Community Cohesion: More than Ethnicity?

Introduction

A key issue already raised in earlier chapters is the focus and scope of community cohesion policy and practice. Arguably, this policy agenda is self-evidently about ‘race’ and ethnicity, having emerged directly in the wake of the 2001 disturbances (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001), having conceptual antecedents in an independent commission process that was directly focused on the future of multi-ethnic Britain (CFMEB, 2000), and an accompanying political discourse that has been overwhelmingly concerned with tensions between separate ethnic and religious affiliations in relation to common values and identities (Goodhart, 2004; Ouseley, 2001; Phillips, 2005; Travis, 2001). However, it is far from clear that this community cohesion agenda, both in stated policy and actual practice terms, is solely about ethnic identity and tensions. Such an ambiguity over focus can be detected in a number of ways that the 2001 disturbances and the subsequent emergence of community cohesion has been analysed, discussed and responded to. These include the immediate response by a range of elected local politicians, especially in Bradford and Burnley, that the 2001 riots were as much about drug-related criminality and associated territory-based feuding as they were about racial tension (Clarke, 2001; Vasagar and Dodd, 2001). Whilst summarily dismissed by government (Denham, 2001) as not fitting their overall analysis or the policy agenda they intended to operationalise in response, such concerns cannot simply be brushed under the carpet, and are not necessarily in conflict with an analysis of ethnic segregation and racialised tension. Indeed, the local reports produced in Oldham (Ritchie, 2001) and especially in Burnley (Bagguley and Hussain, 2008; Clarke, 2001) focused on deeper economic and social causes generally,
and the profound de-industrialisation that their towns had suffered in particular, as much as the analysis of ethnic segregation and tension foregrounded nationally (Cantle, 2001).

In giving the government’s official response to the CCRT (Cantle, 2001) process nationally, Denham (2001: Chapter 3) highlighted wider government policy priorities on employment, regeneration and housing, as much as those on community leadership, activities of extremist groups and tackling crime and disorder, as part of the government’s holistic approach. This suggested that the associated change of language away from multiculturalism and anti-racism towards community cohesion was not just about a critique of past race relations policies and their unintended consequences for conceptions of commonality, but also marked an increased caution over the extent to which the violent disturbances and the longer-term ethnic tensions that they arguably symbolised could truly be understood only through understandings of ethnicity and ‘race’. Chapter 2 highlighted how French policy limitations prevent them from considering ethnicity as a factor in the economic and social marginalisation of many non-white citizens, but Britain has arguably been reassessing whether policy has in the past overemphasised ‘race’ in relation to similar issues. This suggestion of a wider and more complex ‘social’ conception of community cohesion, rather than simply a ‘narrow’ one focused only on ethnic relations, was apparently confirmed by the ‘Pathfinder’ pilot community cohesion activity through local authorities (Home Office, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) and the associated national guidance to local authorities and other public bodies (DCLG, 2007a; LGA, 2002, 2004) discussed in Chapter 4, and which involved engagement with intergenerational and ‘territory’ tensions within monocultural communities, as well as tensions between settled and travelling communities, arguably also of the same ethnic background.

This raises important issues around the focus and meaning of community cohesion at two levels. Firstly, it suggests questions around the relationship between community cohesion and wider agendas of equality and diversity, and social inequality gaps which need greater future investigation elsewhere to explore initial indications of both overlap and tension (Monro et al., 2010). Secondly, and the key focus of this book, is what this suggests and raises for the understanding and implementation of community cohesion policies at ground level, especially around work with young people and their communities. This chapter uses empirical and academic evidence to explore these further, focusing in particular on how issues of ‘territory’ and associated issues of