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b:RAP briefing

no. 4.

COMMUNITY COHESION: The Emperor's New Clothes?

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This is the fourth 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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b:RAP Briefings

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Foreword

Community cohesion is a concept that has risen rapidly up the Government's political agenda following the community unrest in some northern former mill town during the summer of 2001.

The inquiries that followed these events, especially that of the Independent Review Team chaired by Ted Cattle¹, drew attention to a number of factors which were felt to indicate a breakdown in "community cohesion". Foremost amongst these was evidence of an increasing "segregation" between white and black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and the widespread incidence of what Cattle called "parallel lives" – white and BME communities failing "to touch at any point".²

Since then, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 has passed into law, the Community Cohesion Unit has been established within the Home Office and a rash of initiatives launched:

- Guidance for local authorities on establishing "baseline" measures of community cohesion has been published.³
- The *Connecting Communities* race equality support programme was funded for the period 2000—2003, with the possibility of a second round of funding.⁴
- Fifteen community cohesion "Pathfinders" have been funded, aimed at enabling local authorities, in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, "to develop approaches to building a shared vision across diverse communities".⁵
- Specialist community cohesion co-ordinators have been recruited within each of the nine Government Office regions.
- The Home Office has also launched *Strength in Diversity*, a community cohesion and race equality consultation paper aimed at promoting "honest and

¹ Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team chaired by Ted Cattle, Home Office [2001]. See: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/>

² Ibid.

³ LGA/HO/CRE/ODPM [May 2002].

⁴ *Connecting Communities: Proposals for Race Equality Support Programmes*, Report of Consultation, Home Office [July 2002].

⁵ *Community Cohesion Pathfinder Programme – Prospectus for Local Authorities and Partners* [Home Office/NRU, November 2002] and *Strength in Diversity*.

robust debate” regarding the challenges we face in securing community cohesion.⁶

■ Building on this wider debate, it is also planned that a cross-Government community cohesion and race equality strategy will be launched in the autumn of 2004.

There are also plans, set out in a recent white paper⁷, to merge the three existing equality commissions – the Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission – into a single, new Commission For Equality And Human Rights.

On the one hand, then, it seems hard to imagine that more could be done to promote community cohesion. On the other hand, we must ask why so little difference is being made by these numerous policy initiatives and why the assumptions underpinning community cohesion are so little examined.

That is the purpose of this briefing paper. It is structured as follows:

Section 1.0 examines current community cohesion thinking and practice.

Section 2.0 examines the consequences that derive from our failure to develop a shared vision of community cohesion.

Section 3.0 examines some of the issues and obstacles in current practice.

Section 4.0 offers brief conclusions.

⁶ Strength in Diversity: Towards a Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy. Home Office Communications Directorate [June 2004]

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs3/strengthindiversity.html>

⁷ Fairness For All: A New Commission for Equality and Human Rights, DTI [May 2004]. See: www.dti.gov.uk/access/equalitywhitepaper.pdf

1.0 Community Cohesion – Present Practice

Before broadening our examination to look at some of the assumptions which underpin current community cohesion thinking, we should briefly set out the key aspects of present practice. In large part these are contained in Home Office/LGA guidance on community cohesion issued to local authorities in 2003.⁸

The guidance attempts to establish an index of ten national indicators for community cohesion, grouped as follows.

First, there is a “headline outcome” which is said to capture “the main essence of community cohesion”:

Headline outcome

- The percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together.

Nine further indicators are grouped under what are said to be the four key definitions of community cohesion:

Common vision and sense of belonging

- The percentage of respondents who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood/town/country/England/Wales/Britain.
- Key priorities for improving an area.
- The percentage of adults surveyed who feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area.

The diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued

- The percentage of people who feel that local ethnic differences are respected.
- The number of racial incidents recorded by police authorities per 100,000

Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities

- Local concentration of deprivation.
- Percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*–C or equivalent.
- The percentage of unemployed people claiming benefit who have been out of work for more than a year.

⁸ *Building a Picture of Community Cohesion: A Guide for Local Authorities and their Partners*, LGA/ODPM/CRE/NRU/Home Office [June 2003, Home Office Community Cohesion Unit].

Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods

- The percentage of people from different backgrounds who mix with other people from different backgrounds in everyday situations.

One of the fundamental problems with current community cohesion thinking is that its purpose – what it is intended to *achieve* – remains unclear. We are offered an analytical framework designed to assess the progress of particular communities towards cohesion but know neither the issues community cohesion is intended to address nor what benefits communities can expect to derive from greater “amounts” of cohesion.

It is also evident, however, that such a schematic approach has proven far more difficult to implement than anticipated and is currently the subject of some rethinking. We can gather this from recent minutes of an LGA Equalities Executive meeting which state: “The decision to structure the practical guidance around the four elements of the definition has not proved possible given the cross-cutting nature of many of the case studies, which do not fit easily into the single strands of the definition.”

The precise role of *race equality* in community cohesion is also contested: “There has also emerged a difference of opinion between some of the partners as to the relative emphasis that should be placed on race relations, as opposed to other issues of community cohesion.”⁹

As a consequence it appears that the LGA’s guidance on community cohesion will be substantially rewritten during the later part of 2004.

A further set of problems emerges, however, when these so-called indicators are examined closely:

- First, they are tailor-made for local authority surveying approaches – with all the resource implications that suggests.
- Second, they are ‘bland’ and to a large extent ‘impressionistic’, heavily reliant on ‘feel-good’ or ‘feel-bad’ responses. The role of racism and discrimination is not – as the LGA Equalities Executive now seems to acknowledge – adequately explored.
- Third, community cohesion as envisioned by LGA guidance, requires the identification of a range of indicators capable not just of assessing ‘how much’ community cohesion exists in an area or neighbourhood, but

⁹ LGA Equalities Executive, 7 May 2004: Further Guidance on Community Cohesion. See: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/>

also of mapping increases and decreases in the qualities that are felt to promote it. In this sense, community cohesion – at least in part – is seen as being about how a community *feels* about itself rather than *identifying enforceable rights and equalities* that can contribute to individual and community well-being and thereby increase cohesion. This is an aspect we explore more fully in our conclusions in section 4.0.

2.0 Community Cohesion: What is it for?

Community cohesion, like “regeneration”, is not a neutral term. In the same way that “regeneration” suggests that certain interventions can help communities to regain a former wealth and vigour, community cohesion infers that similar interventions – and in the case of some of the Community Cohesion Pathfinder areas they are very similar interventions – can assist communities to regain a cohesiveness which has been lost or eroded.

It is increasingly evident, however, that such a hypothesis conceals a number of crucial issues – even doubts – and these are very much at the heart of why policy-makers are struggling to articulate a clear vision of what community cohesion is about and what it is intended to achieve. In our view, there are two such issues that are worthy of particular attention. One, race equality, has been touched on. We have already seen from the LGA that amongst some policy-makers there remain serious differences of opinion regarding the role that racial discrimination plays in community cohesion. But another equally pressing issue has not yet been explored. This is the question of *structural inequality* and is key, we believe, to an understanding of some of the difficulties presented by current thinking as regards community cohesion.

There is great confusion at present – evidenced in the emphasis that current community cohesion ‘indicators’ place on diversity and ‘difference’ – about whether community cohesion is a BME issue, or a BME *and* ‘white’ issue.

This confusion, we believe, actually derives from the nature of structural inequality. Structural inequality does not respect ethnic origin: it disadvantages black, Asian and white working class communities. It is, in that sense, a dual race and class inequality, although within this, it may still be the case that BME communities experience a more pronounced deprivation.

And yet if we look again at the Government’s definitions of what characteristics we should expect to see in cohesive communities, we can see the extent to which ‘difference’ – or perhaps more accurately, *overcoming* difference – is a central driver:

- There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
- The diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities

- And strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.¹⁰

This conceals the extent to which white and BME communities – especially in the poorest 88 neighbourhood renewal areas – *share* an experience of disadvantage and inequality which is structural in nature. It may of course be true to say – as other reports have suggested¹¹ – that the condition of structural inequality is one in which other tensions, including racism, xenophobia and ‘segregation’, come to the fore, particularly when this situation is compounded with a ‘struggle’ for public resources, the distribution of which is perceived to be unjustly or disproportionately determined by ethnicity. Nonetheless, structural inequality is a shared experience – although it can and frequently does set in motion a cycle of divisiveness, segregation and consequent intolerance.

Our analysis suggests that it is these *symptoms* that community cohesion seeks to address, while leaving the root cause – structural inequality – untouched.

A satisfactory ‘model’ of community cohesion practice cannot be established until these central issues are resolved. Indeed, without a resolution, there is a grave danger that community cohesion will remain a doomed attempt to defuse tensions between, and to reconcile the competing demands of, the poorest.

¹⁰ *Building a Picture of Community Cohesion: A Guide for Local Authorities & their Partners*, LGA/CRE/ODPM/Home Office [Home Office June 2003].

¹¹ Leicester City Council: see p.13.

3.0 Community Cohesion – Issues & Obstacles

The Government has launched *Strength in Diversity* at least in part to promote a debate about “Britishness”, about the shared values of being British as well as valuing different backgrounds, about reclaiming “British pride” from political extremism and defusing the ethnic, faith or cultural chauvinism that underpins religious and fundamentalist extremism. It is a complex task, made more difficult by the speed with which the language of community cohesion has been adopted by far-right parties and even some libertarian academics¹² and the Islamophobia reported by many British Muslims.¹³

Lack of a shared vision

One of the central difficulties, then, is that community cohesion, despite the Government’s constant reiterations of its key importance, is a contested term. Rather like “social capital”, we think we want a lot of it even if we don’t quite know what it is.

Our contention, in addition to the central issue raised in the preceding section about structural inequality, is that there is a lack of shared vision regarding what community cohesion looks like – how we know it when we see it; what its ‘norms’ are – and a lack of clarity about what we expect it to achieve. Will community cohesion ‘solve’ inequality? Or is addressing inequality a precondition of community cohesion? *How much* cohesion can we legitimately expect communities to exhibit? These are complex issues. But they revolve around an equally complex one: that of what it means precisely to be “British” and how many versions of “Britishness” the state is willing to recognise.

Contradictions

In addition to these reservations, we feel there is also cause for concern regarding some of the contradictions that are evident in current community cohesion thinking.

¹² See David Goodhart's “Discomfort of strangers”, first published in Prospect magazine and subsequently reprinted in full in the Guardian. Goodhart argues that diversity erodes common values such as those on which the NHS was built: “All such acts of sharing are more smoothly and generously negotiated if we can take for granted a limited set of common values and assumptions. But as Britain becomes more diverse that common culture is being eroded.” See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,11374,1154684,00.html>

¹³ See the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia’s reports *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* [CBMI/Runnymede Trust 1997] and *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action* [Trentham Books 2004]. Also: “British hostility to Muslims ‘could trigger riots’”, The Observer, 30/05/04 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,11374,1227977,00.html>. Latest CBMI report concludes that Britain is ‘institutionally Islamophobic’.

For example, although the Government now states one of its main aims as being that of “moving beyond multiculturalism” – the promotion of a shared culture rather than of many different ones – much of what is presently happening both at a grassroots level and amongst statutory service providers in terms of community cohesion and race equality is rooted in multiculturalism: they are “ethnicised” or “culturalised” responses. That is to say, they are activities, service adjustments, or means of engagement, which are conducted along race, faith or ethnic community lines, evidence of a deep-seated, structural reaction that tends to fall back on ethnic, cultural or faith *distinctions* as a means of furthering equality. This, coupled with the lazy and tokenistic thinking that suggests that individual faith-group or “community” leaders can legitimately speak on behalf of entire neighbourhoods, is an approach that has been seen to fail repeatedly in Birmingham’s past.¹⁴

Community cohesion – over-identified with public order

It is also problematical that so much of community cohesion practice is, despite its lip service to equality and shared values, seen as a public order issue. The origins of much community cohesion theory in the Bradford, Burnley and Oldham riots of 2001 and the implementation of the first Community Cohesion Pathfinders under the auspices of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (in conjunction with Local Strategic Partnerships) has tended to reinforce a view that community cohesion is, at bottom, primarily an issue of public order.

This is doubly unhelpful. On the one hand, it suggests that “segregation” is an inevitable precursor to conflict; on the other, it fails to acknowledge that a certain level of community disagreement is in all likelihood natural and perhaps even healthy. It is, after all, what in all other circumstances we regard as a cornerstone of democratic behaviour. Perhaps, rather than attempting to legislate away conflict, a much greater emphasis should be placed on fostering communities’ ability to analyse, understand and resolve differences and conflict.

Cause and effect?

Perhaps more importantly, current community cohesion thinking seeks neither to examine practice nor to disentangle cause and effect. So for instance, the “segregation” apparent in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford has rapidly become seen as a pre-existing indicator of failing cohesion. But what brought about such segregation in the first place? Racism and

¹⁴ Issues in BME community engagement and participation in Birmingham are explored at some length in b:RAP Briefing No. 3, “*Do They Mean Us?*”: *BME Community Engagement in Birmingham* [b:RAP, February 2004].

poverty are also key characteristics of such polarised communities and in this sense, it is possible that segregation – or “parallel lives”, in Cattle’s phrase – says much more about the corrosive consequences of racism and poverty than it does the need for “community cohesion”. Indeed, we might go further and argue that community cohesion may yet again be the wrong answer to the wrong question.

A ‘public discourse’?

Strength in Diversity seeks to promote honest and robust debate and this is much needed. But all too often policy initiatives such as this are preaching to the converted – they consist primarily of professionals talking to each other. How are communities – and perhaps especially white communities – to be engaged in this debate?

The example of faith communities “providing leadership and bringing together people from different faiths and cultures” held up as good practice in *Strength in Diversity*¹⁵ is still an “ethnicised” response in the sense that it frequently encourages ‘discussion’ mediated by faith and community leaders rather than a ‘community conversation’ in the broadest sense. Again, this is an approach that in the past – throughout the 1990s – has been central to community engagement methods in Birmingham and which is now acknowledged to have been flawed. Not only did it generate competing demands – and consequently resource allocation pressures – from other faith groups who felt themselves unfairly under-represented amongst these faith-based ‘umbrella groups’, it was an approach that also served to marginalise those – especially young people and women – who found their voices ignored by “male, middle-aged and frequently first generation” ‘community leaders’.¹⁶

Those seeking to promote community cohesion must be careful not to confuse ‘faith’ and ‘ethnicity’. On the one hand, individuals’ rights to practice a religion – enshrined now in article 7 of the Human Rights Act – must of course be respected. But participation, ‘representation’ and community engagement cannot – and should not – be predicated on faith. What can, without sufficient thought, appear on the surface to be inclusive can frequently turn out to be not just exclusionary but discriminatory.

We are still woefully short of both ideas and means for establishing a ‘space’ in which communities can engage in open, honest and *constructive* debate about such issues without the fear of stigmatisation or conflict. In part, of course, this can be explained by the powerfully emotive

¹⁵ *Strength in Diversity*, 5.5, p.17.

¹⁶ The history of community representation and involvement, with particular regard to the ‘umbrella groups’ and ‘standing consultative forum’ model adopted in Birmingham during the 1990s is discussed at length in b:RAP’s paper for Birmingham Community Empowerment Network, *Race, Engagement and ‘Representation’: Issues in BME Community Engagement* [b:RAP, September 2003].

nature of some of the issues concerned, but nonetheless finding a means of facilitating such debate is a necessary and urgent part of the process. One of the key difficulties which we know from our own experience many people grapple with is that of making judgements about what is and is not racist. If we want to 'tackle' racism, we need to create space for people to discuss, analyse and better understand racism's roots, characteristics and consequences. **We make specific proposals for such a 'public discourse' in our conclusions.**

There is a further difficulty, however, in defining or describing this consensual, public 'space' and that is determining what has legitimacy within it and what does not. Put simply, we need a dialogue which first of all establishes the ground rules of such a public space – what individuals can legitimately expect that public space to accommodate, and what it cannot; what is legitimately public and what private.

Resource allocation – a key factor in community tension

A key issue to emerge from the Cantle Report – also reflected in a recent community cohesion “baselining” exercise undertaken by Leicester City Council¹⁷ – is the potential divisiveness of public resource allocation, especially where different ethnic groups feel themselves to be in fierce competition for scarce mainstream or regeneration resources. Many area-based programmes – especially regeneration programmes – have experienced this but until now it has rarely been acknowledged as a contributory factor in instances where community relations are deteriorating.

The Cantle and Leicester reports strengthen this message and indicate that resource allocation – especially when seen to be an “ethnicised” response that favours particular ethnic groups at the expense of others – can be a direct cause of conflict. In this sense, one strand of public policy (regeneration and neighbourhood renewal) may be creating significant obstacles for another (community cohesion).¹⁸

¹⁷ Taking Forward Community Cohesion in Leicester, IdEA for Leicester City Council [undated]. Full report at: <http://www.leicester.gov.uk/departments/page.asp?pgid=5515>. “Developing a community cohesion baseline”, a brief synopsis of the Leicester work can be found at <http://www.renewal.net/Search.asp>.

¹⁸ Ibid. See “Developing a community cohesion baseline” [4.12, p.8].

4.0 Conclusions and a Recommendation

4.1 Conclusions

Community cohesion, “Britishness”, the role of a national identity or identities, racism and profound structural inequality. These are complex issues, further complicated by the fact that they are not static. As we have already seen, racism and the *experience* of inequality – how inequality manifests itself and what are seen as the underlying drivers of inequality – are subject to change. They shift under pressure from a range of other local, national and international factors; they morph as the political landscape changes. The ‘war on terror’, the asylum debate and the rise of far-right parties both in Britain and across Europe are currently exerting immensely powerful pressures. We may not fully understand their consequences for another generation.

Against this backdrop, then, the need for significantly greater clarity in the community cohesion debate is overwhelmingly evident.

We offer the following conclusions as a contribution to that continuing debate and at the end of this section we make a specific proposal for taking forward a more sophisticated ‘public discourse’ in Birmingham.

1. A clear and shared vision of community cohesion is required – what it looks like, how we will know it when we see it, what its ‘norms’ are, and what we expect it to achieve. This is of particular consequence in Birmingham and other localities where minorities are moving towards becoming the majority population. We need to know the key characteristics of *local* community cohesion, with objectives for what we expect it to achieve and the issues we anticipate it addressing. The issue of what it means precisely to be “British” and how many versions of “Britishness” we are able and willing to recognise is also central in this.
2. The precise role of *race equality* in community cohesion must be addressed. It is unlikely that a wholly satisfactory ‘model’ of community cohesion practice can be established until this central issue is resolved.
3. The current imprecise, ‘impressionistic’ version of community cohesion is more concerned with how communities *feel* about themselves rather than with *identifying enforceable rights and equalities* that can contribute to individual and community well-being and thereby increase cohesion. It misses an opportunity to bring existing legislation to bear on the issue and to learn the lessons offered by the “rights and responsibilities” approaches inherent in legislation. Not only does the Race Relations (Amendment) Act offer new legislation for both promoting and enforcing equality, but we would also argue that in some instances the Human Rights Act also offers a *rights-based*

framework for addressing inequalities. Further work is required to see how such equalities legislation can be used to strengthen both the thinking involved in and the practice of community cohesion.

4. Despite the Government's claim that it is time to "move beyond multiculturalism" – to identify and promote a shared culture rather than many different ones – much of what is presently happening both at a grassroots level and amongst statutory service providers in terms of community cohesion and race equality consists of "ethnicised" or "culturalised" responses. They are activities, service adjustments, or means of engagement, conducted along race, faith or ethnic community lines, evidence of a deep-seated, structural reaction that tends to fall back on ethnic, cultural or faith *distinctions* as a means of furthering equality. In Birmingham we already have the evidence that such approaches do not work.
5. It is problematical that so much of community cohesion practice is seen as a public order issue. This is doubly unhelpful. On the one hand, it suggests that "segregation" is an inevitable precursor to conflict; on the other, it fails to acknowledge that a certain level of community disagreement is in all likelihood natural and perhaps even healthy. A much greater emphasis should be placed on fostering communities' ability to analyse, understand and resolve differences and conflict.
6. One of the key difficulties which we know from our own experience many people grapple with is that of making judgements about what is and is not racist. If we want to 'tackle' racism, we need to create space for individuals and communities to discuss, analyse and better understand racism's roots, characteristics and consequences.

Community cohesion, then, cannot exist alongside racism and poverty; without race equality there can be no cohesion.

There is a real danger that the present model of practice regarding community cohesion will serve merely to 'measure' the extent of inequality – and in some cases fail to do even that – rather than tackle the roots of that inequality. In this sense, it may not be an exaggeration to say that community cohesion has the potential to be little more than a distraction from the real business of addressing the deep-seated, structural problems of racism, inequality and discrimination.

Unless these principles are embedded at the very heart of the current debate, then community cohesion, certainly as far as Birmingham's impoverished BME and white working class communities are concerned, will rightly be seen as the emperor's new clothes.

4.2 A Recommendation

“Open Minds” – Birmingham’s public discourse on race and equality

Our work with key institutions in Birmingham has illustrated to us a central difficulty that exists with regard to race and equality issues. What space exists within organisations for discussing race equality is highly circumscribed. It is, for example, more to do with process than people; it is primarily concerned with doing rather than thinking; and it tends to emphasise – understandably – the establishment of professional ‘norms’ rather than of genuinely questioning and open intellectual discussion.

Open, honest, unrestricted intellectual discourse is a necessary condition of any real expansion of our collective thinking and views and a slightly wider public ‘space’ needs to be established as a matter of urgency in order to accommodate and stimulate such discussion. b:RAP is ideally located to undertake this work.

We are advocating that an informal coalition of organisations and individuals are brought together for a series of “Open Minds” discussion forums aimed at examining key issues in race and equality. The participants would be individuals who we believe have not just a key interest in race equality but a willingness to speak openly and frankly about some of the hardest issues.

While it is probably premature to set out a detailed programme for “Open Minds”, there are some crucial themes that we would definitely want to include, such as:

- “Britishness” – what does it mean and is there a unique kind of “Birmingham Britishness”?
- Why “culture” does not equal equality.
- Faith, culture and ethnicity – three different kinds of racism?
- Faith – does it have a place on the ‘public agenda’?
- “Cultural tourism” – do we welcome cultural “gratification” while rejecting the bearers of that culture?
- The death of “multiculturalism” – natural causes or suspicious circumstances?
- Community cohesion – what do we expect it to look like in Birmingham and what do we expect it to achieve?

It should be evident from these topics that we conceive the debates as being “no holds barred”. Their only criteria should be that of expanding our intellectual horizons, of learning from each other, and of questioning our

assumptions. “Open Minds” could be instrumental in helping to shape a new race and equality agenda for the second city.

b:RAP
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