

Response to the Interim Report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church responded to the initial consultation of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in January 2007.

As we stated then, all three denominations have long been involved in promoting community development, inter faith relations and anti-racism, and are encouraged to see the Commission is looking carefully at these issues.

We were pleased to read the Interim Report and write now to respond briefly to some of the areas identified for further consultation before the publication of the final report.

1. Definition of integration and cohesion

We note that the Commission is wishing to consult further on the definitions of the key terms, integration and cohesion. In our initial response we pointed out that these words are sometimes perceived as threatening by minority communities, being heard in the context either of civil disturbances or of assimilation. The Interim Report goes some way to recognising this, saying that a balance is needed between “*the dignity of difference*” and common civic values. But perhaps part of this has to be about the Commission jettisoning terms used in the debate so far, which are perceived to be unhelpful.

2. Perceptions of favouritism

The interim report points out the dangers of “perceived favouritism” between communities. The Methodist Church has committed itself to sustained work on the issues around political extremism and the rise of racist and intolerant parties. One of the myths frequently promoted by these parties is that other ethnic groups are being favoured, usually in terms of the allocation of housing or statutory funding. Communities which feel vulnerable and unsure are encouraged to blame “the other”. Some of this arises directly from racism, but is reinforced by a feeling that people under pressure are fighting for the same limited resources, as well as a fear amongst many white communities that their culture is not valued. Perceptions of favouritism are therefore key in driving a wedge between communities.

Local authorities, local media and politicians have a heavy responsibility to tackle the myths that are built up between communities. We were very encouraged to see the Commission raise this issue. Such stereotypes are one of the most dangerous aspects of contemporary Britain – and hinder honest debates about the challenges of living in a multi-cultural society. We hope that the Commission will be able to remind politicians and the media of their responsibility not to promote stereotypes and myths, and even recommend a strengthening of the relevant codes of practice.

We also hope that the Commission will encourage local people and groups to challenge examples of stereotypes and myths in the media. Churches have encouraged people to use the Refugee Council's "myth-busting" resources to tackle bias in the media.

Local authorities and politicians should also consciously use their publicity machines to promote good news stories of successful interaction between religions and communities, in ways which will be picked up by the local media.

3. Learning English and translation services

The proposals around learning English and the reduction in translation services are likely to be highly controversial. We accept that speaking English is route into developing a common purpose and meaningful interaction with people of host cultures. However this should not be done at the cost of further alienating the most vulnerable who do not speak English and are therefore unable to relate independently to the host culture. Nor should it be assumed that fluency in English will prevent extremism: the terrorist bombers of 7 July 2005 were all English speakers.

Whilst we recognise that moving away from the provision of comprehensive translation services may in the long run lead to the empowerment particularly of women, this will not be achieved without a significant investment in appropriate ESOL provision. We hope that in the light of recent cuts in such services, the Commission will be able to recommend an expansion of adult education in this area.

4. The importance of interaction

We are glad that the Commission has identified the importance of meaningful interaction as this was an issue which we emphasised in our original submission. It is our experience that such interaction works best when there are shared aims or a project, be it organising an inter-faith event or working together on a social justice project. It is organic; it can be facilitated but not forced.

We strongly support the Commission's statement that "*tackling inequality is an absolute precondition for integration and cohesion*", and agree that poverty often inhibits people from taking part in opportunities for interaction. The work of the Commission cannot be separated from other initiatives which are aimed at tackling inequalities. Similarly funding deprived communities without offering opportunities for interaction across communities will merely fuel the perceptions of favouritism, intolerance and potential for extremism which already exists.

5. The role of schools

In addition to encouraging interaction and citizenship, schools have an invaluable role in enabling the objective study of religion. Such study helps young people to understand both the importance of faith to others and the nature of different faiths. We hope that the Commission will be able to emphasise this benefit, and encourage the provision of such opportunities also in adult education settings.

6. Interaction as a pre-requisite for funding

Whilst we can understand the thinking behind the proposal to make the facilitation of interaction a pre-requisite for **all** funding, we do not believe this would be a positive move. Clearly statutory bodies should be encouraged to make this **a** criteria for funding streams, but not to the exclusion of all else. There is still value in building up a sense of strength and worth in one community – people with a strong sense of their own culture or faith can relate confidently to other communities rather than with a sense of fear. This clearly needs to be balanced with opportunities to interact so that

sources of support do not become causes of isolation, but in the long term community confidence will add to communal harmony rather than detract from it.

On a broader issue we would also be concerned if statutory funding became increasingly proscriptive, further inhibiting the voluntary and community sector's ability to respond to need.

7. The role of faith schools

We believe that the Commission is right not to focus disproportionate attention on faith schools: they themselves are not the cause of failures of cohesion. It is not whether a school is a faith school or not that is important but rather what kind of ethos the school has. Does it promote openness to all religions and cultures? Faith schools can do this very effectively whilst retaining the ability to educate children in their own religion.

8. Shared values

The Commission will receive many comments on the shared values outlined in the interim report. We have two proposals which we hope the Commission will find helpful.

We hope there may be room for an ethic of reciprocity, perhaps in the form of the "Golden Rule" found in most major religions and cultures along the lines of "treat others as you would like to be treated". This goes beyond a commitment to listening and interaction, and instead requires that we treat all people, not just those like ourselves, with consideration. It is an ethical stance accepted by people of all faiths and none.

We also want to be sure that in the discussion of shared values and extremism we do not lose sight of the important British tradition of dissent. Shared values do not mean always agreeing with each other or the prevailing political climate. And dissenting from the norm does not always imply extremism. Indeed it has been an important driver in the development of democratic politics. We hope the Commission is able to recognise this, and this point should perhaps form part of discussions on political participation.

9. The challenge of extremism(s)

The challenge of "extremism" has to be a priority for the Commission. People widely regarded as extremists do not just create "tensions" in local communities; they seek to destroy the work of building up cohesion and integration. We would reinforce the Commission's decision to look at the challenges of – and the causes of – different forms of extremisms. Racial and religious intolerance and hatred is found in majority and minority communities, so the focus should not be solely on one expression of extremism.

We hope that these comments will be useful as the Commission concludes its work, and we look forward to reading the final report.

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