

Community Cohesion – where does it belong?

Robert Berkeley
Runnymede Trust

In this short paper I want to consider the providence of ‘cohesion’ and argue that alone it is pretty meaningless (or rather too meaningful) – and suggest a better alternative that might make more sense of the terrain.

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 mill towns, 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.

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.¹
(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. These proposals currently amount to funding for a range of youth projects in Northwest towns to tackle a reported lack of dialogue between young people from different ethnic communities, some frenetic debates about religion in schools (which appear to have been conveniently forgotten about), a plan for every local authority, some ‘beauty contests’ in terms of funding bids, and a lot of talking at the Home Office.

Meanwhile the BNP make further inroads into our political system, young people from the Midlands feel justified in taking life in Israel, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and African-Caribbean pupils fall further behind in GCSE results and, in a report published earlier this week, 77% of respondents to a nationwide poll agree that different cultures in Britain co-exist rather than connect, while 81% are content with the level of contact they currently have and do not wish for any more contact with other cultures in Britain².

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.

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. 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 and a more cohesive society achieved.

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 those who campaign for racial justice have a clear stake in the debate.

In the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, its defined a successful multi-ethnic state as 'a community of citizens and a community of communities'. They noted that liberal conceptions of citizenship which argue there is a single political culture in the public sphere but substantial diversity in the private lives of individuals and communities do not go far enough as the public realm is not and cannot be neutral.

The cohesion debate currently falls foul of a similar objection – by suggesting a public/private sphere it suggests that there is a way of behaving in public that is acceptable and that this way is the way of the white majority – how can **we** cohere if **you** continue to have your Saturday schools and 'segregated' schools – why not behave like us, we don't segregate in terms of race or religion. I don't mind what you do at home but in public you should behave in such a way as to fit in? In other words what you do at home is different to me – I have got it right and you haven't. The Home Secretary has found it difficult to even stay out of the private sphere – his now notorious comments on the use of language in the home go to show that. Cohesion without equality and diversity may lead to errors being made of which I have given a crude typification here.

I want to suggest an alternative way of framing this discussion that might be more fruitful (borrowing heavily from the work of Bhikhu Parekh³) Discussion should focus not on cohesion – which is a fuzzy, pseudo-scientific, and confusing word in any case – but on the construction of a common sense of belonging.

*Membership of a political community entails [in New Labour terms] rights and responsibilities – entitlements **and** sacrifices. Some of us are in the position to pay taxes to benefit others, we often defer our demands in order that the more urgent needs of others can be met first, obey laws that sometimes go against our own self-interest and sometimes against deeply held beliefs, at the extreme, people are prepared to die for our country. No political community can be held together by force – despite some of the many disastrous attempts to do so – neither can it be held together purely by self-interest; this requires what might be called a common sense of belonging.*

What are the components of this common sense of belonging?

- **Mutuality of claims and obligations.** Members of a community recognise each other as part of a single community, and are bound together by claims and obligations that do not obtain in relation to outsiders. This does not mean that they have no obligations to outsiders, but rather that, other things being equal, their obligations to their fellow-members are stronger and more pressing.
- **Fellow-feeling or a sense of concern** for other members of the community, including a willingness to promote their interests, if necessary at the cost of one's own.
- **Loyalty to the community or commitment to its integrity and well-being.** This does not mean that members of a community might not disagree deeply on many important issues, and periodically protest against their government, but rather that they care enough for their community not to allow their differences to get out of control and damage its well-being

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The common sense of belonging is the basis and the defining feature of a community. No group of people can be said to constitute a community unless its members feel that they belong together. A common sense of belonging breeds mutual trust, and the consequent confidence that no member will be a free rider; and that they can count on each other to obey the laws, respect the rules, and in general discharge their share of the burden of collective life. It gives a deep sense of moral and existential security, and the reassurance that none of them is alone and that they can depend on other members to stand up for them at times of need or in their struggle against injustice.

The common sense of belonging also fosters a spirit of sharing, and the confidence that if one of them were to sacrifice her interests for the sake of others, this action would be appreciated and reciprocated on an appropriate future occasion. It also gives the community the confidence to live with and even cherish its differences, for it is secure in its sense of unity and knows that differences and disagreements can neither undermine its harmony nor be used by outsiders to destabilize it. An insecure community is too worried about its unity to tolerate, let alone delight in, its differences.

The common sense of belonging is tied to a community of men and women, not to the territory. It is critical and reflective, and combines attachment to the community with a capacity for detachment. It certainly has an emotional component, but the latter is guided by a careful assessment of the well-being of the members of the community. It represents a quiet loyalty and commitment to one's fellow-members and a willingness to fight against injustices and inequalities, not an exuberant, unconditional and blind love.

Broadly speaking, the common sense of belonging, the sense of mutual concern and commitment, requires the following (they do not guarantee it, by the way, for nothing can, but they do facilitate its development):

Some of its values are universally valid, morally compelling, and admit of no compromise. Some others are distinctive to a community and form part of its cultural and moral identity. If they conform to the basic human values, they are binding on its members, but admit of compromise in exceptional cases. Yet others are subject to debate and enjoy only a limited moral consensus. A common sense of belonging requires recognition of these differences, demanding agreement where it is justified and tolerating and even welcoming differences where it is not.

1. The common sense of belonging requires **equal citizenship**. This means that every member of the community should feel an equally valued part of it and enjoy the same rights and opportunities as others – his interests should receive equal consideration, his views should be heard and respected, and so on. Belonging to a community of men and women is conditional upon being accepted as one of them. Equal citizenship both signifies and gives reality to such reciprocal acceptance. Since justice implies equal citizenship, it is one of the essential conditions of a sense of community.
2. Since members of a political community often belong to different religious, cultural, ethnic and other communities, which are partly constitutive of their identity and matter much to them, **the political community should respect their legitimate differences and allow them to express their identities in appropriate ways**. If belonging to it required that they should abandon other forms of belonging, they would consider the moral and cultural price too high and would resent and feel alienated from it. Respect for non-political identities is therefore essential for a common sense of belonging. The respect has its obvious limits, for no political community can accommodate all forms of diversity or meet their unreasonable demands. It is therefore vital that a political community should provide institutional mechanisms for negotiating their differences and resolving their conflicts in a spirit of democratic participation. It should also create conditions in which its members can live with their multiple identities, and possess the confidence to view each one of these critically and moderate its demands in light of the others. Political and non-political identities can fertilise and complement each other. One can be British as well as, and deepen and enrich one's Britishness by virtue of being, Scottish or Indian and Muslim or Hindu. The political identity should therefore be so defined that members of the community can all own

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and identify with it, albeit in their own different ways. Such a mediated form of common belonging does justice to both political and non-political identities, and benefits from their creative interplay.

3. Common belonging has **an irreducible emotional component**. Self-interest, equal citizenship, respect for one's culture, etc., give one good reasons to want to belong to a community, but these are not enough. These conditions might be met, and yet one might feel no particular attachment to the community. The converse is just as true. How one can build up such an emotional attachment, feel at home in the community, and wish to remain part of it is not easy to specify. Familiarity plays an important part, for when one understands a community and knows one's way around in it, one is likely to feel at home in it. Familiarity in turn is a product of socialization.
4. How one is treated by the community also plays an important part. Those who are devalued, mocked, taken lightly, treated as outsiders, made butts of offensive jokes, and so on, build up alienation and resentment and do not feel a sense of attachment to the community. It is therefore essential that the experience that the members of a community have of its major institutions should be one of respect and fairness. **The educational, economic, political and other institutions of a society**, which profoundly shape the perceptions and emotional responses of citizens, **should be inclusive, hospitable to differences**, reflect a wide range of sensibility such that they are not identified with a particular class, gender or race, **and should empower their members** so that they do not feel like helpless objects of another's will.

I think we need to ask ourselves how far the cohesion agenda faces the challenge of creating a common sense of belonging – or how far it is the catch all – motherhood and apple pie – that will result in some short term plans from councils that are rarely felt, non-enduring, tokenistic, and ignorant of the endemic racisms and discriminations that are still the experience of many members of our community today. Action that focuses on a common sense of belonging instead would tackle political representation and leadership, community involvement, and social interactions, as well as challenging racisms and discriminations, and hold the recognition and celebration of cultural diversity at its heart.

The Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain held a number of focus groups with young people as a part of its deliberations – one participant reflected on his sense of belonging:

I don't feel British. Because I know we haven't been fully accepted. We still walk down the street and get called a Paki.⁴

¹ P. 56 The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (The Parekh Report), (2000) Runnymede Trust, Profile Books : London

² Cultural Breakthrough,(2003), Voluntary Service Overseas

³ Community, Cohesion, and Citizenship (2002) Runnymede Trust

⁴ p. 58 The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, ibid.