COMMUNITY COHESION POLICIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COUNTER-TERRORISM: A CONTRADICTION

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This paper provides an initial account of some of the findings from a qualitative study carried out in five metropolitan authorities in the north of England. The project was funded by the Association of West Yorkshire Authorities and by the Joseph Rowntree Trust. and the collaborating authorities were Bradford, Calderdale, Leeds, Kirklees and Wakefield. Data was collected between June 2008 and July 2009.

The impetus for the project came from a concern with the apparent contradiction between two government policies: namely those on community cohesion and those on counter-terrorism; in both of which the Muslim population of Britain are explicitly targeted.

FROM SOCIAL COHESION TO COMMUNITY COHESION

The current UK policies on social cohesion have their specific origins in the civil disturbances in the northern towns of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001. These were events involving young men of South Asian background living in the predominantly inner city areas of decayed ex-textile industrial towns. The Government immediately put in place a series of review processes and the most significant was the Report of the Independent Review Team (headed by Prof Ted Cantle) , (Home Office, 2001) and subsequently ubiquitously called the Cantle Report.

Cantle “The godfather of community cohesion in the UK has made this distinction:

“Social cohesion reflects divisions based on social class and economic position and is complemented by social capital theories relating to the ‘bonding’ between people and the presence of mutual trust. It is seen to be undermined by the social exclusion experienced by individuals or groups, again defined by their social class and economic position.

Community cohesion reflects divisions based upon identifiable communities, generally on the basis of faith or ethnic distinctions, which may reflect socio-economic differences. It is complemented by the social capital theory of ‘bridging’ between communities. It is undermined by disadvantage, discrimination and disaffection experienced by the identifiable community as a whole and by the lack of trust and understanding resulting from segregation and separateness.”

From the outset community cohesion was focused upon ethnic minority communities: and specifically inner city Muslim communities. From the outset it was consistent with the communitarian predilections of the Labour government: and their commitment to ‘Opportunity’ rather than to equality. As will argued in a forthcoming Policy Press Book, one of the implications of the rhetoric and ideology employed in constructing the community cohesion agenda was that Government policy focused not on the structural and policy issues reproducing inequality and marginalisation; but rather upon the construction of bridging capital and harmonious community relations narrowly defined within a framework of redefined citizenship.

**SELF SEGREGATION AND PARALLEL LIVES**

The ethnic focus of community cohesion has proved a perfect framing for the reproduction of the ‘blaming the minority culture’ trope in response to the events of 2001. The ‘pathology’ of the African-Caribbean family, that figured so centrally in the official interpretation of the riots of 1980/81, have received a creative make-over in relation to South Asian communities in Britain post 2001.

This time of course it is the South Asian, Muslim, culture that is at fault. In the context of a major transatlantic concern about the erosion of social capital post Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* it ironically transpires that these Muslim communities are accused of having too much bonding capital. They are accused of self segregation and of living in parallel cultures. (see Finney and Simpson 2009)

Islam, and the British Muslim communities, have been the explicit target of community cohesion strategies. Following upon the post 9/11 growth of Islamophobia, and the Clash of Civilizations debate, the alieness of Muslims was already scripted into the national consciousness. And, in the British context this had been already primed by the tremendous public tumult over the Rushdie affair and the burning in Bradford of his ‘The Satanic Verses’. As with the debate around the veil which was to follow, the British press provided an international comparative dialogue that made these concerns all the more reasonable:-with, for example, coverage of the disturbances in the banlieux of Paris.

Community cohesion has developed as a deeply ideological policy agenda that has a close synergy with Blairism’s flirtation with communitarianism, and with the contemporary Europe wide shift from a progressive multiculturalism to a neo-nationalist assimilationist style of integration: in the British case centred around an attempt to reconfigure citizenship in relation to a constructed Britishness. The discourse of community cohesion, as developed within the British context, has fed off and fed into an anti-Muslimism which is complexly implicated in the avoidance of an
explicit engagement with the reproduction of inequalities within and between populations. It has produced a fusion of citizenship, gender, labour market management and urban policy in which the supposed perverse alterity of Britain’s Muslim populations have become a salient lens through which policies are developed.

**COUNTER-TERRORISM - CONTEST**

Counter-terrorism policies in the UK had a policy history long before 9/11. In recent times the most significant experience had been the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and the British response to that introduced high levels of surveillance, including the extensive use of closed circuit tv, and the none too subtle bending of human rights with the introduction of detention without charge. But it was the bombings in London in July 2005 that were the trigger for a rapid policy response leading to the Contest strategy of counter-terrorist initiative

The logics of cold war hostilities were framed by a state-to-state dynamic in which intuiting the intentions of ‘hostile’ states formed a key part of the intelligence brief. In contemporary Britain the intentions of al-Qaeda inspired terrorists are relatively transparent but specifically who are these enemies remains tenaciously elusive. Particularly with the emergence of ‘home grown’ bombers the threat cannot be assumed to be external. And the remarkable ‘normality’ of detected home grown terrorists undermines any simple ‘identikit’ construction of the proto-terrorist that can guide intelligence and surveillance. Consequently, we are all potentially suspect and legitimate targets for surveillance – well not quite. Given the faith-based nature of Jihadist terrorism, Muslim communities have been specifically identified as targets for the attentions of the multiple agents of the protective state: for surveillance has now extended well beyond the finite number of employees of the intelligence services.

Indeed one of the most significant features of the policy environment observed through this research has been the intensive nature of inter-agency working. This structural and institutional reality has done much to facilitate the reach of counter-terrorist practices, and their attendant discourses, throughout local state agencies engaged in delivering these two policies.
Again it is Britain’s resident, settled Muslim citizens who are the target of Government rhetoric and policy.

**CONTEST**

(Countering International Terrorism 2006)

The Government’s policy response to 7/7 was the introduction of *Contest*: a 4 point programme of action.

PREVENT - to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremists

Pursue - to stop terrorist attacks

Protect - to strengthen overall protection against terrorist attacks

Prepare - where we cannot stop an attack – to

Mitigate its impact

**PREVENT**

Our concern is with Prevent because of its immediate relevance for community cohesion at the level of the local state

“The ‘Prevent’ element of the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy identifies three principal strands of effort whose breadth illustrates the extent of the challenge:

1. Tackling disadvantage and supporting reform-addressing structural problems in the UK and overseas, such as inequalities and discrimination.

2. Deterring those who facilitate terrorism and those who encourage others to become terrorists – changing the environment in which seeking to turn others towards extremism and terrorist violence can operate.
3. Engaging in the battle of ideas – challenging the ideologies that extremists believe can justify the use of violence, primarily by helping Muslims who wish to dispute these ideas to do so.


As with Scarman, point 1 as been largely ignored. As Mottram (one time Permanent Secretary – Intelligence, Security and Resilience in the Cabinet Office put it: tackling disadvantage and supporting reform “is a huge task with uncertain payback in counter-terrorist terms” (ibid p50)

PREVENT AND COMMUNITY COHESION

Prevent has substantially involved local authority staff in working with Muslim communities to build their resilience to radicalisation.

But this is intrinsically designed as a multi-agency task, including working with the police and counter-terrorism units, and on the ground the distinction between traditional community work and intelligence gathering has become blurred. The responsibility for intelligence gathering re. ‘Prevent’ is de facto merged into the activities of community cohesion.

The interviews carried out within this project has been with:

The senior staff in the five authorities who have responsibility for Community Cohesion, or for Prevent, or for both were interviewed. (The sample of 11 is small but inclusive in that it is composed of exactly those persons identified by the authorities as having a leadership role for the management of these policies. Similarly in each of the 5 authorities councillors who hold the brief for overseeing these policies were interviewed. (n = 9). And finally staff who were engaged in the operational implementation of these policies were interviewed. (n = 21). In these interviews a remarkably coherent image emerged across all of the sectors of the sample, that demonstrated a number of generic issues regarding the impact of the Prevent agenda upon community cohesion.
SOME FINDINGS

CONTRADICTORY POLICIES

There was a widespread view that these two policies were contradictory in their definition and implementation.

A senior councillor:

“When you are required as elected representatives to gain the respect of the community and drive through values: the values of education, care of the elderly, standards in life – a clean environment --basically promoting and encouraging the greater well-being of the populace; to also be the Big Brother that is actually spying on part of the community – then there is a contradiction.”

A senior Officer in a local authority

“NO: It’s an obvious contradiction”.

And with truly worrying implications, a senior manager observed that:

“ I could imagine that there’s nothing that you can do in social cohesion that can’t be perceived as --a front for Prevent”

The suspicion that anyone from the local authority may be involved in spying on your community has done much to undermine the trust that community workers have built up.

POLICY OVERLOAD -- LOCAL DISCRETION

The central government has had a positive blizzard of guidance notes, consultation documents and other directives that has come down to the local level as an attempt by central government to micro-manage these policies. In reality it has produced a situation where the only rational response at the local level is to operate with a large level of local discretion in trying to make sense of this overload.

A senior manager

“ You get policy from different departments and its not joined up and they’ve been banging on about joining it up for years, and all that seems to happen is that it gets to be even more complicated”.

A senior policy officer:
Talking of central Government policy “There is that view that they don’t mean it, or somebody in an office has got to do something: and they’re just chucking stuff out seeing what works:”

At all levels in this data there is evidence of strong local disdain for the expertise and working methods of their central government colleagues.

PREVENT AS POLITICALLY / MORALLY PROBLEMATIC

White majority personnel

There are strong political objections to the explicit targeting of Muslim communities in the Prevent agenda. Four of the five local authorities refused to sign up for NI 35 (a key performance indicator) when Prevent was initially introduced.

A senior councillor with responsibility for Prevent:

“...When the document came out from the Home Office I was aghast. I threw it out: I said ‘We’re not having this. It was racist. Quite clearly racist’

There are also new moral burdens associated with working with Prevent which apply to Muslim and non-Muslim staff.

In the past if something went wrong with your work you got your wrists slapped and told not to do it again. But with Prevent if it turns out that in your work you have been unknowingly nurturing a potential bomber then a whole different set of agendas comes on board. This is a deeply troubling and pervasive impact of Prevent in changing the working conditions of local authority personnel. The nature of terrorism is to pollute normal life with suspicion, anxiety and fear and it appears to have penetrated into the professional environment of local authority personnel. They fear being accused of being associated with some unidentified terrorist activity; and are consequently risk averse when making judgements regarding potential initiatives.

The control on knowledge that is central to the counter-terrorism programme means that the great majority of staff, including senior managers and councillors cannot have access to the information that would enable them to realistically assess risk and to comprehend the actions taken by the CTU on their patch. They are accountable, but outside the informational loop. This has profound implications for managerial practice.
For Muslim staff there are issues about how their credentials as members of the
Muslim communities are ‘exploited’ by their employers. They feel exposed and are
careful to try to protect their integrity with their own community.

A Muslim worker

“But what we are trying to do is that people who make policy and make
decisions are actually depending on people that know their communities; and
that particular communication is not as it should be. Because, if I say to my Head
of Service “Look this is what needs to be done here” my Head of Service is
going to say “Ok, I hear what you’re saying. (but) we’re actually bound to do
this.”

There is evidence, both of Muslim staff energetically protecting their own
integrity within their communities, and of managers being supportive and
sensitive to the challenges that are specifically faced by their Muslim staff when
delivering both of these policies. But the tensions remain real.

COMMUNITIES, IDENTITIES, GOVERNANCE

The strong local identities of the white majority population:

There are very strong local identities which impact on peoples feelings of
detachment from the metropolitan authority which is their service provider. The
nature of the local specificity of established white communities and their relation to
each other and to the authority loom large in the interviews. The dynamics of
intergroup tension that flow from these identities and topographies figure large in the
local staffs understanding off, and handling of intergroup tensions. The staff make
subtle and creative use of their own existential experience of their patch, and of the
data gathered by the local authorities’ research a and policy departments.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Despite this depth of knowledge about local communities when it comes to recruiting
people from these communities to participate in local authority initiatives there is a
repeated complaint from the respondents that—‘it’s the usual suspects: at both national and local levels.

Muslim community worker

“ The other thing is—people up in positions of power and responsible decision making do not really have the kind of understanding, and again it’s the kind of forums that the Government are creating, are usually in a sense the usual suspects as well, and nobody ever questions that”.

A Senior manager:

“ I think that the issue is we only ever scratch the surface of those communities, (ie Muslim communities). So we work with the usual suspects and the usual suspects will hold their hands up and say ‘Yep, we know we’re the usual suspects.’

( This person is talking about a collusive mutual dependency on each other. The authority needs to be seen to be consulting—and specific community groups are in competition for legitimacy and funding.)

In the risk averse policy setting of community cohesion/Prevent there is a built in tendency to rely upon ‘known commodities’ when attracting participants into new initiatives. As a specific aspect of the wider process of securitization the operational processes of implementing both of these policies are permeated by the priorities and needs of counter-terrorism.

Related to this process, the issue of funding has presented a quite specific challenge to Muslim community groups as an initial rejection of any connection with Prevent funding by the majority has become moderated in many cases by a pragmatic engagement with this source of funds as other funding sources have contracted, and some Muslim groups have accepted funding. The governmental, and academic, process of providing apparently reasonable distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslim organizations has been extensively played out through the funding regime. In many instances this is self-legitimating as those who persist in refusing to participate are self-evidently ‘bad’.

Conclusion:

The data in this project has revealed an extensive overlap in management and delivery of community cohesion and Prevent policies. There is real evidence of the polluting effect of Prevent upon the community cohesion agenda. Community cohesion itself is a deeply ideological practice and the staff interviewed in this project have experienced quite specific stresses resulting from the intersection of these two policies.