Introduction: Community Cohesion – A New British Policy Agenda

At times over the past decade it was felt as if Britain’s media and politicians have talked about little else but the interrelated issues of youth, multiculturalism and community cohesion. The violent disturbances in the English northern towns and cities of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in the summer of 2001 saw Pakistani- and Bangladeshi-origin young people clash with the police, as well as with white young men, and led to media fears that Britain was witnessing the development of a violent and oppositional ‘Asian gang’ (Alexander, 2000) subculture. These events prompted a significant re-shaping of government policy approaches to ‘race relations’ (Solomos, 2003), the meaning and impact of which is the key focus of this book, with the emergence of ‘community cohesion’ (Cantle, 2001; Home Office, 2005) as both an explanation for existing problems between different ethnic communities, and as a goal for future progress. All public bodies in Britain now have a duty to promote community cohesion, and public support for cohesion is regularly measured at the local level (DCLG, 2008b). This cohesion analysis of ‘parallel lives’ suggested that profound physical and cultural ethnic segregation in many parts of the country had led to racial tensions and to separate and oppositional identities that urgently need to be overcome in favour of common identities and values if Britain’s multi-ethnic society is to operate successfully and peacefully.

The dangers of such separate, particularly Muslim, identities were apparently confirmed by the horrific events in London on 7 July 2005, when four young British Muslims killed themselves and 52 commuters from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in four co-ordinated suicide bombings on public transport. The fact that this was not an aberration was confirmed by further botched attacks two weeks later, an attack on Glasgow airport in 2007, and a number of very serious foiled plots.
leading to convictions. The reality that the large majority of these Islamist attacks and plots have involved young Muslims educated and mostly born in Britain has suggested that Britain indeed has a ‘Muslim problem’ (Masood, 2006), with government responding through the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ (PVE) agenda (DCLG, 2007b) as part of the overall CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy (Home Office, 2009). Blame for this emerging and home-grown terrorist threat and for the broader problem of ethnic segregation and separate identities in many towns and cities that is arguably causal has been squarely laid at the door of ‘multiculturalism’, not only from perspectives historically questioning of the relativity of values and identities implicit in multiculturalist policy approaches and its effects on national solidarity (Parekh, 2006), but from apparent liberals (Goodhart, 2004) and even equality campaigners, who suggested that multiculturalism had left Britain ‘sleepwalking to segregation’ (Phillips, 2005) through its one-sided focus on difference. The accusation here is that too great a policy focus on the needs of individual ethnic minority communities, and on their distinct and fixed ethnic cultures, has fatally weakened overarching identities and concern for commonality, with the result being separate and oppositional identities within specific ethnic and religious communities. Some evidence in support of this analysis of failed policy approaches to ethnic relations comes in detection of a ‘white backlash’ (Hewitt, 2005) against equality policies seen to favour non-white ethnic minority communities, whilst ignoring the lives and concerns of white working-class communities experiencing profound changes relating to economic restructuring (Collins, 2004). Some of this white discontent has taken a political form, with a rise in support for far-right groups such as the British National Party (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2010), alongside concerns that overtly racist and oppositional identities are growing amongst white young people in some areas.

These developments, both events and policy responses, in the first decade of the twenty-first century suggest that what has previously been seen across Europe as the relatively successful ‘British model of multiculturalism’ had failed and is now of necessity being replaced. In the 1960s, Britain accepted that assimilationist approaches to post-war non-white immigration, which had tried to force new migrants to abandon their own cultures, language and traditions, had failed, and instead started to promote forms of multiculturalism within public policy (Solomos, 2003). A key figure in this move was Labour Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, who linked multiculturalism with integration, the approach to which he defined in 1966 as: