

Complexity and Cohesion

The Three Rs: respect, reason and rights

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The interim report from Sir Michael Lyons has at last got the message home that local government is much more than an agent of the central state and a deliverer of services to customers. And Lyons is right that we have a key responsibility in shaping places – connecting the unique and distinctive capabilities of our areas with the opportunities of an ever more inter- dependent world. The recently published local government white paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, stresses this place-shaping role but also gives emphasis to community empowerment and citizen engagement as well as to local councils' role in ensuring community cohesion. This shift of emphasis is to be greatly welcomed. For the primary role of local government is one that, hitherto, has seldom been mentioned – to help people live safely and harmoniously together. We do not just deliver services to customers; we also deliver obligations to citizens – obligations to citizens about their responsibilities to each other; whether as neighbours or as strangers.

In communities of shared heritage and common social norms this can be a challenging task. In communities of diverse heritage and varied social norms it is more so – to political and community leaders as well as to public servants. These challenges have been brought to the fore over recent years because of concerns, in some localities, of community fracture, separation and division. And one aspect of this difficult challenge has fallen to the new integration and cohesion task force.

The task force will undoubtedly receive many submissions from local councils about “what works” locally. For there are many examples where distinctively different communities living within the same locality have developed shared approaches to living together. Examples abound of how communities once fractured and separate have been drawn closer together through dialogue and inter-community development

and liaison. And it would be right to capture as many compelling case studies as possible. We need to draw general lessons from them and offer threads and strands of “best practice” for others to reflect on; and, where appropriate, to follow. After all when we look across the world we see that the source of most of the major threats to humanity is from real conflicts between communities who consider that their ways of life are incompatible. And we know that the site of most successful rapprochements between communities is at local level. There are many powerful stories of how local communities' relations have overcome separation, hostility and even violence.

But it would also be useful to ground our approach in sound concepts. What is the nature of social change at the beginning of the 21st century in Britain? What factors accentuate difference and separation within and across communities? How does any new approach to integration build on local government's record of ensuring equal opportunities, embracing diversity and fostering multiculturalism? And what guiding principles would help councils develop local approaches to inclusiveness – to integration and cohesion?

This article attempts to give just an outline to these complex issues. My argument is that we should stress the need for openness within and across our communities. We need to maintain our focus on equality, diversity and multiculturalism but we need to do so with the “three Rs” in mind: respect, reason and rights. Respect is a necessary pre-requisite for a tolerant and healthy multiculturalism. Reason enables us to enter into open and critical dialogue with each other across communities. And ultimately we relate to each other, as individuals and as social groups, through our common citizenship and through a simple framework of individual human rights and obligations.

Social change, social diversity and social class

Thirty years ago, discussion about social change and social diversity in Britain centred on analyses of social class and socio-economic status. The twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in the 19th century created a society strongly cleaved on socio-economic lines. The 20th century processes of de-industrialisation and suburbanisation changed the character, but not the underlying nature, of this social cleavage. By the middle of the 20th century in Britain, some localities contained strong “occupational communities” where a majority of people in an area had, for two or more generations, worked in the same occupation or even for the same employer – in mining communities in the north, in Wales and elsewhere; in the docks and ports throughout the country; and in areas of high skilled manufacturing in, say, the Midlands. In very many instances these communities were characterised by a shared sense of solidarity.

At the beginning of the 21st century social class and socio-economic status still matters. Economic advantage and opportunity remains unequally distributed. For individuals, educational achievement is a powerful vehicle for social mobility. Therefore, the education of children from poor families is a crucial driver of social mobility in particular and of social change more generally. However, there is evidence that parental social class still has a strong bearing on life-chances. Progress has been made in achieving gender equality, at least in education. But in 2001, just 4% of the (then adult) children of two-parent families, whose parents were from a professional or managerial occupation 20 years earlier, had no educational qualifications. This compares to 28% of those whose parents were unemployed 20 years previously. This is clear evidence that there is long way to go in achieving progress on inter-generational social mobility.

This is why spreading economic opportunity and promoting educational achievement is central to equalising life-chances across generations. And it is why, it remains sensible to understand the processes of social diversity in the UK through the lens of social class and inter-generational social mobility. Social class differences cut across and inter-relate with other social differences. Our understanding of these differences, and the processes through which they persist across generations, has become more sophisticated. But this growth in understanding has not resulted in more effective social policy to minimise these differences. Indeed, modern-day maps of deprivation in, say, London, produced from complex multivariate analyses of the 2001 census, share remarkable similarities with maps produced by Charles Booth in 1889.

Persistent patterns of deprivation partly reflect socio-economic inequalities and partly reflect how the housing tenure system produces residential segregation of socio-economic groups in urban areas. At local level, tenure both reflects and refracts social class – social housing does not make you poor but you only get allocated social housing if you are poor. The point is that social class and socio-economic status matters – and when we examine other aspects of social difference (ethnicity, religion, culture, etc) we ought not to neglect the socio-economic processes completely. They still explain, in large measure, why people live where they do and why children’s life-chances are unequal. But, and not for the first time in British history, other social differences overlay and make more complex this simple narrative of social change.

For example, ethnic origin is significant in terms of understanding social mobility in Britain. According to a recent longitudinal study of social mobility, ethnic minorities in Britain have achieved a degree of upward mobility through the education system. The study shows that some members of minority ethnic groups with working class parents are more likely to be upwardly mobile than white people of non-migrant but otherwise similar backgrounds. However, this is not the case with young people of Pakistani origin whose social mobility is lower than their white British counterparts. Indeed when educational achievement is examined through the prism of class it remains a powerful explanatory factor – in last year’s GCSE results nationally, white children whose parents are poor (ie those children in receipt of free school meals) achieved less well than equally poor members of any other ethnic minority group.

Multiple Identities . . .

A strong sense of personal identity is a comforting anchor in a swirling world. It is both affirming and confirming. When we have a strong sense of “who we are”, it is self-affirming and it also enables us to identify with others – with people with whom we share some (or many) aspects of our own identity. But

personal identity is not only a static series of attributes. It is also a dynamic discovery of self. Both something you are and something you become – through a mix of circumstance and choice.

No human being has a singular source for their personal identity. Even Socrates who famously said he was a “citizen of the world” was also an Athenian Greek man. We all have multiple sources of our personal identity. No one prism (not gender, not ethnicity nor religion) satisfactorily describes our whole selves. And yet public debate can slip so easily into the simplicities of classification: between ways of classifying “them” so that we can compare and contrast them to “us”. In the current climate of anxious concern, this can have dangerous consequences or it can lead to false simplicities where, “despite our diverse diversities, the world is seen not as a collection of people, but as a federation of religions and civilisations”.

We need to avoid these simplicities and appreciate the multiple, inter-playing character of personal identity. Categorising people into two or three simple groups (such as ethnic minority and white; or Muslim and Christian) hinders more than it helps. Statistical aggregation of people according to their attributes, lowers their dignity as much as it lowers our understanding of their differences.

Ethnic and religious diversity . . .

The proportion of the British population that are of ethnic minority origin has doubled since 1975. And the ethnic minority population is more diverse now than it was then. According to the 2001 census, of the total population in Great Britain of 57.1 million; 50.4 million people are of white British origin while some 6.7 million have different ethnic origin. Of the same total, 41 million are Christian, 8.6 million have no religion, 4.4 million did not state their religion and the remaining 3.1 million people are comprised mainly of Muslims (1.6m), Hindus (0.6m), Sikhs (0.3m), Jewish (0.3m) and Buddhists (0.1m).

Some ethnic groups are more religiously diverse than others; and, similarly some religious groups are more ethnically diverse. People of Indian origin are the most religiously diverse group (45% Hindu, 29% Sikh, 13% Muslim, and 5% Christian). Pakistani and Bangladeshis are the least religiously diverse. By contrast, Muslims are among the most ethnically diverse religious groups in Britain – 43% are Pakistani, 17% Bangladeshi, 8% Indian, 7% “other” white, and 4% are actually white British.

The relatively small size of the ethnic and religious minority populations in Great Britain and their greater tendency to cluster in small areas means that most local authority areas are not particularly diverse. London is by far the most ethnically diverse region in Britain – it is home to more than three-quarters of Britain’s total black African population, six out of 10 black Caribbeans, one-half the Bangladeshi population, one in four of the Indian population and one in three each of the white Irish, mixed and Chinese populations and one in five Pakistanis. It is this rich ethnic diversity that makes London’s claim to be a truly world city genuinely authentic.

But it is important to recognise that most local government areas have low ethnic diversity. Of the 376 local authority areas in England and Wales, just 28 have high ethnic diversity – almost all of which are in London. The London Borough of Brent is the most ethnically diverse local authority area in Britain. According to recent analysis undertaken for the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the likelihood of two people chosen randomly from Brent’s population being of different ethnic groups is 85%. By contrast, the same likelihood in Easington, County Durham, is just 2%.

These measures of diversity should not be confused with measures of concentration. The same ONS report shows that concentrations of specific ethnic groups within the population were more apparent at small area level (the so-called “medium super output area”, MSOA, which is comprised of an average of some 7,000 people) than at the local authority level. In only a few of these small areas do ethnic minority groups form the majority of the local population. Indians form a majority in a small number of areas in Leicester; as do Pakistanis in Bradford, Birmingham and Rochdale; as do Bangladeshis in some areas in Tower Hamlets and Oldham. But according to this analysis, no other ethnic minority group formed a majority in any other small area (MSOA) in Britain. It is these concentrations of ethnic minority populations at the ward or small area level (and not the ethnic diversity of local authority areas or cities), which appear to give cause for concern

in respect of the integration and cohesion agenda. This is why councils need to adopt cohesion strategies which connect with small areas and not just their entire area.

The concentration of religious minority populations is also more evident at this sub-local authority. And again, areas within Birmingham, Bradford and Leicester emerge as cities with relatively higher degrees of concentrations. And London also features as an area of diversity rather than concentration. For example, there is a 62% random chance of two people from Harrow's population being from different religious groups. Concentrations of minority populations in small areas reflects some degree of residential segregation. It produces a cocktail of social issues for communities themselves as well as for local government in its attempt to foster community development. This is because residential segregation crystallises "difference" into daily life – "we live here, they live over there". This sense of distinctive separation can be found in all communities that are "trapped" in localities. It can be found in poor white communities as much as in poor ethnic minority communities. It is as much a function of impoverished ambition and aspiration as it is a function of fear of others. Bounded communities, of all types, live frozen in localities, looking inwards and backwards. They struggle to preserve ancient traditions and customs (of kinship, work and sense of place) and feel threatened by the uncertain character of modern life.

One recent in-depth social research account of Tower Hamlets, for example, highlighted the complex nature of divisions between generations, classes and ethnic groups in respect of the allocation of social housing, attitudes to welfare entitlement and the corresponding role of local government. This considered account is now being supplemented by more journalistic accounts of tension and division in communities across the nation (and not just in urban Britain) arising ostensibly from ethnic and religious differences. The current call, across the body politic, for stronger social integration and community cohesion arises directly from these concerns.

Integration and cohesion . . .

The two concepts of integration and cohesion are, like most social policy terms, quite slippery when examined up close. They imply a search for greater unity and solidarity amid diversity. The distinction between exclusive and inclusive is perhaps more useful in respect of characterising the social life of communities; but the terms "integration and cohesion" seem to have stuck in the current social policy lexicon. At the surface, they imply a better linkage or connection between otherwise separate and disconnected communities. However, in a country with relatively small ethnic and religious minority groups, the phrase "integration and cohesion" can be read to imply a range of differing things. From a desire for harmony and compromise; through a visible reduction of separateness between people (in terms of their everyday life – in places where they live, work, learn, play and pray); to some degree of assimilation of minority groups with the larger "indigenous" majority group. It is this often un-stated continuum of implications, together with the propensity of people of all persuasions to talk past each other rather than actively engage in dialogue, which raises the temperature in public debates on these issues.

The influential American social theorist, Robert Putnam, uses the terms "bonds" when referring to the social norms (or the "social glue") that ties specific communities together. Sometimes it seems that some communities have stronger bonds than others. Although this perception may arise as much from observational bias as from actual social differences – what one community considers a strong bond, another may consider a weak one. Putnam also refers to the importance of social "bridges" that connect distinctive communities to other communities. Using his terms then, the case for integration and cohesion rests on the feasibility of building new, and strengthening old, bridges between communities. It does not necessarily follow that the bonds within any specific communities need to be weakened – unless of course one of those bonds includes the maxim "don't build bridges to others".

Migrant people have particular challenges in building social capital. They have to handle the demands of multiple identities, while building bonds with people like themselves. This means that the link between social capital and social cohesion is not straightforward for local areas with high ratios of migrant groups. Migrant communities may need to establish strong bonds within themselves before they can build connections with the "majority" community. A recent examination of the links between social capital and migrant communities in Britain argues that forming social capital within a community can be a process of delineating

boundaries among sub-groups of a larger ethnic minority, as much as a process of stitching the sub-groups into the mainstream.

Putnam's "bonds and bridges" metaphor can be applied in weak or strong version. In the weak version, the building of bridges simply establishes a more networked set of communities. The differences remain distinctive, although they are more connected. In the strong version, the bridges act so as to reduce the distinctiveness of communities – essentially through establishing network-wide social norms. This strong version itself comes in two variants. The first variant is social – it suggests the existence of deeper social norms of cooperation. This latter idea is akin to the late 19th century idea of "organic solidarity", which was thought to arise through the cooperative endeavour amongst workers coping with the new and harsh demands of modernity. The second variant is political. It stresses that while a nation may be composed of varied communities, it is held together by a common political citizenship or responsibilities to each other.

The melting pot

Now consider two other metaphors that arose in early American social policy: the "melting pot" and the "salad bowl". The "melting pot" was a metaphor first used in the 1780s to describe the way in which American society was thought to be converging to a new norm from its diverse origins. The term has stuck in the popular mind although in practice it has proved to be a hopeless metaphor for social policy. The later term, the "salad bowl", was introduced by Horace Kallen in 1915 to fit what he described as the "cultural pluralism" of the USA. Kallen attacked the racism of the earlier Anglo-Saxon assumptions of assimilation but his own approach was also heavily dependent upon racist assumptions.

While the salad bowl metaphor is less well known in Britain it is more useful in that it acknowledges the distinctive character of different heritage while implying that variety is beneficial and continuing – along the lines of the "whole is greater than sum of its parts". But in truth, the use of these metaphors over the past century has created far less light than heat. Describing social and cultural diversity in an inclusive manner has proved very difficult, actually promoting unity in the context of cultural diversity is harder still.

Cultures differ . . .

This is nothing new. The appreciation of cultural pluralism did not develop in 19th century USA. Cultural differences between peoples have always existed; and throughout history and across all societies, people have invariably favoured their own customs and traditions above those of others. Nearly 2,500 years ago, the Greek author, Herodotus, wrote in the following terms: "For if one were to offer men to choose out of all customs in the world such as seemed to them the best, they would examine the whole number, and end by preferring their own; so convinced are they that their own usages far surpass those of all others."

This reads as true for the current age as it did for its time. It shows how as human beings we view the world, and pursue our own version of the "good life", through strong cultural lenses that bias our perception and our judgement. Culture is lived and dynamic. It is a central source of personal identity but is also a key element of our heritage and as such it differs from ethnicity, religion and nationality. But culture is not reducible to ethnicity, religion or nation. And because people differ and their circumstances vary, culture is never homogenous. We may acknowledge the existence of many cultures but when we examine any one culture in depth we soon realise that any "single culture" is itself a river of many tributaries.

However, the past two centuries have seen two developments which have added further layers of complexity to our understanding of cultural pluralism. First, the sheer scale of global movements of people during the 19th and 20th centuries has led to a position where very many societies are comprised of people of differing ethnicity, heritage, cultures, faiths and customs. And second, the rise of democratic governance in the 20th century has built, in over 100 nations in the world, a stronger sense of equal political rights – of citizenship. This means that in democratic societies people may have different religious beliefs, different ethnic heritage, different customs and cultures but they now share common political rights and responsibilities – a common citizenship.

Much more recently, the Chief Rabbi in Britain, Jonathan Sacks, wrote a book called *The Dignity of Difference*. It is a marvellous text of informed optimism about how people of different faiths and heritage can best live in harmony together. Sacks noted that in this century we now live in communities of radical difference.

“Throughout history until recently, most people for most of their lives were surrounded by others with whom they shared a faith, a tradition, a way of life, a set of rituals and narratives of memory and hope ... that is not the situation today. We live in the conscious presence of difference.”

The reality of these felt differences at the local level in the early part of the 21st century in the UK has set complex challenges for local government. Political, community and managerial leadership locally are only just beginning to address this complexity. The challenge for local government in the UK is to create the conditions where local political citizenship and local civil society can flourish amid ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

Lessons from equal opportunities . . .

British local government is not starting from scratch. We have substantial practical experience of this challenge. Our colleagues in Northern Ireland have enormous experience in managing public services in the context of extraordinary segmentation and tension based on religious difference. Our colleagues in Wales have handled heritage issues and linguistic differences with sensitivity and dignity. And in England and Scotland we have dealt with the reality of social and cultural diversity in our localities; dealing at first hand with real people, their hopes and their fears. In urban England, we began our approach to this issue by challenging racism and focussing on disadvantage that arises from ethnic difference.

My own authority, the London Borough of Lewisham, established a “race relations working party”, one of the first in English local government in 1977. Its meetings were held within reach of widespread racism and racial injustice. But its work was foundational for my council and its now ingrained commitment to combating racial injustice and fostering racial equality. Thirty years later, councils across the country have practical experience in fostering community harmony – Bradford council’s recent “harmony” awards being perhaps the best recent example of effective work in this area.

And tens of thousands of local government professionals have developed locally appropriate approaches to combating injustice and discrimination locally and implementing more just policies and practices. I have myself been personally involved in these issues for all of my professional life. One of my first jobs was in Lambeth’s housing department in the early 1980s when I was responsible for drafting part of the council’s response to the Scarman report into the lessons to be drawn from the Brixton riots.

But the challenges we face in the early 21st century are more difficult than those we faced just a few decades ago. Across the country, the demand for fairer and more just outcomes is ever present, while society is becoming more diverse. In London and other metropolitan areas, we now face multi-dimensional challenges – our cities contain a bewildering and marvellously rich diversity among their citizens. We live at a time when perhaps the majority of people now have multiple sources for their personal identity. What’s more, people are generally more demanding of the state, while individuals are much less deferential to authority. And, if all that wasn’t enough, we all know that public institutions are saturated with accountability for their actions as, among other things, there exists a voracious 24- hour-a-day media coverage of everything. And yet our overall policy stance has failed to keep pace with this dramatic change. Put simply, in the decade from 1985 to 1995 local government “discovered” equal opportunity. Policies were developed to ensure opportunity was equalised across different groups of people, simply to make sure that people who were subject to racism, sexism and other pernicious “isms” had the same chances as other people. Generally, these policies made a difference for the better. This is why local government, on the whole now delivers more equitable outcomes than it did in the 1970s.

Lessons from diversity . . .

In the decade from 1995 to 2005, local government “discovered” diversity. It was felt that approaches to equalising opportunities had become a bit too process dominated. This sprang initially from a recognition that we had unwittingly fallen into classifying people into just a few categories – the mainstream majority group and then a few other “minority disadvantaged groups”. It also became evident that diversity was beneficial to achieving organisational effectiveness. In a rapidly changing environment the successful organisation is one that contains the requisite internal variety to its external environment. The solution became to add a diversity twist to the equal opportunities mix. Some made the mistake of adopting diversity approaches as a substitute for a disciplined approach to ensuring equal opportunities – instead they should have used them as a supplement.

The benefit of an approach based on diversity is that it embraces the full variety of human character and difference. It is important that people have opportunities to affirm, cherish and celebrate their heritage, traditions, faiths and customs. In the local government calendar, October is Black History Month – a rich recognition of the long-run contribution of black and minority ethnic people to our society, a marvellous opportunity for public affirmation of this contribution, and a reminder to us all, whether white or black and minority ethnic, of how little we celebrate our unity in diversity. However, to some extent a new orthodoxy emerged – one that blended the language of “celebrating diversity” with techniques for addressing the specific needs of so-called “hard to reach” groups. At best this approach has helped local government to approach complex community issues in a humanist and all embracing manner; at worst it diluted our focus and led us to overlook the persistent nature of the wicked “isms” (and particularly, racism).

At least a focus on diversity has led us to move beyond the simple notion of “tolerance”. In a plural society characterised by difference between people, their customs, traditions and their belief systems, tolerance ought to be encouraged. But tolerance has two weaknesses. First, it promotes passivity – I don’t even need to understand why or how you differ from me, I simply need to tolerate your difference. And second, because it avoids engagement it can undermine the social progress, which occurs when communities live together in harmony. I may learn more about how best to view the world and how best to pursue a “good life”, if I better understand why and how you differ from me. At its root I suspect that as human beings, few of us seek just to be tolerated, instead we all crave the respect of others – and not just for what customs, traditions and beliefs we hold but because simply of who we are.

Respect . . .

Respect is a simple word but it has very complex connotations. This complexity is understood by people intuitively – they do not need it defined. A sense of disrespect is felt acutely; and respect when offered to others is a precious emotion as well as a scarce commodity. Respect has several dimensions: it is comprised of a mixture of status, prestige, recognition, honour and dignity. We gain self respect from our sense of our own abilities and capabilities relative to performing a task and in some cases relative to how others perform tasks.

The sociologist Richard Sennett refers to the personal and the social aspects of “respect”. He argues that mastery of a craft or a subject can produce a high measure of self respect. But respect has strong social dimensions, it is not just a sense of personal craft.

“Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen – as a full human being whose presence matters. When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around. Like many famines, this scarcity is man-made; unlike food, respect costs nothing. Why, then should it be in short supply?”

Respect is crucial for positive social interaction, it is crucial for bonds between strangers to be effective and it is vital for trust to develop in the economic market exchange between people. That is why we need to

nurture respect across our local communities. Respect requires us to acknowledge the humanity of others and attempt to understand other peoples view of the world and the routes through which they are trying to discover a good life. Respect is predicated on the twin social concerns of mutuality and reciprocity. We give respect to receive respect. Mutual respect arises from engaged dialogue about the ways in which, as human beings, we differ; and the ways in which, through our shared humanity, we are common. This is why approaches that embrace diversity and foster multiculturalism are so important.

Weak approaches to diversity and multiculturalism, where people are encouraged to acknowledge difference but not to understand how and why people differ, promote tolerance. Tolerance is an important social stance – it says “live and let live”. And it is always preferable to intolerance (other than in those complex situations when we have to choose whether to tolerate the intolerance of others). But strong approaches to diversity and multiculturalism require people both to tolerate and respect others – to understand why they differ. This is why local politics matters – yes, local politics enables civic leadership to develop to shape and advocate places; and yes, it enables collective decisions to be made on local public interest questions; but more than this it facilitates public dialogue across communities of difference. Politics “is constructed to express conflicts and allow different interests to shape our collective endeavours.” And the only sensible basis for public dialogue across communities rests on reason and rational discussion.

Reason...

Passions inflame our emotions, reason informs our judgements. And when we enter dialogue in the context of diversity, reason and rational discussion offer the best route to discovering accommodation between people. In his seminal text, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper put the case for rational discussion in the following terms: “It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that ‘I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth’. It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that by such means as argument and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance; and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equity, is acceptable to most, if not to all.”

It follows that the best basis for public dialogue is reason and rational discussion. Discussion requires questions, discussion ventilates issues, and discussion opens communities. Formulaic approaches to community dialogue do not enable us to question each others ideas, beliefs and traditions and ways of pursuing their definition of the good life. “I may be wrong and you may be right” is the best starting point for every discussion.

Of course it remains true that the varied values of different people may be contrary or incompatible. Contrary opinions may be reconcilable, incompatible values may not. What is more, the values that people hold dear vary enormously and are not understood simply by reference to their basic moral or religious belief systems. Consider a vexed issue which divided Britain for years (and which continues to grumble away) – fox hunting. The philosopher Simon Blackburn uses the example of fox hunting to point to the problems of moral relativism in seeking the truth. Suppose John believes that fox hunting is cruel and should be banned and that Jim thinks that it is not cruel and should be allowed. Janet, the relativist, speaks to them both and says “there is a plurality of truths; it is true for John that fox hunting should be banned and it is equally true for Jim that it should not”. Blackburn points out that Janet cannot force John to respect and tolerate Jim’s views simply on the grounds that he holds these views. Blackburn suggests that while in consumer society we can price our differences in taste and preference: when it comes to moral issues and values in very many ways we simply cannot agree to differ.

In this way public dialogue will always discover dissent. This is why local politics is so vital in securing open local communities. Political practice is often depicted as being about building coalitions for public action – where political leaders are attempting to craft public consent. But in reality politics is about moving public purposes forward, deciding upon public action, in the context of some degree of dissent. Moreover, this approach requires the support of public managers working to help citizens better articulate their preferences. A recent report by the Work Foundation into public value, based on input from a range of

British public services (including my own authority), concludes that public managers need to support more deliberative approaches to engagement with their service users and citizens.

Public dialogue involves more listening than talking. This is a simple function of arithmetic. With 20 people in the room, if I have the right to speak for five minutes on a subject, I have the duty to listen for 95 minutes to what the other 19 people want to say. This was put simply by a political theorist recently in relation to the Athenian ideal, "the equal right to address one's fellow citizens as they take their sovereign decisions, has always been offset by the less agreeable (but accompanying) duty to hear out the persuasions of every fellow citizen who chooses to exercise it, and by the still more painful duty to accept whatever these fellow citizens together then proceed to decide".

But dialogue is not people talking past each other; it requires people to engage with each other on a reasoned basis. The liberal philosopher, John Rawls, argues that a core function of public officials (whether elected or appointed) in an open democratic society is the promotion of public reason. In a representative democracy citizens vote for representatives and not for particular laws. Rawls suggests that those who are elected or appointed need to explain clearly how they have themselves exercised justice in the performance of their duties. And he says that they need to do so within a "criterion of reciprocity". By this he means, "when terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated or under pressure caused by inferior political or social position."

Thus reason, rational discussion and public dialogue are central to a healthily functioning local democracy. But there is little point in respectful and reasonable discussion between people who have a vastly different conception of their relative rights and duties to each other. That is why a publicly agreed conception of human rights is so vital to any open community.

Rights...

If open communities are encouraged first, by the fostering of respect; and second, by the promotion of reason in public dialogue; third, they are secured through a strong framework of rights and obligations. But each and every right I have as a free and equal citizen, gives me a corresponding duty or obligation to others arising from the impact on others of the exercise of my rights. In short, my free actions may limit the scope for your free actions.

There are two sets of issues involved in considering the issue of rights in this context. First, there is the question of how the exercise of an individual's rights impacts on the rights of others. And second, there is a question about the difference between individuals rights and minority group rights.

In liberal democracies with significant minority cultures (whether comprised of nationally indigenous minorities or those arising as a consequence of, say, international migration) there is a complex interplay between two sets of rights. First, the rights of the minority group itself – to access its heritage and culture (and perhaps even some special resources) and to protect it from the dominance or tyranny of the majority. And second, the rights of every individual in respect of the group in which they live their lives and in respect of their life in wider society.

The inter-connection between these sets of rights is not entirely straightforward. And in some ways the past 30 years of social policy in Britain has avoided this complex problem. In some circumstances, this has led to the application of crude "group rights" approaches to equality and diversity issues. And it has led to some false assumptions – principally, that the preservation of group rights is the cornerstone of a multicultural society. Furthermore, it has led to some confused conclusions about how to balance the rights of groups to conserve their traditions and customs with the rights of individuals within those groups to choose different customs and traditions.

Liberal democracies have yet to work through the principles and consequences of these issues. They are only illuminated in certain circumstances – say, when individuals who are members of a group contest wider social norms or when, say, they dispute their groups' claim over them as individuals. Political theory has yet

to develop fully in this regard – although legal cases are beginning to set interesting precedents. Two legal examples, which both involve Christian groups, illustrate the depth of this quandary. The first case was in Canada in 1970, when life-long family members of a Hutterite Brethren community, were expelled against their will from a lakeside colony over a dispute over an asset. The second involved an Amish community in the USA (again in the 1970s). This latter case involved families who were arguing that their religious freedom was being infringed in requiring their children be enrolled in school until the age of 16. Both the Canadian and the US Supreme Courts gave judgements which supported rights of religious groups. In the case of the Amish community the US Supreme Court ruled (6 to 1) that the compulsory education law violated their rights under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. This effectively privileged the rights of the group to preserve its traditions above the interests of the children concerned to a non-Amish education (which were never actually considered).

These two cases were highlighted in a recent account of how liberal democracies try to cope with the competing claims between group rights and individual rights. Plainly, the right of a group against its own members is not absolute. And from time to time society is justified in interfering and imposing restrictions on some cultural practices within groups within society if these practices are injurious to individuals. However, this does not mean that such groups do not have rights against the larger society in respect of matters which do not entail harm to others. But it ought to be recognised that in liberal democracies some norms are considered to be intrinsically wrong – such as those which result in physical harm to women and children.

In Britain the debate on these issues has focussed, perhaps unhelpfully, on just one religious community – the Muslim community; though it is comprised of very many cultures and traditions and though it is the most ethnically diverse religion in the country. In truth, the issues and concerns of how best to balance minority group rights with the rights of individuals within these groups, impacts to a greater or lesser extent, on all communities in Britain.

These complex legal and policy issues challenge the orthodox approach in local government, which tends to think of “groups” before it thinks of “individuals”. We are right to ensure that there is not a tyranny of the majority on the minority – and we are right to be concerned that so-called “hard to reach” groups get their fair share. But we are wrong to start with the characteristics that separate “this group” from others. In so doing we overlook what unites every individual in that group with every other individual outside of the group - they are all unique individuals with individual human rights – to liberty, free association, and the pursuit of their own reason and happiness.

Over the recent past, we have paid more attention, as a society, to those differences arising from faith than to those that arise from varied ethnic heritage or cultural traditions. And we have worked hard to foster dialogue, respect and trust across faith groups. It is essential for the spread of understanding and tolerance for councils to promote and foster inter-faith dialogue and respect in their communities. Tolerance of difference and the development of genuine harmony across faiths are crucial to fostering a more respectful community. However, the first step to a common cause across communities is the fundamental acceptance by all citizens of the individual human rights of their fellow citizens. Without this acceptance we can have no basis for inclusion; for integration and cohesion. Around what do we integrate; with what do we cohere?

We need to remember that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted some 60 years ago in 1947 in the shadow of Auschwitz. It was where Europeans declared that the world should not repeat its grave mistakes of two world wars in just two generations. Chief among these mistakes, according to Michael Ignatieff’s recent account of this time was “the idolatry of the nation state, causing individuals to forget the higher law commanding them to disobey unjust orders.” In short, the responsibility of each individual to other individuals is greater than the rights of individuals to adopt group norms.”

From confusion to conclusion . . .

Perhaps above all, we should never confuse cultural conservatism for cultural freedom. The economist, Amartya Sen, wrote recently that “the demands of cultural freedom include, among other priorities, the task of resisting the automatic endorsement of past traditions when people – not excluding young people – see

reason for changing their ways of living.” The pivotal idea here is the importance of protecting individual rights and choices.

But Sen also argues for retaining the benefits of earlier approaches to equalising opportunities as well as for restoring the benefits of our faltering but positive attempts at promoting multiculturalism. For Sen, a healthy multiculturalism springs from individual freedom and integration and not from cultural separatism and the protection of group rights over individual rights. Nations are not mosaics of smaller but distinctively different and separate communities. And as Sen comments, “the disastrous consequences of defining people by their religious ethnicity and giving pre-determined priority to the community-based perspective over all other identities, which Ghandi thought was receiving support from India’s British rulers, may well have come, alas, to haunt the country of the rulers themselves.”

Live and let live ...

A “live and let live” approach to inter-community dialogue will not minimise exclusion and optimise inclusion: it will not lead to greater integration and cohesion. At best it will foster tolerance. At worst it will reinforce a segmented cultural pluralism where sovereignty lies with the “group” and not the individual. Lessons like these are hard learnt. One example may illustrate this further. For two years following the death of Victoria Climbié I chaired the multi-agency London Child Protection Committee. During this time the Metropolitan Police worked in strong collaboration with London boroughs and health service partners to tackle child abuse and safeguard London’s children. At one point it became clear that a very small number of children in London lived in closed families that threatened them and not close families that supported them. In this instance whose interests come first; those of the family to its traditions and customs or those of the child? Put like this, we all know where we stand – for the rights of the child. At the launch of the new Department of Communities & Local Government earlier this year I was invited to speak for local councils and say what I wanted from the new department. With funding and structure and the very future of local government at stake I thought hard about what was the main message I wanted to give to the new secretary of state. I said that with the transfer of civil and community responsibilities from the Home Office, the Department had a real opportunity to open up closed communities.

In this discussion, the key difference to grasp is between a close community and a closed community. Closed communities exclude others by a mix of social, economic and cultural barriers. And the key task for local actors (political and managerial leaders) is to foster openness within communities. Closed communities cannot integrate with the wider society in which they live and they certainly cannot thrive in the fast pace of the modern world. As a result, very many of the individuals within them have closed horizons and low aspirations.

By contrast, open communities can thrive in the context of difference. Open communities expand dialogue between people and thereby expand peoples’ horizons. They enable communities to discuss with each other, on a fair and reasonable basis, how best to pursue a good society. They promote opportunities and expand horizons for the individuals within them. The open community therefore needs all the allies it can get. Open communities need the “three Rs”. They need to nurture respect – based on an informed appreciation of difference and an active sense of mutuality and responsibility between people and communities. They need to nurture a sense of public reason – based on a rational dialogue between people as citizens and across communities in civic dialogue. And they must recognise that they will only nurture respect and reason if people and communities have a shared approach to individual human rights – of individuals as citizens with an equal stake in society and with corresponding obligations to their fellow citizens.

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