possible way of how we get there. In conventional futures work you start with the present and you have some idea where you want to go and you do forecasting or Strategic Planning and you work towards that. If you are thinking as the future as an ocean this particular methodology does not work very well. So for us to try and develop some understanding of how we get there, we have to do a slightly different methodology which is called backcasting, as opposed to forecasting. So we start with the vision and work backwards, just as the forecast starts with the present and works towards a viable future. In the kind of exercise that we are undertaking, we start with the vision and we

assume that the vision has actually been realised. So if our vision for 2025 or 2035 has been realised the question arises what we will have in 2024 so that 2025 is what we expect to it be. Then the question arises what we would have had to do in 2022, so we are at a position in 2023 where we can reach our vision in 2025 so you work backwards, in a very systematic way and develop some sort of if you like a sign post or roadmap to the future. Although, this exercise looks very academic you have it with many, many communities around the world with really profound effects. Perhaps, I ought to conclude, one very good example, which is the example of fishermen in a small village in the Philippines. They discovered the fishing stock was dwindling and the village was suffering very seriously. We did a vision exercise where do you expect your village to be in 10 or 15 years' time. As we were developing the backcasting system, a number of things came to the fore; the village discovered that in fact certain factories nearby were dropping chemicals that were killing their fish. They become mobilised, not just confronting the industries but actually took the local government to task, and then they realised there was nobody there for him to become on their behalf. Schools were open, so the children can be trained. And within five to ten years they had a whole young general generation who could articulate and fight their cases and the village was back in a better position that is was, so it is a practical thing you can do.

In terms of equality and human rights it is more sophisticated exercise. What we need to do is realise while we have been very successful in the kind of equality legislation we have produced. While human rights legislation has helped many, many people around the world, it is not enough; we need something bigger and better, something that can incorporate conflicting and diverging points of view, the notion of human dignity in a sense. I would argue we might have to move away from the notion of rights to that of Wellbeing, the dignity and Wellbeing of human beings if you can get an inkling of a vision that incorporates that, I think we would have taken a major step towards the future.