



Institute of Community Cohesion

‘Connecting with communities’

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What we are beginning to learn about diversity, is that there is a lot of it about - in fact, it is beginning to dawn on us that we are all part of this diversity – it is about ‘us’ not just about ‘them’.

In any society dominated by a majority community it is inevitable that the majority take their identity for granted – their overwhelming characteristic sameness is a given and is taken to define the nation as a whole.

But minorities, by contrast, usually find it much more necessary to define themselves by their difference; it is quite literally what sets them apart. Their visible difference means that they are often treated differently, if only because their status is in transition as they move from migrant to citizen. And that status lingers on in their minds – and in the minds of the majority community – long after their formal position has changed.

None of this should be surprising, it takes time for all of us to adapt to change.

It should also not surprise us that people want to hang on to their culture and their heritage – just look at the success of the ‘who do we think we are?’ type programmes on TV. Our roots are important to us. This applies to majority as much as minority communities, though minorities inevitably feel that they have to try much harder to prevent their distinctiveness from being overwhelmed. And perhaps it is that ‘trying harder’ that leads the majority community to feel that no-one is helping them to maintain their culture and their identity.

We should not condemn people for trying to maintain their heritage, we need to empathise with that quest. We need to be able to reassure both minority and majority communities that having a number of distinct personal and community identities does not mean that we cannot all share a common identity too. These are not in any way mutually exclusive.

In an era of ‘super diversity’ we do need a much better sense of belonging, which citizenship can provide – and in this debate I will define this as being about both rights and responsibilities (the contractual element of citizenship) and shared values and behaviours (the normative element) – and these should overlay the differences and ensure that we can understand and relate to each other and work together in a shared space and society.

In communities that are apparently composed of people who look more or less the same, we need to learn that this really is only skin deep. Scratch below the surface and differences are evident; we are young or old, gay or straight, in a relationship, or had different relationships – increasingly involving ‘mixed race’ the fastest growing minority – and have every conceivable type of health or physical limitation, we are

from many denominations and belief systems, or none and in one social class or another.

But the work done by Sir Keith Ajegbo on 'diversity and citizenship' is instructive. It shows that students from minority backgrounds are often able to articulate their many identities with ease – a powerpoint slide I often use for our school work shows a female student who describes her identity as a 'British Glaswegian of Pakistani descent who is a Muslim attending a Catholic school (and surprisingly) a supporter of Glasgow Rangers'. In contrast, Sir Keith found many White boys who could only think to say that they were 'from nowhere, I'm just British' or perhaps just say that they are from the neighbourhood in which they live in. Where family history projects, have been used, however, a rich history and heritage emerges – as it always does on those TV programmes - and shows just how much 'difference' really exists in apparently homogeneous areas. We need to deal with that contrast and actually make sure everyone has a personal and community identity of which they are proud.

However, I do believe that all our identities are under threat, at least in the sense that they are not safe from change. But this is not so much from the many cultural differences around us, but from other more profound social and economic impacts.

'Traditional' communities are changing as a result of many internal and external pressures. Society is after all dynamic – and never more dynamic than now.

Incidentally, we have defined 'traditional' communities as, in general, being communities characterised by:

- Relatively high levels of disadvantage and deprivation
- Low levels of social capital neighbourhood and civil society organisations
- A decline in leadership; a loss of traditional structures, eg trade unions and clubs and societies
- A relatively insular social structure and low levels of population turnover
- Predominantly White, but not necessarily exclusively so
- A decline in traditional industry and employment patterns which had tended to dominate social and community structures and provide stable incomes
- A perception that change is imminent and a threat to the area

Some of those aspects will be more important in some areas than others, but I think the most important aspect of these communities may well turn out to be their relative insularity. We are very quick to condemn people who have little understanding of others, or are unwilling to trust people who are different from themselves – and worried about change generally. But should we be really surprised by these fears and anxieties, if they do not have the opportunities to enable them to engage with others and to find common cause?

Ironically, the changes British people are apparently often most afraid of are the ones we are ourselves responsible for – the British are amongst the most 'global' of all peoples, we have travelled virtually everywhere across the globe in great numbers. I am not just referring to the colonies of the past but to today - millions of us apparently now have second homes in other countries. So, it is hardly a surprise that we are also feeling the reciprocal impacts of international trade, the mobility of labour and capital, and the freedom to travel – we cannot dis-invent Easy Jet!

But migration in and out of the country is just one part of the equation. We are also experiencing the most profound change in family patterns, with many of the traditional extended family networks under great pressure and so too, the stability of the nuclear family. In employment terms, we have lost many of the traditional industries and with them the social networks and residential patterns that supported them. When I started working for Wakefield Council in the mid 'eighties, there were 11 or 12 coal mines (or pits) in the area, when I left just 6 years later there was just one (I should add that I am not responsible for the decline!). The mining industry supported working class estates where most of the residents were miners, where the social networks were very strong with many working men's clubs and other societies which constantly brought people together - holiday clubs, works outings, football and rugby teams and many other activities and support networks.

Whilst the demise of the mining industry was sudden, many other industries have suffered, to a large extent, the same fate – textiles, potteries, shipbuilding, fishing and all sorts of manufacturing. And most of the jobs which have replaced them do not have the same sort of geographic focus or the same rigid work patterns.

Of course, there have been many other changes too, particularly in technology, the way we learn, communicate with each other and the way we work – and the skills that we now need have changes too. This has led to massive changes in our workplaces and the way we relate to each other on every level.

The impact of migration – and the way we see ourselves – is just one aspect of the process of change sweeping the globe. It is all too easy for those troubled and challenged by the change to be stirred up by those who are prepared to advance their cause at the expense of others – and I am thinking of the Far Right in particular – who can see no further than the visible part of the change we are experiencing and to constantly allude to 'migrants', or to 'foreigners', or as we have seen recently, just to 'Muslims', as the top line of their cynical appeal.

But there is a danger here that we begin to believe that the Far Right are able to connect with White working class communities on that simplistic basis. Actually, that does not appear to be entirely true and there is evidence that the Far Right are targeting more middle class areas and that the reason that they win the small amount of support that they do, is actually more complex. We also know that there are some very progressive forces and a rich history of outward looking concern for social justice and human rights in some of these areas. Some are coping with and even leading changes. In some cases, they have become more diverse without any problems. We also know that 'mixed race' groups are the fastest growing minority in Britain and this cuts across all social classes. It is true that leadership in these communities has suffered greatly, again partly as a result of other changes, particularly the loss of organised labour and traditional industries and that this is a vacuum which needs to be filled by people who have the whole community's needs in mind.

Having visited quite a number of these areas over the last few years, it is evident that the physical infrastructure is often good, with a lot of investment in housing and other aspects of the environment. But there is also clear evidence of high levels of deprivation and often strong feelings of 'disconnection'.

We hope that the research programme which iCoCo is now undertaking, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) will reveal a great deal more about the perceptions of people within these areas and how best to engage with those views and respond to some of their needs. We do not expect to find a simple answer, but rather some fairly complex and nuanced views which need to be considered with some care. We also hope that the programme of Intensive Local Engagement announced by the Secretary of State today will enable us to gain another series of insights into these communities.

As we have seen with the Prevent agenda, there is of course a danger in focussing on one type of community, but that is now being addressed – thanks in particular to the new approach of John Denham and the Cohesion Minister Shahid Malik – And we do need to understand a great deal more about these communities precisely to add a greater degree of balance to our present approach – we need to engage with traditional communities as much as all others. We can avoid the problems inherent in single identity work if we then ensure that we set their needs and aspirations alongside all of the others and tackle them in a proportionate way under the umbrella of community cohesion. And, in any event, some of these responses to problems can be dealt with thematically, on a cross-community basis, because they are common problems – like the absence of committed leadership, the under-representation of young people and women, the corrosive problem of drugs, the need for skills training, and so on. These are problems which we can respond to in a way that unites communities in common cause.