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b:RAP briefing

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Community Cohesion and Asylum

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Introducing b:RAP briefings

This is the 7th in a continuing series of **b:RAP briefings**. The purpose of these briefings is to examine key issues in public policy *from a clear and practical race equality perspective*.

While some briefings will cover topics that have a very clear and evident relationship to race equality others will take less obvious issues and examine them afresh, teasing out the race equality dimension.

Each briefing will identify the key issues involved, highlight current trends in thinking and recommend practical action and solutions.

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October 2005

b:RAP Briefings

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Community Cohesion and Asylum

In its broadest sense, the concept of community cohesion pivots upon the development of a shared vision across communities: it concerns the erosion of barriers that exist, or are perceived to exist, between different groups within any given community in order to foster a sense of belonging for all. In *Building a Picture of Community Cohesion: A Guide for Local Authorities and their Partners*¹, the Government articulated the headline outcome of community cohesion to be an increase in the “percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get along well together”. In summary, progress was to be measured using indicators such as ‘recognition and appreciation of other people’s different circumstances and backgrounds’ and the ‘development of strong, positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in schools and workplaces’.

The Government’s action plan provides an analytical framework for measuring cohesion, but stops short of specifying which issues it will address or what outcomes it will reap. In focussing upon the characteristics of the problem, rather than the consequential nature of cause and effect, “community cohesion seeks to address symptoms, whilst leaving structural inequality untouched. Indeed, a quasi ‘chicken and egg’ scenario emerges: will community cohesion resolve the inequality suffered by asylum seekers, or must this inequality be resolved first for community cohesion to occur? The following discussion argues on the side of the latter.

Asylum Seekers and the Current Equality Agenda

At the global level, the application and interpretation of internationally ratified treaties such as the *1951 Convention* and its *1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, coupled with lesser-ratified treaties such as the *1990 International Convention on the Protection and Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families*, have consistently affirmed that systematic discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin constitutes persecution and, equally, that expulsion or extradition which may lead to any form of discrimination is prohibited. Moreover, it is highlighted that asylum seekers, refugees and migrants should be provided access to basic economic and social rights as provided in international law, including social security, health care, education, employment and adequate housing. Thus, concrete efforts should be undertaken to remove current obstacles to the equal economic, social and political participation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Migration Watch UK emphasises that four fundamental principles should underlie non-discriminatory treatment of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, displaced persons and other non-nationals: 1) recognition and validation that virtually all countries are multicultural, with rich diversities of racial and ethnic identities, cultures, languages, traditions, religious faiths, and national origins contributing to the identity and development of each society; 2) the extension

¹ LGA/ODPM/CRE/NRU/Home Office [June 2003, Home Office Community Cohesion Unit].

to all persons of universally recognized human rights must serve as the fundamental basis of law, policy and practice by all actors; 3) the rule of law must remain an essential guarantor of democracy, of accountability and of access to justice for all and 4) a gender perspective must be applied to all policies and practices in order to recognize the multiple discrimination faced by women of ethnic minority background².

Yet in the United Kingdom, despite a recent growth in human rights discourse, it seems clear that asylum-seekers do not fit into the current equality agenda. Media reports of “bogus asylum-seekers” and of “illegal immigrants” are actively encouraged by populist politicians and right-wing think-tanks. Government action also seems to encourage this trend: one of the main reasons for proposing the introduction of Identity Cards was that they would be useful in clamping down on “asylum fraud.” Similarly, by submitting foreign nationals and asylum seekers to a parallel system of justice – from long-term imprisonment without trial to control orders and curfews – the clear implication is that asylum seekers do not deserve to be treated on the same terms as domestic nationals.

As a result, asylum-seekers seem to be a stain on government action to improve community cohesion and foster greater equality. In sum, they are unable to work, their access to social security is hampered and they are subjected to a separate justice system. With this in mind, the current popular approach to equality issues seems to suggest, particularly in the post 9/11 era, that “*All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.*”

Cultural Tourism as a Substitute for Challenging Inequality

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge in the active ‘celebration of diversity’ throughout the UK. Festivals, events and broadcasts have emphasised the means in which film, literature, art, dance and theatre are all enriched and vitalised by people who can draw on a wide variety of cultural influences from around the world. By celebrating diversity in such a way, we are acknowledging the impact and influence that other cultures can have and, certainly, in breaking down cultural barriers, society is taking a step in the right direction. However, by no means do such steps represent a first-class ticket to equal citizenship for the individual.

Appreciation of the cultural and ideological characteristics of asylum seekers is a far cry from honouring the fact that they have the present and future potential to be participatory members of society, to be accepted as being on an equal-footing with their naturalised neighbours. To draw an analogy, one has to wonder how Emmeline Pankhurst, at the height of her quest to shake society into accepting men and women as equals in early 20th Century society, would have felt her revolution to be furthered by community-wide celebrations of ‘*the woman as mother*’ or events demonstrating man’s appreciation of the woman’s ‘*place in the kitchen*’.

² See <http://www.migrationwatch.com/unitedkingdom>

Delivering true equality for all means making more than merely a token gesture. It means confronting directly the problems of structural inequality that persist in keeping many members of our society, notably asylum seekers, on the 'outside looking in'. To speak of equality within the asylum debate, and within the wider context of community cohesion, is to recognise that there is no such thing as first, second and third class citizenship. Equal rights means equal rights.

The Way Forward

At present, "community cohesion" is catchy rhetoric, but we must transform it into meaningful reality. This involves more than just pushing people with different backgrounds and differing beliefs into one common present. Indeed, this vision must look further than people's inculcated traditions – it must also be built on a shared future, a future that offers a favourable outlook for all. In other words, we must not just work to eliminate discrimination. We must also work to increase equality of opportunity for all. Thus, positive action must be taken. Some possible examples include:

1. Improved access to services across the board, for example, interpretation support and development of language skills is a priority. This could be further enhanced through the development of sector specific language programmes to facilitate eventual entry into the chosen workplace.
2. Development of an employment strategy which is appropriate to the needs of the asylum seekers in the UK. We must develop means of enabling asylum seekers to play a more active role in society and to enable those who gain refugee status to have a more rapid transition into the job market.
3. An increased focus upon vocational integration from an early stage, for example, *Northern Ireland Council For Ethnic Minorities* has implemented a 'one stop shop' skills audit approach for asylum seekers, which allows for accreditation of prior learning, advice on writing CVs, etc. This organisation also follows an exemplary system of organising voluntary experience and professional placements within local organisations for asylum seekers, according to their acquired skills and future aspirations.
4. Actions to challenge racism in all its forms, and the prejudice which follows, for example, a call for national and local politicians to take a role in promoting integration by targeting key opinion formers in the media. This may include monitoring of media reporting and the development of a programme of work that would seek to influence public perceptions of asylum in a positive way (see, for example, *Oxfam's Positive Images Project*)
- 5) The widespread dissemination of the dicta of, for example, *A & Others v United Kingdom*, which articulates that all individuals, including asylum

seekers, have the same rights irrespective of their status, nationality or background.

- 6) Organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees have also issued practical recommendations, such as the need for NASS to regionalise its support and outreach functions and the need for a more expedient issuing of national insurance numbers.
- 7) Young people must be guaranteed immediate entry into the educational system. In this way, they are made aware of their rights from an early age and can serve as important vehicles for integration of their family within the wider community.
- 8) Linkages to existing voluntary organisations also need to be explored, especially where they have championed issues of equality and able to apply past experience with other immigrant communities. Although, we must bear in mind that competition for scarce resources in deprived neighbourhoods can also act as a barrier to the sector's engagement with new arrivals. However, these are the kind of problems that must be overcome if we are not doomed to go through a similar (and ongoing) development path as in the case of previous waves of immigrants.