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# **‘Community Cohesion’: reflections on a flawed paradigm**

**Peter Ratcliffe**

## **Abstract**

This paper interrogates a concept at the core of a social policy agenda that has dominated thinking in the UK over the past decade. It argues that the notion of ‘community cohesion’ is based on a fundamentally flawed interpretation of the sources of tension and conflict in Britain’s towns and cities. It overly ethnicises societal divisions and essentialises ethnicity. Examining the development of government policy since 2001 the paper shows that the result has been a predominantly culturalist agenda that obscures key sources of division, most notably those related to social class and material inequality. It is argued that the hegemonic status of this policy stream has also undermined the equalities agenda. The paper concludes with a reflection on the implications of the emergence of a Conservative-led coalition government in May 2010.

**Keywords:** multiethnic, integration, culturalist, material inequality, population churn.

## **Introduction**

The cohesive society is a fundamental aspiration of contemporary multiethnic democracies. What distinguishes them is not so much the aspiration but the underlying discursive and substantive content. In mainland Europe, for example, the focus of social policy is ‘integration’, with the emphasis on minority/migrant populations (Fekete *et al.*, 2010). By contrast, much recent UK policy, the current paper will argue, has been blighted by a confused discourse surrounding ‘integration’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘cohesion’.

Debates on these themes have deep roots in social theory. Of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim probably contributed most to these debates. In conceptualising society as an organism that tends to exhibit pathological features he was concerned with both revealing the latter’s roots and discovering the properties that could heal the underlying fissures. His notion of ‘organic solidarity’ has much in common with the contemporary idea of a cohesive society. Ruth Levitas (1996) acknowledges the contemporary significance of Durkheim’s ideas for policy debates about ‘social exclusion’ and the quest for an ‘inclusive’ society.

Closer still in theoretical terms, however, is the debate concerning the relationship between social integration and system integration (Lockwood, 1964). This focuses on social agency in the context of an individual’s relationship with other social actors and structure in the form of the relationship between different segments of society and the polity. Lockwood (1992: 400) says ‘.....social integration focuses upon the orderly or conflictual relationships between actors...’. System integration, on the other hand, ‘focuses on the orderly or conflictual relationships between the parts of a social system’. Exploring the theoretical complexity (or perhaps

intractability) of these, and related, debates is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to recognise, however, that contemporary debates about social capital make reference to the various building blocks of social integration; and system integration is a *sine qua non* of what is now conventionally termed social cohesion. Approaching the concept from the actors' perspective, however, Lockwood (1999: 65) sees social cohesion as referring 'to differing levels of *social* (as opposed to system) *integration*.' [original italics]

This paper aims to present a critical analysis of *community* cohesion (an ethnicised variant of the latter term) which has acquired a prominent position in British social policy throughout the past decade. The justification for the current exercise is two-fold. First is the fact that the concept has assumed paradigmatic status (in a Kuhnian sense). Secondly, despite the extant (voluminous) literature on the topic, little has been said about (a) the methodological problems associated with the concept, (b) the lack of effective policy evaluation and, most importantly, (c) the insidious side effects of the policy agenda linked to it.

The paper begins with an analysis of the socio-political context within which the community cohesion agenda took shape. It then reflects on concept definition and measurement issues, both core elements of policy formation. The third section follows the trajectory of policy discourse, policy and practice over the past decade and explores the ways in which these have changed as a response to major shifts in demography and political priorities. The final substantive section assesses the impact on the cohesion agenda of the emergence of a Coalition government following the 2010 General Election.

### **The emergence of a paradigm**

As many writers have acknowledged, the origins of the community cohesion agenda can be traced back to a series of events in the summer of 2001. Outbreaks of urban unrest in a number of towns in northern England, most notably Oldham and Burnley in Lancashire and then Bradford in West Yorkshire (Ritchie, 2001; Clarke, 2001; Kalra, 2003; McGhee, 2005, 2008; DCLG, 2006; Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; Cheong *et al.*, 2007; D. Phillips *et al.*, 2008) sparked a national debate about the relationship between minority (in particular Muslim) populations and their white neighbours. Notably, these were towns that had endured sustained economic decline from the 1980s onwards following the demise of much of the manufacturing base (including the textile industry that had once dominated local landscapes). The jobs to which South Asian migrants had once been drawn had disappeared and there were few alternative opportunities either for them or for working class whites.

Two government sponsored reports were commissioned in the wake of the disturbances. The first emanated from a Home Office committee chaired by Ted Cante, a prominent local government figure (Home Office, 2001a); the second was produced by John Denham, then a Home Office minister (Home Office, 2001b). Whilst acknowledging the significance of long established tensions between groups, racism and parlous material circumstances, the principal focus of their attention was the issue of spatial patterns. A common feature of all three locations was a degree of physical separation between poor white populations and their South Asian (principally Muslim) counterparts. Based on this observation the Cante report in particular

inferred that the central problem was that these groups were leading ‘parallel lives’. In other words, the argument ran, residents from the respective groups lived in separate localities, went to different schools, worked in different organisations, and did not socialise, or ever worship, together. In a word ‘segregation’, in all its guises, was at the root of the disturbances.

This set the scene for an agenda that was ultimately to prioritise the dynamics of social relations between groups. More significantly it embodied a thinly veiled culturalist perspective based on the assumption that certain groups, more specifically Muslim communities, were ‘guilty’ of ‘self-segregation’ (Phillips *et. al.*, 2007; Finney and Simpson, 2009). Rather than examining spatial patterns from a historical perspective and in the context of evolving relations between equally impoverished groups struggling to achieve a moderate standard of living, Muslims were subject to a process of pathologisation. Rather than being seen as the product of a complex dialectical relationship between housing market dynamics, normative demographic change processes and the growth of local services and community resources in the context of an increasingly hostile climate of racism and Islamophobia, segregation was seen in a more sinister light. Especially in the wake of ‘9/11’ and more recently the London bombings of July 2005 (EUMC, 2005), physical separation was increasingly regarded as evidence of potential sedition (Kundnani, 2007). It threatened the government’s idealised vision of an inclusive citizenship.

Prior to 2001, Asian communities had normally been viewed in an extremely positive light on the grounds of what Putnam (2000) termed ‘bonding capital’<sup>1</sup>. They seemingly provided both a model to which white communities should aspire and at the same time a vision of what the white working class had allegedly lost (thanks to a growth in individualism and atomisation). Muslim communities were now seen as a threat to ‘cohesion’ (DCLG, 2006; Cheong *et al.*, 2007) or an ‘enemy within’ (Bourne, 2007). So, an internally cohesive ‘community’ was problematised: white working class communities, on the other hand, constituted a problem because they **lacked** cohesion. Out of this debate emerged the idea of ‘community cohesion’ with, as will be seen later, an intriguing confusion in official policy discourse concerning the precise meaning of ‘community’.

### **The concept of ‘community cohesion’: methodological issues**

The next step for policy makers was to define the concept and to find a mechanism for measuring and evaluating progress. In 2002, therefore, there was widespread debate across central and local government, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and a range of faith groups. The result of consultations spanning the Local Government Association (LGA), Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Home Office, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Inter-Faith Network was the publication of *Guidance on Community Cohesion* (LGA *et al.*, 2002). This included the first formal definition of the concept in question. A cohesive community, they argued, is one where:

- **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 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**

The guidance document also provided a good deal of practical advice on how to approach this challenging agenda: challenging not least because the historically entrenched racism and prejudice that, along with material inequality, lie behind most urban unrest in Britain are not readily counteracted by local authority policies and practices in the here and now (DCLG, 2006). The real problem, however, is that the major emphasis is placed what is essentially a culturalist agenda, dominated by the ideas that underpinned (failed) multiculturalist policies of the 1960s; specifically the assumption that inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue represent the panacea to the tensions in Britain's neighbourhoods (Carby, 1982). The one exception is the inclusion of a reference to material 'life opportunities'.

In 2003, the Home Office established the Community Cohesion Unit and set about the task of devising the means by which the level of cohesion in a particular locality could be measured. Its conclusions were contained in *Building a Picture of Community Cohesion* (Home Office *et al.*, 2003). Each of the elements identified in the above definition were to be measured by a small number of indicators (*ibid.*: 5)

#### ***Headline outcome***

CC01. The percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together.

#### ***Common vision and sense of belonging***

CC02. The percentage of respondents who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood/town/county/England/Wales/Britain

CC03. Key priorities for improving an area.

CC04. The percentage of adults surveyed who feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area.

#### ***The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued***

CC05. The percentage of people who feel that local ethnic differences are respected.

CC06. Number of racial incidents recorded by police authorities per 100,000.

#### ***Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities***

CC07. Local concentration of deprivation.

CC08. The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C or equivalent.

CC09. The percentage of unemployed people claiming benefit who have been out of work for more than a year.

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

CC10. The percentage of people from different backgrounds who mix with other people from different backgrounds in everyday situations.

The appeal of these indicators (to policymakers) was that the relevant data were either readily available or relatively straightforward to collect. The surrogate measures of 'similar life opportunities', for example, could be obtained from existing official data sources. Data from the national *Citizenship Survey* was supplemented by that from the *Place Survey* until it was scrapped by the incoming Coalition government in 2010 - <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/audit/nis/pages/placesurvey.aspx>). In addition, up to April 2008 local authorities were bound by statutory requirement to conduct Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) surveys ([http://www.iprow.co.uk/gpg/index.php/Performance\\_Indicators](http://www.iprow.co.uk/gpg/index.php/Performance_Indicators)) and (subject to resources) expected to survey residents on a variety of topics as an integral part of their public relations and/or communications strategies. This cannot be used as a justification for the reliance on flawed measures, however. In this instance, it is not difficult to take issue with a number of the indicators on methodological grounds. The 'headline outcome', for example, is crucial to the measurement process in that it was regarded by government as the primary indicator of 'community cohesion'. It is a pity, therefore, that it simply asks respondents how they view relations between 'people from *different backgrounds*'. It is not possible to ascertain the meaning that people attach to 'different backgrounds' or their interpretation of 'local area' (even though this is *formally* defined as within 15-20 minutes walk away).

Although it would be easy to raise further quibbles about the specifics of question wording (not least the level of generality/abstraction), there is a rather broader question invoked by this methodology. What do these questions actually tell us about the level and nature of underlying tensions that constitute the essence of relations between constituent 'groups' within a locality? The fairest answer would be 'not as much as government might have hoped'. Even discounting significant concerns about the methodology itself (vague and ambiguous question wording, sampling error, and even the choice of the particular mode of interview) a snapshot of people's answers to general/broad questions at a particular time and place generate a high degree of data unreliability. More importantly, what people **say** about an event, clearly does not constitute direct evidence about the event itself.

Where direct evidence is invoked, for example the number of 'racial incidents' recorded by the police, this provides only a very partial picture as comparatively few instances are actually **reported** and not all of these are **recorded**. Furthermore, there

is the question of what, say, an increase in incident numbers might mean (a point to which the Home Office document (2003) itself alludes). It may simply be the case that confidence in the police has improved to the point where people are more willing to report such events. The same argument holds in the reverse case (a drop in the figures).

On the positive side, there is at least an acknowledgment that material inequalities are relevant to the cohesiveness of neighbourhoods. The problem at this stage, however, was that they were considered a secondary issue (McGhee, 2005). There is an extremely revealing comment in paragraph 9 of the Home Office document (2003: 7). This says:

Community cohesion is a theme that cuts across many issues. The indicators that compare life opportunities between people from different backgrounds are also relevant to other issues, such as tackling racial discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity.

It soon became clear that government intended to place great store on the idea of ‘social capital’, which explains why the Cabinet Office commissioned a major review of the evidence around this time (Aldridge, Halpern and Fitzpatrick, 2003). The result was that, rather than focusing on the structural constraints limiting the options of all deprived communities and on the problems faced by poorer minority households in particular – not least systematic market discrimination and racism (Solomos, 2003; Ratcliffe, 2004, 2009) - the major policy emphasis was placed on intercultural and inter-faith communication (Flint, 2009).

The ‘Pathfinder programme’ (Home Office and VantagePoint, 2003), which focused on increasing the level and quality of cross-cultural interaction, resulted in government funding for 14 authorities and a similar number of authorities adopted such programmes despite the absence of such external financial support. Smaller local initiatives such as the *Swapping Cultures* project (Hall, 2006; DCLG, 2007) also demonstrated what could be done to increase understanding between young people from different ethnic, cultural and faith backgrounds<sup>ii</sup>. Once again, however, this only addresses surface manifestations of diversity and difference, what McGhee (2005: 54) sees as an attempt to modify extant forms of sociation and interfere with the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), without tackling the material inequalities that divide people and communities fundamentally.

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), involving representatives of the local authority, public service providers, ‘the third sector’, politicians, local media and the police, were seen by government as a key weapon in the quest to generate greater cohesion. One such strategy adopted by many local authorities became known as ‘*myth-busting*’ (DCLG, 2006). The idea is to counter mischievous untruths circulating within a locality; untruths, in particular, that are driven by an explicit or implicit racist agenda often exploited by right wing groups such as the British National Party (BNP). The authority acts in conjunction with local media outlets to project a ‘corrective’ message. Liaison between these agencies is promoted via the LSP.

The problem with ‘myths’ is that they may contain at least a grain of anecdotal ‘truth’. Such a ‘myth’ is the claim that minority and migrant communities are

accorded preferential treatment in access to social housing. No lesser figure than the (then) incoming Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) provided credence to this allegation by suggesting that there should be a wide-ranging investigation into social housing allocations (T. Phillips 2007). Although he admitted that the ‘evidence’ was at that stage purely anecdotal and could have been influenced by those on the political right, the damage was done by effectively inviting speculation in the national media. The research commissioned by the EHRC ultimately discredited the assertion (Rutter and Latorre, 2009) but widespread suspicions inevitably remained.

It would be a mistake to see this simply as naked racism, however. The influx of migrants to urban (and even rural) areas impacts most heavily on more deprived neighbourhoods. Given a chronic shortage of social housing, some inter-communal tensions are only to be expected (Flint, 2009). The key point here is that there is both a class and a ‘race’ dimension at play (Kearns and Forrest, 2000). Any attempt to address ‘myths’ needs to reflect this reality, especially in the context of a widespread lack of trust in public institutions (DCLG, 2006).

### **‘Super-diversity’ and the entrenchment of a paradigm**

Because of this apparent disconnect between citizens, the polity and forms of governance the policy agenda moved towards the creation of a stronger sense of civic values. Local authorities, via strong civic leadership, were seen as a crucial element of this. At a national level, policy discourse focused on the idea of an inclusive citizenship that stresses the need to develop a set of common values (‘Britishness’) and to balance rights and responsibilities. In practice, the push towards responsabilisation dwarfed the rights agenda and the development of ‘common values’ took precedence over, for example, (common) access to equal ‘life opportunities’.

The next major cohesion policy trigger was arguably the series of bombings in July 2005. As these involved a number of British-born and/or bred Muslim men there was considerable soul-searching in government circles about how such ‘extremism’ could be incubated amongst second generation migrants. The events also triggered an increase in Islamophobia and a wave of physical attacks not only on mosques but on anyone who appeared ‘Asian’. There were even reverberations across mainland Europe (EUMC, 2005).

The first half of the decade witnessed a marked increase in migration to Britain. What was especially significant about this was not so much the volume but its heterogeneity. Whereas the national debate, sometimes frenzied, focused initially on the influx of asylum seekers and refugees, from 2004 attention turned to migrants from the new EU accession states. It was clear once again that most of these new arrivals would settle in the already overcrowded and less affluent inner urban areas of towns and cities, This generated significant levels of ‘population churn’ and placed massive pressures on public services, not least schools, GPs’ surgeries, social housing and welfare services (CIH, 2008; Simpson, 2011).

Realising the potential for a serious escalation of civic unrest, the government sponsored a major review of cohesion policy. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC), established in 2006 and chaired by Darra Singh, then Chief



Executive of Ealing Borough Council, launched a major national consultation exercise. What was ostensibly a response to the issue of ‘super-diversity’ (Phillips *et al.*, 2010: 5), however, often seemed to be swamped by concerns with the perceived threat from radical Islam (an accusation repeatedly denied by the Commission). Indeed, a recent paper from CLG comes close to acknowledging it. DCLG (2010: 7) says that ‘the Commission on Integration and Cohesion was set up following the London bombings of 2005’.

Their draft report (CIC, 2007a) contained clear echoes of the integration agenda of the 1960s, especially in the centrality accorded to the ability to communicate in English. Language was seen as the route both to economic inclusion and to potentially greater intercultural and inter-faith communication. Although given much less prominence in subsequent public debate, however, it also concluded that ‘bringing communities together’ could not be achieved without addressing the **prior** question of levels of inequality and deprivation. Thus, socioeconomic inequality appeared to take temporal precedence over the question of ethnic and faith divisions.

The thrust of this point was rather lost in the final report, however. This proposed ‘four key principles.... underpin(ning) a new understanding of integration and cohesion’: ‘shared futures’, ‘a new model of rights and responsibilities’, ‘a new emphasis on mutual respect and civility’, and ‘visible social justice’ (CIC/DCLG, 2007b: 1). It also provided a comprehensive definition of an integrated and cohesive community. This, they suggested, is one where:

- **There is a clearly defined and widely shared sense of the contribution of different individuals and different communities to a future vision for a neighbourhood, city, region or country**
- **There is a strong sense of individual’s rights and responsibilities when living in a particular place – people know what everyone expects of them, and what they can expect in return**
- **Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities, access to services and treatment**
- **There is a strong sense of trust in institutions locally to act fairly in arbitrating between different interests and for their role and justifications to be subject to public scrutiny**
- **There is a strong recognition of the contribution of both those who have newly arrived and those who already have deep attachment to a particular place, with a focus on what they have in common**
- **There are strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and other institutions within neighbourhoods**

There is also an attempt to define, and distinguish conceptually between, ‘cohesion’ and ‘integration’. In their view:

‘Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together; while integration is principally the process that ensures new residents and existing residents adapt to one another.’ (ibid.: 9)

There are two key issues that merit further consideration. The first relates to the vague and highly confused notion of ‘community’ that it and the accompanying narrative reveals. ‘Community cohesion’ ostensibly refers to relations between groups of people designated as ‘communities’ in ethnic and/or faith terms. In this definition, however, it is clear that it relates to whole neighbourhoods/localities and the relations between groups that may or may not be seen as constituted on ethnic/faith lines. This is much more akin to the idea of civic integration found in Lockwood (1999) and associated with the notion of ‘social cohesion’. This confusion is in an obvious sense understandable, as illustrated by Parekh’s resort to the term ‘community of communities’ as a way of characterising British society (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000). Craig (2007) reminds us that the idea of community has long been debated and critiqued by sociologists, perhaps most notably by Hillery (1964) and Stacey (1969). In this case, however, the key point is that, insofar as the term does refer to ethnicity/faith, it relies on a crude form of essentialism. This supports the claim by Wetherell (2008) that Tony Blair adhered to the idea that Britain constituted a multicultural mosaic neatly divided into separate and distinct ethnic and faith groups.

The second issue of note arises from the implied separation of integration and cohesion in that the former, by implication, refers only to the social impact of recent and ongoing population churn. It is only therefore ‘new residents’ who are in need of integration (and not, say the marginalised and ‘socially excluded’ amongst ‘existing residents’). The discourse surrounding both groups of residents is heavily ethnicised with matters of cultural, ethnic and faith background to the fore. In this context, the precise form of integration is crucial: does it, for example, involve a two-way process such as advocated in a key EU policy statement (Council of the European Union, 2007) or is it, rather, a one-way process of assimilation, absorption or even acculturation?<sup>iii</sup> This brings into sharp focus New Labour’s civic values agenda and in particular the inculcation of a sense of ‘Britishness’.

In February 2008, the UK Government published its formal response to the Commission’s definitions of integration and cohesion and to its recommendations on the way forward (DCLG 2008b). This somewhat simplified the CIC’s definition (whilst doing little to remove its inherent ambiguities):

‘Community Cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new and existing residents to adjust to one another.

Our vision of an integrated and cohesive community is based on **three foundations**:

- People from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities

- People knowing their rights and responsibilities
- People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly

And **three key ways of living together**:

- A shared future vision and sense of belonging
- A focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity
- Strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds

Two things immediately flow from this. First, there is now a clear sense of prioritisation in that, for the integrated and cohesive society to become a reality, there needed to be a focus on material inequalities (at least in terms of ‘life opportunities’ and albeit viewed in the context of a ‘correct’ balance of rights and responsibilities and of mutual trust, including at the broader institutional level). Despite the caveats, however, the equalities agenda does assume a greater prominence than hitherto.

Secondly, the definition (and the accompanying narrative) conveys a clear message that integration is a two-way process involving mutuality. But is this really the case? A perusal of the accompanying practical guide on these matters (aimed at local authorities) is revealing both in the portrayal of the assumed common ground surrounding ‘British values’ and in its examples of good practice from authorities around the country (DCLG, 2008d). As to the former, it states (section 6) that ‘(a)s residents of the UK we are proud of many of the values we hold in common. These include

- Respect for the law
- Treating others with fairness and respect and all races equally
- Working to provide for oneself and paying tax
- Respecting and preserving our local environment’

One might question just how ‘common’ the commitment to these ‘British’ values are, certainly in the case of the second item. As for demonstrating mutual ‘respect’, a little more reflexivity might have been exercised when outlining evidence of good practice. It praises the advice given to ‘new local residents’ (a thinly-veiled attempt at de-ethnicisation) in Gateshead (north-east England) in which an explanation of normative queuing behaviour is followed by the statement that ‘(p)eople feel that it is generally very bad manners to spit in the street’ (ibid.: section 5). This clearly constructs the ‘new local resident’ in pathological/derogatory terms; as a threat to British values and norms of public decency.

More damaging to the hopes of cohesion, however, was the introduction of the national policy known as PREVENT. As argued earlier, there were widespread suspicions that the CIC was triggered by concerns about the spread of ‘radical Islam’. PREVENT took this agenda to another level by seeking to target the sources of

radicalisation allegedly linked to ‘violent extremism’, in the process effectively constructing Muslims as ‘suspect communities’ (McGhee, 2008: 52). The investment of resources in particular areas was to be linked to the size of the ‘problem’ (assumed to equate to the magnitude of local Muslim populations). Local residents were co-opted into playing a pivotal role in rooting out those potentially posing a threat. Practices included daytime police-run seminars and workshops for Muslim women, training them to work alongside the authorities (undercover) identifying, and reporting on, individuals and groups. It is very difficult to see how this policy could help to promote the rather broader aim of creating ‘integrated and cohesive communities’ (Kundnani, 2009; Fekete *et al.*, 2010).

This also sits rather uneasily alongside the burgeoning equality agenda. The Equalities Review (Cabinet Office, 2007), which led up to the establishment of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in October that year, sought to bring together and unify the various strands of the equalities agenda. Crucially, it also raised the thorny issue of socioeconomic equality. In other words, it embraced a more fundamental interpretation of ‘equality’. This was in keeping with most academic analyses, which argued that the focus on *community* cohesion was misplaced: that in concentrating on relations between groups defined essentially in the sense of ethnicity and faith more fundamental class divisions were de-emphasised. Reorienting the debate around *social* cohesion, in contrast, would lead to the recognition of intra- as well as inter-‘*community*’ tensions and conflicts (Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Flint and Robinson, 2008; Ratcliffe and Newman, 2011). DCLG (2010) seems to take this point on board in arguing (*ibid.*: 5) that ‘cohesion is about all parts of the community, not just race and faith issues’.

Laurence and Heath (2008), using multi-level modelling of data from the 2005 Citizenship Survey, reported two key findings; first that ‘it is.... deprivation that undermines cohesion, not diversity’ (*ibid.*: 47) and, secondly, that ‘individual level disadvantage (i.e. low socio-economic status) is ...a negative predictor of cohesion’ (*ibid.*: 47). In other words, it is deprivation, low socioeconomic status, and poverty that are the principal correlates of ‘cohesion’, and not ethnicity. This explains the rather obvious empirical point that ethnically diverse middle class neighbourhoods rarely feature in debates about cohesion.

There appeared to be an emerging consensus in policy circles that a greater focus on redressing inequality in this wider sense was needed. Accordingly, the *Equality Act*, passed into law during the parliamentary ‘wash up’ immediately prior to the 2010 General Election, contained a clause that would impose a statutory duty on public authorities to ensure that their policies and practices contribute to undermining socioeconomic inequality. This ‘socioeconomic duty’ was justified by government on the grounds that ‘a more equal society is more cohesive and at ease with itself’ (GEO, 2010). Equality Impact Assessments would be the vehicle for monitoring and evaluating policy interventions.

There is a compelling argument to suggest that addressing these more general social inequalities is a *sine qua non* in the quest for cohesiveness. But this has also to be regarded as **a necessary but not sufficient condition** in that it would not in itself resolve many underlying tensions, not least because of entrenched racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on (DCLG, 2006). Indeed, greater equality may in the short term

serve to exacerbate certain conflicts. This is where the current cohesion agenda, in placing emphasis on ‘mutual respect’ and ‘good relations’ would be of value (Phillips *et al.*, 2010). Unfortunately, and despite recognising the importance of equality, CLG seemed to prioritise the traditional cohesion agenda as recently as March 2010. CLG (2010) in spelling out duties under Public Service Agreement (PSA) 21 (to build cohesive, empowered and active communities), set out its requirements by essentially resorting to indicators CC01, CC02 and CC10 from Home Office *et al.* (2003).

### **Coalition retrenchment: an epilogue and concluding thoughts**

On the basis of the previous paragraph, the conclusion would be that the New Labour government remained, at best, somewhat equivocal on the relationship between equality and (community) cohesion: indeed there is a suggestion that over the past decade the cohesion agenda has in many ways **supplanted** the earlier emphasis on equalities (Cheong *et al.*, 2007). No such equivocation or ambiguity could be detected in the policies of the incoming coalition government, however.

Within the first six months of taking office, it became clear that there would be a radical shift to the Right politically. The focus would be on ‘small state’ and ‘Big Society’. As to the former, Grant Shapps, the new Local Government Minister, made it clear that local authorities would be relieved of the ‘burden’ of reporting on a wide range of core functions, including matters that go to the heart of the cohesion and equalities agendas. For example, it announced its intention to abolish the Audit Commission, the body that monitors the performance of local authorities across a wide range of functions (<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=15421917>). It has also abolished Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs) - <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/audit/caa/Pages/default.aspx> and <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/Pages/auditcommissionrespondstoabolitionofcaa.aspx> - and it is likely that the same fate will befall Local Area Agreements (LAAs) - <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=15421917>, both crucial to the pursuit, monitoring and evaluation of cohesion and equality initiatives. In the face of substantial and sustained fiscal control, policies in this area will inevitably be sidelined so as to protect front line services. Moreover, past experience would suggest that the lack of a strict regime of monitoring and evaluation will mean that progress is unlikely (DCLG, 2006; Sullivan, 2011).

The most damaging attack on the existing agenda, however, came with the removal of a core feature of the new Equality Act. On 17 November 2010 Theresa May, Home Secretary (and also, ironically, Minister for Women and Equality) said:

You can’t make people’s lives better by simply passing a law saying that they should be made better. That was as ridiculous as it was simplistic and that is why I am announcing today that we are scrapping the socio-economic duty for good. We shouldn’t just compensate people for the barriers to opportunity that they face, we should take action to tear down those barriers altogether (May, 2010).

This represents a gross distortion of the proposed duty. The aim was not to ‘compensate people’ in this way or to ‘make people’s lives better by simply passing a

law saying that they should be made better', but to ensure that public authorities bore in mind the need to reduce inequalities, in the process seeking to remove barriers to progress and create greater life opportunities. A few months earlier, no lesser body than the Government Equalities Office (GEO, 2010) had said:

Equality matters. The Government is, and always has been, the champion of equality in public policy and in our democratic institutions. Equality is not just right in principle ..... everyone has the right to be treated fairly and the opportunity to fulfil their potential. To achieve this we must tackle inequality and root out discrimination.

The Coalition's retrenchment from the equalities agenda has to be seen against the backdrop of ongoing cuts imposed on the EHRC and abolition of Equality Impact Assessments. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) initiative has also been scrapped (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/19/students-education-maintenance-allowance>), with the likely effect of deterring students from poorer backgrounds from remaining in education beyond the statutory minimum leaving age (this compounding the projected impact of steep rises in university tuition fees). These policy shifts run directly counter to May's claimed aspiration to 'tear down'.. 'barriers to opportunity'. The same can also said of the Coalition's rejection of the Act's public sector procurement duty (specifically designed to deploy procurement as a tool for promoting equality – Orton and Ratcliffe 2008).

At the heart of their neo-liberal agenda is a individualism based on a claim to promote 'equality of opportunity' (but not 'equality of outcome'), and a rejection of the previous focus on putative **groups**. Whilst having the merit of rejecting crude essentialism, it also means that monitoring and evaluation is heavily circumscribed. Moreover, the ending of a requirement for local authorities to report on these matters to central government will mean that there will be no incentive even to attempt to collect such data.

There is also one further development that has, rather surprisingly, received little public comment thus far. The Coalition has suggested that the population census to be held in March 2011 may be the last. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) faces a major cut in its resources over the next four years and has been required by government to consult users about how best to deploy this (reduced) funding. As the decennial census is an extremely resource intensive exercise, it is clearly under threat. Were the census to end, assessing shifts in 'equality of outcome' at a national level would become impossible (ONS, 2010).

The 'small state' therefore results in a reneging on central elements of the Equality Act, but the question is whether the 'Big Society' can compensate for this. The latter seems to hark back to the Putnamesque vision of an enhancement of bonding social capital and there are further echoes of the New Labour approach, in that there are superficial similarities with what Flint (2008) labels 'political communitarianism'. Community empowerment was a central aspiration in New Labour policy thinking, and responsabilisation placed an implicit obligation on residents to pull together in order to improve their neighbourhoods. The 'Big Society' agenda seems to go much further, however. It relies much more on voluntarism and the replacement of publicly funded posts by local volunteers and the third sector. A

consensus appears to be emerging (outside Conservative circles) however, that public sector cuts combined with changes in housing benefit and social housing rules with impinge most severely on the most deprived sectors of society. The inescapable conclusion is that a combination of the 'small state' and 'Big Society' will worsen social inequalities and undermine the prospects for an 'integrated and cohesive society'.

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<sup>i</sup> This marked the beginning of a protracted period of renewed interest in social capital theory and, in particular, the work of Robert Putnam (2000, 2007). Detractors pointed to the fact that his work was based on US society and that it was not necessarily appropriate to transpose his ideas to urban Britain.

<sup>ii</sup> The Pathfinder initiative also spawned regeneration (Housing Market Renewal – HMR) programmes that sought to promote a greater level of ethnic mix in formerly mono-ethnic neighbourhoods as well as to improve the quality of housing and the built environment. Results were extremely mixed, however (DCLG 2006). Many programmes failed to respond to their 'cohesion' remit: others found that increasing levels of ethnic mix was not always easy to achieve in practice.

<sup>iii</sup> The CIC report also recommended to government that it should establish an Integration Agency tasked with mitigating the impact of population churn associated with ongoing immigration. This proposal was considered but ultimately rejected (DCLG 2008c).