

## Facing the Challenges of Community Cohesion

**Beverley Hughes, MP, Minister of State at the Home Office**

The first speaker of the afternoon was Beverley Hughes MP, Minister of State at the Home Office. In welcoming her to the speakers' platform Lord Parekh reminded the audience that currently Ms Hughes's overall responsibility at the Home Office was for matters of nationality, immigration and asylum, including work permits, and that included in the field of nationality was policy-making for coherent citizenship and inward migration. Beverley Hughes has held appointments at the Home Office since 2001.<sup>1</sup>

Runnymede has had a long history of promoting race and community relations in Britain, and it's very important that we have independent organisations such as Runnymede, working in this area of policy. It's a difficult area. It's sensitive. There is inevitably a range of deeply held views about the issues involved. And so informed debate, critical discussion, and the establishment of a culture in which that dialogue can take place are crucially important. Runnymede fulfils all of those functions and more.

If we are to tackle the root causes of conflict, and help develop cohesive communities, it will take a long-term commitment and determination from all – in government, in public bodies and among voluntary and community organisations. And a commitment above all to keep talking and keep demanding progress.

### **Contributing to the debate**

The Parekh Report made an important contribution to the debate on national identity, equality and diversity, as well as creating a vision of a modern, multi-cultural Britain. It highlighted the challenges that remain if we are to create a more equal society, free from racial inequality and discrimination – the continued need for tackling:

- ?? racial and religious discrimination
- ?? educational inequality and disadvantage
- ?? health inequality
- ?? labour Market disadvantage and
- ?? political exclusion

The recommendations of the report are extremely valuable to Government both in terms of the race relations agenda as well as community cohesion. Many are already Government policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Following a government reshuffle in summer 2003, Beverley Hughes MP became the new Minister of State responsible for Immigration and Asylum policy, as well as for 'Community Cohesion'.

Geoff Filkin (who has day-to-day responsibility for race relations) will be considering the Trust's updated recommendations and using them to inform our thinking as we implement the Race Relations (Amendment) Act.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conference issues**

As you would expect, then, the conference is addressing some of the issues most critical to promoting community cohesion:

- ?? employment
- ?? neighbourhood renewal
- ?? community safety and crime reduction
- ?? housing, education, policing
- ?? the role of the media

Two years on from the publication of the Parekh Report, we are faced with further challenges in race and community relations in our country, most notably from the disturbances last year in some of our towns and cities, compounded as they were by the aftermath of Sept 11<sup>th</sup>.

#### *Disturbances:*

Last year's disturbances took many of us by surprise. The period that followed them began to demonstrate just how much we all need to do to address the problems that lie behind the conflict and hostility in some of our most hard-pressed communities. Since then, central government, local agencies, voluntary organizations and local people have been trying to work out how best to meet the challenges of nurturing greater cohesion in communities.

And in one sense this isn't rocket science. The theory isn't difficult. But the practice is. And there isn't a lot of well-developed practice wisdom about. In any case, whilst there are common principles, they have to be applied in different ways in different localities, because each has its own unique set of characteristics and factors, its own unique population.

#### *I want to talk to you about:*

- ?? the core principles and themes behind community cohesion;
- ?? our commitment to having an open discussion on citizenship and shared values
- ?? the practical action we all need to take if we are to create more cohesive communities; and
- ?? our policies and proposals to tackle the root causes of conflict in some of our communities.

But let me say first why this is so important. It is not only essential if we are to avoid the kind of disorder that we saw last year. It's also crucial to so many of the objectives we all have for helping people, especially young people, young people from all backgrounds, to reach their potential, to do as well as they can in school and in work, and, through that, to foster strong families, strong communities, a strong economy and a strong, inclusive society. So it is linked directly with the most fundamental objectives of this Government.

It starts with a concern for people, but one which recognises the mutuality, the interdependence, of individuals, families, communities and the wider society. People will not achieve what they are capable of, will not have the chance of a good quality of life, if their

---

<sup>2</sup> Need to add note about Filkin's move, and who is now looking after this area – Fiona McTaggart?

community is isolated, divided from other communities, feels excluded, under siege and disconnected.

### **So what are the principles behind community cohesion?**

Community cohesion is about building safe and strong communities and this is not easy. There isn't a long-standing body of knowledge of how to do this. Building community cohesion must be based on:

- ?? creating real equality of opportunity;
- ?? creating a common vision and shared sense of belonging, rightly identified by Bhikhu Parekh in his opening chapter to the conference report published today;<sup>3</sup>
- ?? Creating a positive and inclusive notion of citizenship and identity;
- ?? Opening up education, social and economic opportunities for every section of the community;
- ?? An absolute commitment to tackling poverty and deprivation in all our communities;
- ?? And an uncompromising challenge to racism in all its forms.

### **Belonging, citizenship and identity**

I'd like to dwell a little on these issues, because all of the places I have visited where community cohesion is a live issue have concluded that they need to generate open discussion in their communities about shared values, rights and responsibilities, a common sense of belonging and identity. In my view, this also needs to happen at national level. The territory can be difficult, but it is of paramount importance that such a discussion begins and is not quashed.

- ?? Debate needs to be unambiguous and categorical in its rejection of racism and religious hatred.
- ?? There needs to be a clear recognition of the enormous benefits that immigration has brought, and continues to bring to our country.
- ?? For all communities, rights must go hand in hand with responsibilities.

The way in which the debate is conducted will vary. How we engage people at local level will be necessarily different from a debate such as today, on the national stage. But of one thing I am clear: the *terms* of the debate have to be framed around identifying what are the shared values that define our identity and inculcate that common sense of belonging. A debate fuelled by a drive to preserve prevailing institutions, narrowly based on territory and history, is both irrelevant and doomed.

We have to press for the terms of the debate to be modern, open and based on the centrality of diversity as a positive defining characteristic of Britain both historically and for the future. Such a debate needs clear and inclusive leadership at every level.

- ?? That means a willingness to challenge and lead public opinion where necessary, when it is the right thing to do
- ?? It also means challenging communities – all communities – when they need to change or start to think differently

---

<sup>3</sup> *Cohesion, Community and Citizenship*, Proceedings of a Runnymede Conference, May 2002. London: Runnymede Trust.

?? It means creating a positive narrative of what we are as a country, with diverse communities:

One country, many cultures.

One town, one city, many cultures.

I am all too aware that, at national level, we need to get political and civic leadership right as much as we do at a local level. We need to recognise and ensure that at all levels politicians have a responsibility to help bridge division and hostility between communities.

So the debate is important, but so is action on the ground. And I think we have to understand that action on the ground, learning by doing, is a fundamental characteristic of the endeavour we have set ourselves.

### **Locality, particularity, commonality**

Tackling community cohesion issues does require commitment, policy and resources from the centre, and the stimulation of ideas and thought from conferences like this. But it can only be put into practice at local level and each locality is different. The process, then, has to be evolutionary and rooted in locality but there *are* existing mechanisms in place at local level that we can harness.

For a start, we have to bring a focus on race equality and community cohesion into all our mainstream work:

?? Build community cohesion into local community plans;

?? Build community cohesion into neighbourhood renewal strategies; and

?? Make community cohesion central to local strategic partnerships.

Second, begin to forge and develop a collective vision for local areas with all communities – and communicate that vision widely.

Third, encourage partnership working. An over-used word perhaps, but not yet an over-used practice. Whether in local authorities, police, other public bodies or the voluntary sector, effective partnership between key local agencies and local people is critical if we are to get service delivery right.

The task of analysing the issues faced in each community, agreeing a strategy to tackle them, and systematically implementing that strategy **has** to be done locally. For different areas some of the issues will be common, such as:

?? tackling the root causes of prejudice and hostility

?? fostering co-operation

?? focusing particularly on young people, and

?? reducing the sense of neglect and isolation.

However, the particular issues, the priorities you afford them, and the best ways to tackle them, will be different in each area.

### **Government policy**

The policies we adopt at central government level are also important.

In government, we are working across departments examining our policies on education, housing, regeneration, youth policy – to name just a few. And we will change policies to promote community cohesion, where this is necessary.

There is an absolute commitment at the centre to challenge and reform those policies to ensure we build community cohesion.

We have established a Ministerial Group from across government whose role is to ensure that community cohesion is built into the work of Whitehall departments.

We have established the Community Cohesion Unit within the Home Office to ensure we get government policy on community cohesion right, to co-ordinate policy across government and to mainstream community cohesion in all our work.

?? We have also established an independent panel of experts – the Community Cohesion Panel, chaired by Ted Cantle. The panel will act as a critical friend of the government and oversee as well as produce ideas for promoting community cohesion.

?? The panel has established 12 groups of experienced practitioners from a wide range of disciplines. They come together to look at policy solutions to some of the core policy areas related to community cohesion – including housing, policing, education, faith, the voluntary sector, health and social welfare, political leadership, to name a few.

So we now have an infrastructure through which to develop policy and practice, and action at national and local levels.

### **What are we doing to meet the challenges of community cohesion?**

In government, we have sought to initiate both some immediate action as well as a longer-term programme of work to build community cohesion into our policies.

As an immediate measure and in response to the disturbances in 2001, we made £7 million available to fund summer activities. We released further funding for a similar and extended programme for this year including additional activities in those areas with high levels of street crime.

We are funding a programme of community facilitation to encourage dialogue and tackle local grievances or misunderstandings that threaten good community relations.

Also, in recognition of the need to build cohesion into the agenda of local government, we recently announced that community cohesion would be one of the key themes of the Beacon Council Scheme.

We are also working with the CRE, LGA and ODPM to produce draft guidance on community cohesion for Local Authorities. We have received over 80 responses which are overwhelmingly positive, and the final guidance will be published in December 2002.<sup>4</sup>

### **Guidance is only a start.**

?? Community cohesion has to be built into the incentive structures for local authorities to ensure it is a part of their core work.

---

<sup>4</sup> Launched by the Minister herself on 11 December 2002 at Local Government House, Smith Square.

?? So, I welcome the support and co-operation of the Audit Commission and am delighted that community cohesion is an issue which they are looking at as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Since the summer of 2001, a lot of good work has been done. Already, there are many examples around the country where local authorities, partner organisations and local communities are working together to overcome common concerns. So the potential is there – to be built upon.

To complement that work we have put in place sources of practical help in the form of guidance, seminars and conferences. What is clear, however, is that in many areas the foundation has yet to be developed, and the benefits are yet to be fully felt. Our challenge is now to turn that commitment into immediate action.

In order to help further embed community cohesion at a local level, I am pleased to announce today that we will be establishing a new Community Cohesion Pathfinders programme, with an investment of £6 million over two years. The programme, which will run in 15 local authority areas, will support local authorities, the voluntary sector, and communities themselves to build local solutions to local problems.

At the end of the 2 years, we should have 15 very real-life examples of local areas that have successfully put community cohesion at the heart of everything they do. Disseminating this knowledge widely – both during and at the end of the programme – will help all areas across the country. To get the pilots up and running as early as possible, it is my intention to write, by the end of the month, to all local authority Chief Executives setting out in detail the purpose of the programme and to invite expressions of interest.

### **Conclusion**

This is not a short-term, quick-fix agenda and there are no easy solutions. Nonetheless, we recognise the urgency of the situation. Our strategy has three strands:

1. To support local authorities and other public bodies in implementing their short-term goals to tackle immediate problems.
2. To help address the longer-term challenges of really integrating community cohesion into mainstream policy and practice.
3. To work with you to develop and disseminate the knowledge, experience and growing expertise that is essential.

This is challenging work in difficult territory. It is complex, multi-faceted, risky and at times may feel thankless. But we know the stakes are high, and that the cost of ignoring the issue and pretending it will go away would be paid by generations in the future.

So we all have to grasp the nettle and resolve to do our very best. The future for so many people, and for so many of our communities, as well as our wider society, depends on it.