Comments on a 'critical examination of the recommendations of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion'

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Abstract

A previous article in *People, Place & Policy Online* by Derek McGhee was highly critical of the work of the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion, which reported to the government in July 2007. This paper reviews the criticisms, and concludes that many are either unfair or fail to take account of evidence in support of the Commission's approach. While there are valid criticisms of the Commission and the policy outcome from its work, the strengths in its analysis should not go unrecognised. There are key differences with early policy reports on community cohesion which fairly respond to a changed environment in which migration has become a much more important issue.

Keywords: community cohesion, migration, diversity, neighbourhoods.

Introduction

Derek McGhee launched a comprehensive critique of the work of the government-appointed Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) in issue 2/2 of *People, Place & Policy Online* (McGhee, 2008). The CIC published its final report *Our Shared Future* in July 2007 (CIC, 2007a), and had previously published an interim report (CIC, 2007b). The government responded to the CIC report in February 2008 (CLG, 2008a) and has published other papers on detailed aspects of the CIC's recommendations.

   Derek McGhee summarised aspects of the reports and criticised many of the commission's approaches, conclusions and recommendations. This article offers a policy perspective on McGhee's critique, questioning aspects of the CIC report but at the same time debating many of McGhee's points. The article does not repeat McGhee's summary of the original report, but takes as its framework the four part division of McGhee's article.

These four parts can be summarised as relating to the CIC's promotion of a 'complex local perspective' on cohesion issues (part one), the CIC's updating of the concept of multiculturalism and its promotion of 'visible social justice' (part two), its promotion of an alternative vision of 'shared futures' (part three) and the issue of what it called 'single group funding' (part four). The article concludes with reflections on aspects of the CIC report that might be considered significant and useful changes in the direction of policy on community cohesion.

Part 1: The CIC's promotion of a complex local perspective on cohesion issues

McGhee's first criticism relates to the CIC's promotion of a 'complex local perspective' on cohesion which recognises 'a series of interacting factors', as against the 'one size fits all' approaches in cohesion policy that emerged from the response to the 2001 disturbances in northern towns. As McGhee says, the CIC favours 'bottom-up strategies that emphasise the local and distinctive community cohesion and integration patterns of distinctive areas'.

The first of McGhee's points under this heading relates to the CIC's concern about the overemphasis in the community cohesion debate on the issue of one neighbourhood being segregated from another by race or ethnicity. Its chair, Darra Singh, characterised obsession with residential segregation as 'sleepwalking into simplicity' (thus referring ironically to the views of the now chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips, who warned against 'sleepwalking into segregation' in speeches in 2005 and 2006).

Although McGhee reports Singh's views critically it is unclear if he is challenging the point being made. However, Trevor Phillips' views on segregation *were* comprehensively challenged by (among others) Danny Dorling, whose own work shows that there is a clear issue of growing segregation by income, wealth and class, rather than by race (Dorling, 2005). Harrison *et al.* (2005) have made the point that there is a variety of reasons why residential clustering of ethnic groups takes place, both positive and negative - the latter including discrimination and feelings of being unwelcome in other areas. It would be a fair criticism of the CIC to say that while it accepted the arguments from researchers such as Harrison on the reasons why ethnic clustering occurs, it neglected the bigger issue (highlighted by Dorling) of segregation by income, wealth and class.

It should also be recognised that while residential clustering of different ethnic communities remains a feature of many cities, it exists in dynamic housing markets in which many people will choose to move out of clusters as others move in. Several studies (for example, Ratcliffe *et al.,* 2001) have shown that many people living in ethnic clusters would prefer to move elsewhere if there were suitable alternatives. Recent work on the housing aspirations of South Asian women shows their reluctance to continue living in clusters and their desire to live in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods (Harries *et al.*, 2008).

Work by Hudson *et al.* (2007) in Manchester and Haringey concludes that in the debate on cohesion 'there is an overemphasis on residential segregation to the exclusion of the complex dynamics of separation/interaction in highly diverse neighbourhoods'. The interim report of the CIC was therefore right in directly challenging the importance of residential segregation and saying we should be 'bold about questioning' it (CIC, 2007b). As the report went on to say: 'how people feel about their area is more important than statistics'.

The second focus of McGhee's criticisms of the CIC is on its preference for solutions being locally based, in part because the Commission sees the issues as more complex than they were before, and as varying considerably between areas. McGhee criticises the CIC's chair, Darra Singh, for having solutions that 'rarely rise above the level of "the local" and "the particular" ', which he attributes to the constraints of Singh being a 'local government man through and through'. Setting aside the fact that he ignores Singh's earlier career in the voluntary sector and in housing associations, it is unclear on what factual basis McGhee criticises the CIC focus on local-level solutions.

Again, the evidence suggests that the CIC report does have a basis in reality. For example, the summary of evidence on neighbourhood effects of immigration by Robinson and Reeve (2006) pointed to the 'distinctive local geography' of settlement and the way that variations in levels of deprivation and of prior experience of migrants moving into an area affect the prospects for cohesion. A new study by Hickman *et al.* (2008) contrasts areas that do and do not have prior experience of migration and ethnic diversity. It also, even more importantly, suggests that policy approaches can shift antagonistic attitudes. This has famously occurred in Glasgow, where a city which evidenced some hostility towards asylum seekers now has many local networks campaigning for asylum seeker rights and against deportations.

In other words, local action can influence levels of cohesion, provided it is based in the actual experiences and characteristics of the neighbourhoods concerned. While it might be valid to say that the CIC focused too strongly on the local level, it is at least arguable that this was necessary to achieve a shift in policy away from 'top down' measures, to ones which pay full regard to local circumstances.

Part 2: The CIC's updating of the concept of multiculturalism and its promotion of 'visible social justice'

The CIC made much of the issue of competition for scarce resources within neighbourhoods, and perceptions of unfairness (in resource allocation) between different ethnic groups. McGhee says that this is a further example of an attack on multiculturalism, which 'has been attacked on many fronts in recent years'. He suggests that for the CIC multiculturalism is shorthand for 'preferential treatment', and that their concern about this applies even to groups such as 'asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants'.

However, the CIC report makes clear (page 33) that in referring to such concerns and resource allocations to such groups it is referring to public perceptions, as indicated by the MORI poll it commissioned. Unfortunately, such views are not surprising, and are confirmed by other studies (Crawley, 2005) and by trends monitored in the British Social Attitudes Survey. A recent study by Threadgold *et al.* (2008) in Wales mentions the ways that migrants are mislabelled as 'asylum seekers' as an apparent justification for disputing their claims on limited local resources such as housing. Hudson *et al.* (2007) describe people asserting their 'entitlement' to services because of having been born and bred in the UK and having paid their taxes (in contrast to recent migrants). Given the apparent growth of such conflictive attitudes, it is hardly surprising that the CIC should want to focus on them and why they occur.

This, of course, brings in the other element of McGhee's criticism, which is that the CIC places too strong an emphasis on competition for scarce resources as the reason for racist

attitudes. Again, however, whether or not it was the case in the past, such perceived competition does indeed seem to be at the root of much current hostility towards newcomers, particularly in deprived areas. Hudson *et al.* call this 'victims blaming victims'.

It would be a fair criticism that the CIC could have made more of the issue of the need for considerably greater public investment in deprived areas, and particularly in affordable housing, where significant shortages exacerbate tensions. While this was emphasised in the CIC interim report (2007b), it received less attention in the final one (CIC, 2007a), and none at all in the ministerial response. Nor does the CIC explicitly question the ways in which policies often expect deprived communities to accept newcomers who themselves are also deprived – as happened and continues to happen with asylum seeker dispersal.

However, it could also be argued that, given the prominence of the issue of competition, and the fact that resource issues are unlikely to be solved quickly, the CIC emphasis on reducing competitive tensions was understandable. This is particularly the case with housing, where what Hudson *et al.* call 'racialised resentment' is fed by the indisputable fact that net migration is a significant factor in the growth of housing demand (Wilcox, 2007), but also may well be influenced by misconceptions about who gets social housing. Work by IPPR for the EHRC and LGA (2008) has shown that migrants' use of social housing remains very limited.

The CIC's promotion of more transparency and of what it called 'visible social justice' (the subject of chapter 7 of its final report) earns McGhee's particular ire, apparently because it responds to this 'white backlash' of white communities perceiving themselves to be the losers in the competition for scarce resources. Whether or not such perceptions are valid, however, they clearly have to be tackled if community relationships are to be improved.

Part 3: The CIC's promotion of an alternative vision of 'shared futures'

The CIC report responded to the debate about multiculturalism by suggesting an alternative vision of 'shared futures', which its chair Darra Singh describes as capturing 'what integration and cohesion really mean to people' - that is that 'the future can be shared even if the past is divided' (Singh, 2007). The essence of the 'shared futures' idea is – first – that there is a need to recognise that people have multiple identities (and that this complexity is greater than in the past), but – second – that commonalities can be found on which to build a consensus view about (for example) priorities for change in a neighbourhood. 'Shared futures' includes both national and local perspectives. At national level, there is the new definition of cohesion which the CIC recommended, and which was intended to inform a long-term policy not driven by responding to crises. At local level, efforts should be made to promote interaction between communities, so as to develop shared values and a shared sense of belonging to an area.

The main emphasis of McGhee's criticism of the 'shared futures' idea seems to be its failure to recognise the discrimination and inequalities which form barriers to such sharing. It is true that the CIC called for 'targeted action to reduce inequalities', but that the emphasis on this is much less strong than it might have been. One of the report's major weaknesses was in not having recommendations about the resource needs of inner city areas.   It was an opportunity to remind the government of its commitments to

neighbourhood renewal (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) and its target that within 10-20 years '...no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live'.

Aside from the barriers caused by deprivation, McGhee also criticises the idea of finding commonality, because it forgets the barriers of what Cohen called 'the impact of structural and cultural racism' (Cohen, 1999). This seems, however, to ignore the results of practical exercises in breaking down such barriers. An example of approaches the CIC would favour comes from two winning entries in the 2008 Housing Corporation Gold Awards, in Birmingham and in Tower Hamlets. Both projects appear to be successful in breaking down barriers between young people from different communities, in the context of sport. So, in CIC terms, the projects built 'shared values' around sport and young people's identification with sports activities, as a way of overcoming or building respect for other differences, such as ethnicity and faith (see Perry and El-Hassan, 2008a).

McGhee is sceptical about the CIC's translation of experiences with bringing religious communities in Northern Ireland together, into projects to bring different ethnic communities together in towns in Northern England. Again, however, such efforts seem to have had at least superficial success (see examples in Perry and Blackaby, 2007). It is at least worth remaining open-minded about such approaches, and encouraging such experimentation, given the serious problems of racism and racialised resentment that persist in some areas.

Oddly, perhaps, McGhee sidesteps a criticism made of both the CIC and earlier reports on community cohesion, that what the CIC terms 'shared values' has been elevated by the government to the much more ambitious aim that people should develop a 'shared future vision' for their neighbourhood (CLG, 2008a). Two recent studies suggest that cohesion should be based on more pragmatic principles, aiming for 'mutual respect and regular interaction between neighbours, rather than aspiring to a level of shared goals and mutual support that may never be achievable in increasingly transient societies...' (Markova and Black, 2007). A balance is required between aiming for unity and recognising separateness. As Hickman *et al.* (2008) point out, most people do not expect to be 'surrounded by people who have the same values as themselves'. But they do want to be able to 'live in close proximity, accept differences, mix with those they wish to, and have local agreed and effective means for resolving disagreements and problems'.

Part 4: Single group funding

The most controversial proposal to emerge from the CIC report was undoubtedly its advocacy of greater limitations on what it called 'single group funding', meaning funding 'awarded on the basis of a particular identity, such as ethnic, religious or cultural'. McGhee has two main criticisms of it.

The first is that it is motivated by the CIC's view that some groups have had or continue to have preferential treatment, or at least that is the perception – particularly in white communities vis-à-vis BME communities (or vis-à-vis labelled groups such as asylum seekers). This issue was addressed in part 2 of the paper (above).

McGhee's second criticism is that the limitations on single group funding are based on what elsewhere (Choeng *et al.*, 2007) has been called the 'social capital cure' for cohesion problems. McGhee rightly points to the strong influence of the ideas of Robert Putnam (2000) on cohesion policy, from the Cantle report up to the present government's policy

statements, and the way that these seem to be accepted rather uncritically. For example, considerable publicity was given to Putnam's latest research in the United States (Putnam, 2007), which seems to show that the more ethnically diverse an area, the less likely it is to generate social capital. Yet there is direct evidence to challenge this in the UK context (see, for example, Hickman *et al.*, 2008). The CIC was careful to point out that the picture was more complex, with areas with no tradition of diversity being the most likely to react adversely to newcomers.

In questioning the validity of applying Putnam's ideas, however, McGhee seems too to be questioning the principle of intervening in social relationships to promote greater interaction between ethnic (and other) communities. This is a more far-reaching criticism that would call into question not only the CIC's belief that more effort should be put into community development initiatives which promote cohesion, but also the actions of many public and voluntary sector agencies working in this field. Robinson and Reeve (2006) rightly point to the lack of systematic evidence on the effectiveness of different kinds of community interventions in different places, but they do not suggest that such interventions *cannot* be effective. It would be interesting to know if this is what McGhee intends to convey.

Nevertheless McGhee makes a telling point when he says the legacy of the CIC may not be what he believes to be its 'naïve vision' of shared futures, but rather the adoption by government of a new, CIC-inspired, funding regime where single group funding will be the exception rather than the rule. Oddly enough, the government itself backed away somewhat from the CIC proposals in its subsequent consultation paper on the issue (CLG, 2008b). Yet McGhee's warning may still come to pass given that there is evidence of funding bodies starting to take the simplistic view that single group funding is now unacceptable under any circumstances, thus cutting off funding from projects which have an established track record in providing culturally sensitive services, without leaving in place any equivalent alternative. The most prominent example is that of Southall Black Sisters, which provides services to women from minority groups experiencing domestic violence or threats of forced marriage, and which has had much of its funding withdrawn by Ealing Council, arguing that cohesion policy means that it should favour groups which serve all communities.

Yet even the milder regime advocated by the CLG could be seen as clashing, at least in spirit, with the government's simultaneous agenda of encouraging community-based third sector organisations to become providers of public services, including specific encouragement for migrant and refugee community organisations to do so (see Perry and El-Hassan, 2008b).

Given the earlier background of Darra Singh as chief executive of a black-led housing association, it might be speculated that the CIC's conclusions on single group funding came in part from his experience. It is certainly the case that many of the eighty-odd BME associations established in the 1980s have diversified to take on wider roles, serving wider communities than those from which they originally drew their base. However, they have also had more than twenty years to mature in this way, whereas newer organisations based in newer migrant communities are still in many cases in their formative stages, and struggling for resources. A shift in climate against single group funding may make life even more difficult for them. This would, indeed, be an unfortunate legacy of the CIC's work.

Conclusion

In the end, however, it seems facile to dismiss the CIC's vision as 'naïve' and to dismiss its efforts to get to grips with what Vertovec (2006) has called Britain's new 'super-diversity'. In arguing that the CIC merely repeats in a different form what McGhee sees as the mistakes of the earlier reports on cohesion (for example, the Cantle report – Home Office, 2001), he dismisses various important features of the CIC report which respond to the changed reality of mixed neighbourhoods in Britain today. For example:

1. Its call for policy to reflect the complexity of needs brought by 'super-diversity', rather than being locked into dealing only with what are now Britain's long-established BME communities.
2. Its advocacy of the importance of recent migration, in its impact both on local areas (e.g. in terms of its affect on the housing market) and on people's perceptions about newcomers.
3. Its recognition that issues about cohesion now extend to many different areas, in addition to those affected by the 2001 disturbances, including many places which hitherto have had little experience of ethnic diversity.
4. Its recognition, too, that cohesion is not just about race, ethnicity and faith, but for example is about relationships between younger and older people in an area.
5. Its advocacy of local approaches, which respond to the different circumstances of different towns and neighbourhoods.
6. Its emphasis on the potential of community development work to improve relationships between groups at neighbourhood level.
7. Its questioning of the significance of physical segregation and 'residential clustering' as barriers to cohesion between ethnic groups.
8. Its arguments for better communication strategies - especially to 'bust myths' about migration and access to services.
9. Its call for a positive policy towards integrating migrants, especially focussing on their English-language needs.
10. Its contention that integration implies a responsibility on both new residents and existing residents in an area to adapt to one another, rather than the responsibility lying only with the newcomers.

To end on a point of agreement with McGhee, it would be a pity if the main outcome of the CIC's work were to be an over-simplistic and potentially damaging shift in funding policy away from supporting community-based groups in minority ethnic communities. if, on the other hand, it were to lead to lasting policy changes which reflect the important elements of the report set out above, its legacy would be much more positive.

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