

Building Community Cohesion
Conference Report

On March 18th the Runnymede Trust hosted a conference in collaboration with the Industrial Society to consider the emergent policy agenda around social cohesion.

Rob Berkeley reports on the event and outlines a rationale for further development of the Runnymede's work in this area.

Since 1997 and the coming to power of the Labour government, new social policy language has emerged in tranches to address policy areas that in the past were often dealt with in singular, vertical approaches. So far two big areas have developed into which much of government thinking and policy to do with 'race' have been subsumed – social inclusion/exclusion and neighbourhood renewal.

At the end of 2001, in response to the summer disturbances in Northern milltowns, a third policy tranche was introduced – community cohesion – into which, again, future policy for dealing with 'race' might well, and perhaps appropriately, be absorbed.

Some critics have argued that the summer disturbances were a signal of the failure of multiculturalism. That the power of choice for different communities to express their specific cultural values – to be perceived to self-segregate – whether this is true or not – led to breakdowns in community relations through a lack of shared identity – a British identity.

This, then, begs the question – does a multicultural society need a single common identity to hold it together? It does not. It needs two things – a set of moral values/principles (i.e. commitment to democracy, equality) and a shared political culture in the sense of institutions and practices (i.e. adherence to the rule of law).

The emergence of the community cohesion policy agenda in response to the summer riots possibly signals the former position. But what does community cohesion mean, and how is it translated into policy and practice?

Back in 2000, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain used the term 'cohesion' in connection with its associated notion of a 'community of communities'.

Britain needs to be, certainly, 'One Nation' – but understood as a community of communities and a community of citizens, not a place of oppressive uniformity based on a single substantive culture. Cohesion in such a community derives from a widespread commitment to certain core values, both between communities and within them: equality and fairness; dialogue and consultation; toleration; compromise and accommodation; recognition of and respect for diversity; and – by no means least – determination to confront and eliminate racism and xenophobia.

(Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain)

The government has adopted the language of cohesion as a descriptor for a whole range of policy proposals building on reports released in the wake of last summer's disturbances in northern mill towns. Indeed, on the day of the conference, the Home Office announced the structure of a new Community Cohesion Unit, an advisory panel chaired by Ted Cante (author of the Home Office's *Community Cohesion Independent Review Team Report 2001*), and funding for a range of youth projects in Northwest towns to tackle a reported lack of dialogue between young people from different ethnic communities.

At this stage, however, it remains unclear what the government understands by social cohesion and what direct connections to this agenda can be envisaged for groups and individuals concerned with racial justice, and policy-makers with a responsibility for the promotion of racial equality.

If the Home Secretary achieves his ambition to conduct a national debate on social cohesion, it is crucial that the process should not obscure the centrality to the achievement of a progressive cohesive community of both eliminating racism and increasing respect for diversity. It is crucial that any social cohesion agenda improves racial equality in the UK, and that those who campaign for racial justice have a clear stake in the debate.

There is a significant danger that the community cohesion agenda will sacrifice action on the fundamental issues around 'race', citizenship, and belonging, for a managerial approach focusing on local government structures. The conference made clear that community cohesion is a framework around which to group a large amount of policy activity – yet there remains at its heart a lack of coherence and understanding. It is only by tackling these larger questions that any coherence can be provided. It is only by beginning to address the core issues that racism can be challenged. The conference provided an opportunity for delegates to begin making the links between the community cohesion agenda and the implications for racial equality. It is a policy area that the Runnymede Trust will continue to concentrate on over the coming months.

Ownership and engagement

In inviting our speakers we were anxious to highlight, at this very early stage, areas which appear to be significant in delivering social cohesion: housing, policing, industry, and education. David Faulkner noted in summation that social cohesion could be achieved only through creating a sense of belonging. For public institutions this meant that all communities needed to feel that they had ownership. He argued that this was easier in the case of schools and hospitals, but that, for example, social care services, police services, prisons and probation services, also had to find ways to develop this sense of ownership through accountability and engagement.

The speakers at the conference all brought their experience of different areas of social policy to a consideration of how to improve and support community cohesion. At even this early stage we can identify a number of common themes whereby connections can be made between a social cohesion agenda and the struggle for racial equality:

improving communication;

delivering change in communities through public institutions;

championing social justice;

and coordinating local, regional and national policy strategies.

Improving Communication

Anne Power, Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, discussed the issue of community involvement in her keynote presentation 'Brokering inter-racial relations'.

Professor Power recounted the experience of conducting a research project in Bradford where the social housing stock in Bradford is segregated along ethnic lines. This segregation is the result of policy decisions that stated that certain areas were suitable for Asian communities while others were not. Housing officers believed that they were responding to the needs of the communities, yet Asian applicants for housing were left on waiting lists while properties remained vacant. Estate agents engaged in the practice of 'blockbusting' – selling a home to an Asian family and then informing white neighbours that their house price would fall, encouraging them to sell. In fact, the house prices would go up.

Housing policy, when constructed in this way, delivers ethnic segregation, which, Professor Power's research showed, was an outcome desired by neither community. Through a series of focus groups, public consultations and interviews, it became clear that residents were unhappy with the current situation, that few parents wanted segregated schools for their children or to live in mono-ethnic communities.

It was also found that simple strategies could be developed to respond to fears about moving into areas previously perceived as either white or Asian. Local authorities had developed a series of myths and presumptions about the local Asian communities and made them real through adapting policy to fit the myth. Through brokering communication between groups, policy could be changed to enhance social cohesion and offer more relevant services. Baroness Uddin, chairing the morning session, offered her experience of working with families in East London in support of Professor Power's analysis.

David Westwood, Chief Constable of Humberside Police, spoke about how Humberside Police have developed the concept of 'Quality of Life Policing'. This was adopted after a series of extensive public consultations, followed by visible and accountable change.

Stephanie Draper highlighted the kinds of consultations and engagement which businesses are undertaking to involve communities with their commitment to corporate social responsibility. Akram Khan-Cheema considered the development of Muslim schools as a means of engaging Muslim communities with public institutions.

The speakers' focus on communication highlighted ways that the cohesion agenda can be utilised to develop race equality. Institutions reaching out to all communities in meaningful ways can serve to improve policy. The ability to adapt in an accountable fashion to needs expressed can better deliver the sense of ownership and engagement with public authorities. This involvement may lead to a series of better outcomes for people from communities which have until now been excluded from effective services.

Delivering community change

David Westwood, in setting out an example of how policing in Humberside has reformed, demonstrates that it has responded to the needs of communities in the area. He noted that the Cantle Report states that community policing can be an effective means of developing community cohesion. In Humberside a form of policing has been developed through asking the fundamental question of the public about their police service; 'What does policing success look like?'

Major restructuring of the Humberside Police Service into geographic community policing has involved making "daily working practices evolve around solving problems with local communities". Communities have responded to this approach with enthusiasm, even supporting tax increases to pay for extension of the model. Communities' relationship with their police service has been changed through a process of consultation, change, and accountability. This shift in relationship

has led to an improvement in the quality of life for people living in those communities – and Humberside Police Service has been in the top four forces for crime reduction for the last three years.

Championing social justice

Akram Khan-Cheema delivered a sustained critique of arguments against faith schools – especially Muslim faith schools. He argued from the perspective that it is a matter of equality (and equality before the law) that *all* faiths should have the right to state funding for their schools or *none*. He argued that irrational fears and Islamophobia are responsible for current worries about Muslim schools and that in the name of equality Muslim schools should be enabled to join the state sector.

I'm not for faith schools but I want to maintain the right for any faith group to establish their own. But if they are there I want to do everything to inject into them this pluralist perspective, thus engaging with the cohesion of the community in whatever way they can.

Muslim schools could be seen as forces for improved social cohesion in that they can “contribute to the enrichment of pluralism within a democracy . . . and prove invaluable in dismantling the myths and creating an imaginative and constructive means of achieving a harmonious appreciation of Islam and Muslims as dynamic contributors towards a pluralist Britain.”

This approach to the debate about faith schools is rarely heard and offers a positive and sensitive take on the issue. It re-introduces the notion of shared values, including equality and fairness. It also gives credence to the idea of Britain as a community of communities – with Muslim communities developing public institutions and contributing, by this means, to their neighbouring communities.

Developing national, regional and local policy

All the speakers referred to action at different levels of government to aid social cohesion. So much so that it became unclear where responsibility and power lay in the development of this agenda.

Andrew Housley described the far-reaching Race Relations Amendment Act and the potential impact it could have in making public authorities more mindful of their race equality responsibilities. While David Westwood noted what one Police Authority could do, he was also aware of the tensions that rafts of central governmental policy created. Akram Khan-Cheema

noted the obstructions to Muslim schools at local government level. Anne Power noted the behaviour of local government officials and employees at neighbourhood level who could be drivers of change for improved social cohesion.

John Denham, Minister of State at the Home Office, who spoke just before the closing remarks of David Faulkner in the Chair, noted the overlapping roles of local and central government

At the end of the day it is local people who are going to have to work out and implement a different and more positive vision for where they live. And I do accept that Government has a role and an important one in revitalising communities and in building community cohesion.

This already complicated relationship will also include health authorities, police authorities, government offices for the regions, and devolved assemblies. Without a clear understanding of where responsibility and power lie it will be difficult to influence policy and to hold authorities accountable. In order to effect policy on 'race' it will require campaigners to become much more sensitive to where decisions are being made and to focus their attention on local, and regional as well as central government.

A national debate on social cohesion

The minister included in his presentation a call for a national debate. Yet it is difficult in this multi-tiered structure to see what form it could take or even who would participate and how.

debate and discussion won't just happen . . . To bring it about is going to take local leadership of great vision and quality, certainly yes from the political leadership of all mainstream parties but also from the leadership of faith groups, of voluntary organisations, of public sector institutions and from the business community. And the type of discussion and debate that needs to take place will not all be in one place, in one meeting or at one event, it needs to take place across the activities of different organisations with every organisation asking what it can do to take these issues forward

These are ambitious plans and there has never been anything of the like attempted before. It poses a serious challenge to all those concerned with race equality in terms of capacity building and the ability to orchestrate such a debate at so many different levels in such a way as to reach positive conclusions. This is especially true, as many of the core issues of the community cohesion agenda are currently opaque, and attract much hostile political and media attention. What such a national debate needs to be wary of is being hijacked by party political wrangles, or formulated around the wrong initial questions.

There is a great deal of interest in what Britishness means. David Faulkner suggested that this interest might signal a revived public appetite for values more satisfying than modern

managerialism. Yet it is a debate which too easily adopts a cultural essentialist approach which, in defining Britishness, produces a checklist of characteristics. This pays no credence to the dynamic nature of cultures or the diversity of cultures which need to co-exist within national boundaries. If the question is re-framed to ask 'what does it mean to be British?', the response can be more inclusive – a common sense of belonging, equality and fairness, justice, a stake in society.

Follow-up

On March 18th our conference began to tease some meaning out of the recent policy flurry and to identify some routes for pursuing racial justice through the government's agenda. For Runnymede, social cohesion is clearly linked to any debate about 'race' and forms part of our vision for a successful multi-ethnic Britain.

In the Parekh Report we posed the big questions: What values and loyalties must be shared by communities and individuals in One Nation? How should disputes and incompatible values between different communities be handled? How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally, the need to treat people differently, and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion?

These are perennial questions for moral and political philosophers, but they are also dilemma experienced by millions of people every day. If the community cohesion agenda is to have any impact, it must begin to tackle these central questions. It must clarify the relationships between cohesion, equality and difference. It must define the core around which society should cohere. It must reassert the fact that racisms operate in ways that confound cohesion, and introduce strategies to counteract them. So how can the community cohesion agenda be taken forward to deliver improved racial equality? Indeed, conference delegates were asking the same question. But it is not only the role of government to make these connections, as stakeholders, it is also ours.

The conference represented a beginning of the Runnymede Trust's follow-up work to the Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. Clearly, the community cohesion agenda has to be a focus for the initial stages of this work, and in order to bring clarity to this bundle of policies, the Trust will continue to develop thinking on social cohesion and to assess how this agenda is functioning to improve racial equality.