

# The new politics of community cohesion: making use of human rights policy and legislation

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Although community cohesion and human rights are currently two of the most discussed political discourses in the UK, their links for policy are underplayed. This article presents the findings of a nine-month research project that included interviews with a selected expert sample, and which aimed to explore whether human rights values and legislation can be used as tools for community cohesion. Available levers within human rights and the 1998 Human Rights Act are identified, and evidence-based policy recommendations are posited. The article aims to start a new and more inclusive dialogue on community cohesion policy.

## Introduction

The organic concept of cohesion seems to have been approached by British policy makers as a list of ingredients that certain individuals – particularly faith and minority groups – need to have in order to be successful in baking the ‘Britishness cake’. At the same time, the human rights discourse at the academic, legal and political levels has not been explored within the context of community cohesion. The community cohesion and human rights agendas are not joined up, and while grappling to build a ‘human rights culture’ in the UK, we wonder how community cohesion can be achieved.

This article argues that linking the two agendas is a missed opportunity. Good community relations resonate in the grammar of human rights, which can be read as the structure of individual and collective fulfilment, a sketch for the essential ingredients of the good society. The potential of the 1998 Human Rights Act (HRA) is still underplayed as it was originally conceived as the foundation of a human rights culture that could inform our dialogue of shared values, shared responsibilities and democracy, indeed the ingredients of a cohesive society.

The passing of the 2006 Equality Act, the establishment of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the 2010 Single Equality Act and other current policy and legislative developments present us with a unique opportunity to move things forward for both agendas. “If you feel you belong to a neighbourhood, then you will protect it, and human rights have a role in empowering people,” one interviewee said. “A community cohesion agenda that is not based on the values underlying the HRA will be one of coercion and similarity,” another expert interviewee said.

The evidence for this article was collected through desk research and original fieldwork that was carried out through in-depth interviews with a selected sample of human rights and community cohesion experts (see Appendix I). The interviews were used to prompt these experts to think in imaginative and creative ways about human rights in the hope that the findings will help us jumpstart a dialogue about

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the potential to link productively the human rights framework to community cohesion initiatives.

The article is broken down into three sections. The first section looks at the limited existing empirical literature and human rights jurisprudence to make the argument that the neglect of human rights policy instruments and legislation represents a missed opportunity for a more expansive understanding of community cohesion that goes beyond its narrow remit of race and religion. The second section presents four themes that were identified as common patterns in the experts' responses to the interviews. The final section presents conclusions and recommendations resulting from the nine-month project.

## **Human rights and community cohesion policy in the UK: missed opportunities**

### *Defining 'community cohesion' and 'human rights'*

#### *'Community cohesion'*

The term 'community cohesion' was not widely used until the 'Cantle Report' in 2001 (Cantle, 2001). The report was prepared in the wake of the 2001 race riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham and focused primarily on the challenges faced by black and minority ethnic (BME) and faith communities. It concluded that many ethnic groups were not integrating and 'that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives' (Cantle, 2001: 9). 'There is an urgent need to promote community cohesion, based upon a greater knowledge of, contact between, and respect for, the various cultures that now make Great Britain such a rich and diverse nation' (Cantle, 2001: 10).

The emphasis of the Cantle Report on culture, BME and faith communities had a lasting impact on how government policy defines the term 'community cohesion'. A glance at the many policy documents produced at national, regional and local levels leads us to conclude that the community cohesion question is perceived to be one of race and faith rather than one of society. This is contrary to the many commentaries that followed the Cantle Report pointing out its limited premises of understanding community cohesion (Harvey, 2005; CIC, 2007).

For instance, the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) noted in its final report:

Based on the evidence of increasing local complexity and on the feedback from consultation respondents and practitioners about the current definition of community cohesion, we need to set out a new understanding of integration and cohesion – one that responds to local complexity, and that reinforces a sense of common purpose across communities. (CIC, 2007: 30)

This article adopts the CIC's definition of community cohesion. According to the Commission (CIC, 2007: 32), community cohesion exists where:

There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities; the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a list of these documents, see <http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20080726153624/http://www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> See [www.iars.org.uk](http://www.iars.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> See [www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/10/BORIS\\_Oct\\_04.pdf](http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/10/BORIS_Oct_04.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See [www3.hants.gov.uk/rrr\\_full\\_report-2.doc](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/rrr_full_report-2.doc)

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## Appendix I: Interviewees

Name	Title and organisation
Zrinka Bralo	Executive Director, Migrant and Refugee Forum
Frances Butler	Independent advisor on human rights policy in the UK (currently advising the EHRC and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights)
Dinah Cox	Chief Executive, ROSA
Moira Dustin	Manager, Equality and Diversity Forum
John Eversley	Senior Lecturer in Applied Social Sciences, Metropolitan University
Conor Gearty	Director, Centre for the Study of Human Rights, London School of Economics and Political Science, Barrister Matrix Chambers
Katie Ghose Hanah Clayton	Director, British Institute for Human Rights Development and Training Officer, British Institute for Human Rights
Colin Harvey	Head of Law School, Queen's University Belfast
Nick Johnson	Director of Policy, Institute for Community Cohesion
Francesca Klug	EHRC Commissioner, Professorial Research Fellow, Centre for the Study of Human Rights, London School of Economics and Political Science
Audrey Osler	Director, Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights Education, Leeds University
Darren Sharpe	Coordinator, National Youth Agency, Young Researcher Network
Hugh Starkey	Reader of Education, Institute of Education, University of London
Phyllis Starkey MP	Chair, Select Committee on Migration and Social Cohesion, Member of Parliament

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