

The Year of Cohesion

If there has been a key word added to the Runnymede lexicon in 2002, it is cohesion. A year from publication of the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, the Cattle, Denham, Clarke, Ouseley and Ritchie reports moved cohesion to the forefront of the UK race debate. It has been a major focus of our work at Runnymede and the past year has seen a number of activities designed to get to the bottom of the concept and its usefulness in delivering the key aim of a successful multi-ethnic polity in Britain. However, cohesion remains a slippery policy construct, its grounding in social action difficult to ascertain and its significance in forging a progressive path towards racial equality and harmony in question. Yet this is the way it must be if cohesion is to be used as a policy framework to deliver real change.

If a year ago it was thought that it was simply a matter of defining cohesion and re-focusing activity around the concept, then we should be disappointed. That cohesion is more complex and difficult to deliver than this should not be a surprise. It is a fundamental concept within any polity, tackling core issues which have been the basis for debate among political philosophers for centuries, impacting on daily behaviours and attitudes, calling for compromise, negotiation and constant imagination and re-definition.

It has become clear over the past year of Runnymede's (and others') activity around the concept of cohesion that within the common-sense definition of the term there also needs to be focus on creating a sense of belonging, combating racisms, enabling cultural exchange and discourse, and a denial of essentialist approaches to 'race' and community. For cohesion to work as a policy framework it has to appeal to the hearts and minds. In emotional terms a sense of belonging cannot be guaranteed by mere delivery of services (although it can be destroyed by failure to deliver those services). Cohesion cannot be guaranteed simply by the sharing of public spaces if such sharing is marked by hostility rather than an openness and willingness to engage and to change as a result of interaction. Cohesion cannot be guaranteed by imposing identities and presupposing responses, it must be responsive to the multiple identities and hybridity that are characteristic of complex late-modern societies. In political terms, the links have to be made between the relationships of people with the state as well as each other. Dissatisfaction (the riots of Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham in its most extreme

manifestation) is not merely a result of 'not getting along' or 'parallel lives', but also of the pervasive nature of institutional racisms and political disenfranchisement.

Is it any wonder that the usual tools of central government social policy have appeared to flounder in the morass of cohesion and that responses so often seem tokenistic or piecemeal. For cohesion to be delivered will take a rethinking, not only of histories, but also of our present and future relationships, sometimes outside of the usual confines of social policy instruments. The focus on single-faith schools and youth work in much of the post-Cantle policy activity is recognition of this fact. Young people are seen as the key because the state is involved in their lives to a greater extent than that of many adults – education is seen as the most transformative of social policy tools. As Grand (1999) notes

Groups and communities coming together can be seen as places of emergence, creation and transformation

Cohesion as societal transformation is a rather larger project than suggested by some of the cautious approaches to the policy currently emerging from government circles. The interest in the concept of cohesion has grown over the past year as practitioners and policy makers have begun to recognise its importance. In March Runnymede held a conference (with the Work Foundation), which began to unearth some of the emerging policy debates at which the then minister for community cohesion, John Denham, spoke [bulletin reference]. At that stage, the debate was characterised by the need for a national debate about common values and the failures of local government policies. Other speakers emphasised local responses in terms of policing, housing and education which began to shed some light on the complexities of delivering cohesion and the necessary sea-changes that would be required in attitude. There was some question about how more people could be engaged in an agenda for which there appeared to little enthusiasm.

In May 2002 Runnymede held a conference (with the LSE Centre for the Study of Global Governance) to provide some much needed academic rigour to an agenda that had been developing apparently without a clear ideological or theoretical basis. A series of challenging papers, considering cohesion from wider European, American, as well as UK-based perspectives were delivered. These mapped out the terrain of different conceptions of cohesion

and made it clear that some conscious decisions had to be made about which of the models would be pursued as part of the UK policy framework.

In October, Runnymede held its largest conference on cohesion (with the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit), which was designed to allow different social policy disciplines to focus on what their work could add to the debate on cohesion. Coming two years after the publication of the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, it was also a timely reminder of the importance of cohesion in forming a vision for the future and transforming the UK polity to a successful multi-ethnic state. Further details of the conference are reported in this edition of the bulletin.

During this period, the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit began to operate and panels of practitioners met in order to inform government ministers of the key policy changes that pursuance of cohesion would require. They will report early in 2003. Their input will be welcome in adding more flesh to the bones of cohesion. While welcome, it is probable that their recommendations will not mesh to form a blueprint for cohesion. Given the complexity of the issues highlighted above this will be no reflection on their skill or commitment but an acknowledgement of the limits of central government policy-making.

As Ash Amin (2002) argues for an 'agonistic' political culture.

If common values, trust, or a shared sense of place emerge they will do so as accidents of engagement . . . a politics of trust in emergent situations based on the process itself of democratic engagement. Open and critical debate, mutual awareness, and a continually altering subjectivity through engagement are the watchwords of agonistic politics . . .

This is not a political culture that will emerge simply from neighbourhood renewal or youth work but from a re-imagining of Britain. This is why the concept of cohesion will remain slippery and difficult. Changing a political culture is not an overnight enterprise and is not a process that fits into the language of quick wins or delivery because it is an ongoing process. It will come from the recognition that;

People in Britain have many differences. But they inhabit the same space and share the same future. All have a role in the collective project of fashioning Britain as an outward-looking, generous, inclusive society – a community of communities and citizens

Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000

Runnymede's continuing work will play a role in sharing this recognition as the route to true cohesion – challenging racisms through policy analysis and lobbying, rejecting essentialist notions of identities and communities, enabling cultural exchange and discourse, and advocating for the construction of a common sense of belonging. Amin argues for an emphasis on

everyday lived experiences and local negotiations of difference, on micro-cultures of place through which abstract rights and obligations, together with local structures and resources, meaningfully interact with distinctive individual and inter-personal experiences.

Runnymede's work with young people in 2003 through the project 'This is Where I Live' has begun to look at cohesion from this angle. The narrative of everyday life and identity formation expressed through the arts and literature will, we hope, illuminate the transformative nature of the concept of community cohesion. We hope to also give further inspiration to the policymakers who will have a role in enabling the development of the community of communities and citizens, who have a stake in re-imagining the polity, in delivering a successful multi-ethnic Britain.