White Britons are now a minority in the capital and national identity is increasingly multifaceted, according to Professor Eric Kaufmann

Demographic research rarely dominates the headlines, but the comparison of the last two censuses has proved to be an exception. From The Daily Mail to The Huffington Post, Professor Eric Kaufmann was quoted extensively when he released his findings about London’s population.

Professor Kaufmann’s analysis showed that the proportion of white Britons in London’s population fell from 58% to 45% between 2001 and 2011. During the same period, the share of ethnic minorities reached 40%.
The media were fixated by the concept of ‘white flight’ to explain the fact that 600,000 white Britons left the capital in a decade. However, Professor Kaufmann is anxious to explain that the decline in the white British population – both in relative and absolute numbers – is not the result of a new phenomenon of ‘white flight’, but the consequence of long-term demographic trends.

He describes how, ever since the late nineteenth century, more people have migrated out of London than into it. As people have prospered, this trend has continued, resulting in the capital being progressively transformed.

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The ethnic composition of London is set to continue to change in future, especially because of the age profile of the population, with higher proportions of white British residents among older people and more people from ethnic minorities among younger age groups.

The effects of this unprecedented demographic change in London are profound, and have widespread implications for community cohesion and identity. National politics are affected as well, especially as experiences at local level in relation to immigration influence voting patterns. Consequently, there is significant interest in Professor Kaufmann’s ongoing 18-month, £197,000 research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

One of the opportunities to discuss this research was the ‘Diversity and the White Working Class’ conference, organised by Birkenhead and the think-tank Demos in April 2013. In addition to Professor Kaufmann, other speakers included Frank Field, Labour MP for Birkenhead, and Gustin Burwell, Conservative MP for Crewe and Nantwich.

Professor Kaufmann said: “There is a lot of public policy interest and interest from politicians for a whole series of reasons. Part of it is the whole crisis in the white working class – a traditional base for the Labour Party, but whose votes are increasingly going elsewhere. For the white working class in Britain there is a sense of alienation, and immigration in particular is a big issue. There is also a lot of interest in the question of national identity and integration.”

Interestingly, while there is a perception that white British culture is under threat, Professor Kaufmann says that people from ethnic minority backgrounds are increasingly able to successfully combine their multiple identities with their ethnicity, nationality and locale. As a Canadian who has lived in Britain for more than 20 years, he also knows something about multiple identities.

Professor Kaufmann added: “In many cases, people from ethnic minorities have a stronger attachment to Britain than white British people, who tend to be orientated towards England or Wales, for example. A hyphenated British identity seems to work quite well. You can be British, you can be Pakistani and British, or Pakistani and Welsh. Encouragingly, the white British population in ethnically diverse areas is more tolerant, because of increased contact with people from different backgrounds.

The policy recommendations from these insights are still being developed, but thoughts so far favour avoiding housing or schooling decisions that accelerate white British departure from diverse neighbourhoods.

Professor Kaufmann is also against forcing or incentivising ethnic minorities to be dispersed across Britain, or into rural areas. He says that ethnic minorities initially opt for the support structures of their own communities in large cities, and that moving people of ethnic backgrounds into predominantly white British areas can be problematic for both sides.

Professor Kaufmann encourages a broad and personalised interpretation of what it means to be British. He added: “There should be flexibility. As long as there are certain things in common, everyone may see Britain through their own lenses and that provides a unity in itself. Not only can you have multiple identities, but you can have multiple versions of the national identity.”

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Listen to a podcast interview with Eric Kaufmann at: www.bbk.ac.uk/birkbeck/voices/episode14

LONDON’S CHANGING POPULATION

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