

From 'A Shared Future' to 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration'
An Analysis of Northern Ireland's Policy Framework
Documents

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Executive summary

The task set for the Institute for British Irish Studies, University College Dublin (IBIS) was to compare and contrast two policy documents *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland* (March 2005) and the *Programme For Cohesion, Sharing And Integration* (July 2010) and to comment on significant differences between the documents in light of current international scholarship and research on issues of identity, cultural difference and social division in conflict and post-conflict situations.

The issues addressed in these policy documents are of high political importance. Comparative lessons are bleak: most settlements fail to last, and few overcome communal antagonisms. Despite favourable conditions in Northern Ireland, a sustained strategic effort on behalf of government is necessary to translate political change into better community relations. This report acknowledges the important contributions to this end in the two documents, and the constraints of the present economic situation. It also points to indications that *Cohesion* may underestimate the difficulty of the task, both in its conceptualisation of its goals, and in its strategic orientation.

Comparison of the two policy documents reveals some clear conceptual shifts.

- *Cohesion* jettisons the goal of 'reconciliation' emphasised in *Shared Future*. The community relations task focuses upon creating shared and safe spaces, through local community involvement, and encouraging 'mutual accommodation'. While these are admirable goals, they fail to harness all the good will, positive potential and cultural energy in the society. It is far from clear that a government goal of 'mutual accommodation' is enough to hold off the dangers of re-sectarianisation especially among the young.
- *Cohesion* sees 'cultures' and 'identities' as given and stable entities. In *Shared Future*, the vision was of constant cultural change and dynamism: with individuals making their cultural and identity choices in a context of social division, economic difficulty and permeable cultural boundaries, the strategic aim being to facilitate these choices through creation of a safe environment with mutual recognition state-neutrality between cultures (11.13). In *Cohesion*, the vision is of 'an intercultural society' with 'cultures and communities' in contact (7.1). The strategic aim includes promoting 'pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities' (2.3). This can allow 'mutual accommodation' and perhaps long term change (7.1). This, in our view, amounts to a reification of 'cultures' which pushes change into the future and loses sight both of the positive potential and of the dangers of the present. It does not acknowledge that political changes have led many to question

aspects of their traditional cultural identities, and that this questioning and re-evaluation can lead to very positive repositionings, as well as to a sense of loss and sectarian reaction. Without acknowledging this conceptually, it cannot develop an adequate strategy of intervention.

In losing sight of this complex present reality, *Cohesion* is in danger of treating the community relations task too simply and of jettisoning key strategic goals. For example, the important goals of 'encouraging shared neighbourhoods, tackling the multiple social issues effecting (sic) and entrenching community separation, exclusion and hate' are defined in 2.6 as for the long-term. .

It jettisons, too, a key idea of *Shared Future*, of institutionalising an independent accountable agency tasked to push forward the community relations/good relations duties and to look critically at the role of existing political and local organisations. Given the complex mechanisms involved in community relations and the bleak comparative lessons, this is dangerous. Politicians and parties, particularly strong 'ethnic parties' such as those presently in government, have other priorities and other skills, and may through the best of motives put forward counter-productive policies. An effective strategic and critical voice is necessary alongside the practical political common sense of the dominant parties and local communities. This critical strategic role has to be institutionalised if it is to be effective: individual experts are easily silenced or marginalised in larger politically-dominated panels and the same is true of advisory panels; 'critical friendship' (10.9) requires a rough equality of status which does not exist between government and advisors. Northern Ireland needs a watchdog, not a poodle.

Arguing for the institutionalisation of such a critical voice leaves open for discussion how best to organise the institutional delivery of the community relations imperative.

Introduction

The task set for the Institute for British Irish Studies, University College Dublin (IBIS)¹ is to compare and contrast two policy documents produced in response to the statutory requirement 75 (2) to promote 'good relations' in the Northern Ireland Act (1998): the policy framework entitled *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland* (March 2005) and the public consultation document the *Programme For Cohesion, Sharing And Integration* (July 2010). IBIS was further tasked to comment on significant differences between the documents in light of current scholarship and research on issues of identity, cultural difference and social division in conflict and post-conflict situations.² This report focuses on the concepts, norms and political aims implicit in these two documents, in terms of which the specific policy recommendations in *Cohesion* must be assessed.

The importance of the policy issues is clear. There is evidence of a resurgence of sectarian incidents in the recent period in Northern Ireland (*Cohesion*, 6.10) and of public disbelief that key public spaces are indeed safe or shared (*Cohesion*, 3.31, 6.2, 6.3). Comparative research on ethnic conflict shows that most settlements fail to last and few overcome communal antagonisms. The Northern Ireland settlement of 1998-present provides very favourable conditions for moving beyond antagonism. It involved agreement between the parties, rather than an imposition after victory and defeat; possibilities of future change are built into the institutions; the geo-political context (British-Irish and European) is stable; and public opinion strongly supports a movement towards sharing rather than separation. This makes realistic the hope of 'a new beginning' promised in the 1998 agreement. But to achieve this requires social interventions as well as political negotiations and geo-political opportunities. Research shows conclusively that political and structural changes may trigger cultural developments but do not determine them, and responses at individual level may as easily be sectarian as accommodatory and inclusive. Ensuring that policy favours the cohesive, integrative and inclusive trends is of utmost political importance.

¹ The Institute for British Irish Studies (IBIS) was set up in University College Dublin in 1999 with the express aims to conduct research on the two traditions on the island, and to facilitate contact between policy-makers, academics and media. See www.ucd.ie/ibis

² IBIS has conducted significant research on issues of culture, identity and conflict in Northern Ireland and more generally, as well as on ethnic conflict and conflict regulation. See www.ucd.ie/euiteniba and www.ucd.ie/ibis/publications/ and www.ucd.ie/ibis/research. The research referred to in this report includes social/political psychological research carried out from the University of Limerick and Queens University of Belfast, and work on social and symbolic boundaries carried out in Harvard and UCLA, as well as the extensive international literature on ethnic conflict and conflict regulation.

A Shared Future Policy Document: Summary

Inter-communal division in Northern Ireland, building upon existing community relations policy whose original framework had been developed in the late 1980s, has been addressed by way of funding, policy making and advisory functions of the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), Community Relations Council (CRC) and District Councils Community Relations Programme. A review of community relations policy was undertaken by the government of Northern Ireland in 2002 resulting in a new Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in 2005 entitled *A Shared Future*. In a *Shared Future* the Government of Northern Ireland aims to deliver a more coherent, coordinated and long-term approach, which places responsibility for improving relations at all levels of public sector delivery. The key objective in the document is reconciliation. Policy aims in Part 1 are set out in relation to the gradual formulation of a 'shared society', defined by a culture of tolerance and the achievement of reconciliation and mutual trust (2005: 3). The document explicitly states that 'benign apartheid' is not an option: "we are not talking about an apartheid society. A 'cultural variety' in constant motion is very different from, and highly preferable to, a limited 'variety of cultures'" (2005: 8). A process of reconciliation premised upon a culture of tolerance is established by three clear principles: (1) that everyone in Northern Ireland deserves to be treated as an individual; (2) that each individual must mutually recognise the essence of common humanity; (3) the state must be neutral in relation to competing cultural claims (2005: 9). Based on this aspiration the document outlines the facilitatory means by which a more integrated approach to a shared society is delivered. Key policy priorities include:

- The elimination of sectarianism, racism and other forms of prejudice to enable people to live and work together without fear of intimidation.
- The reduction of tension and conflict at interface areas.
- The promotion of civic-mindedness through citizenship education.
- The protection of members of minority groups.
- The impartiality delivery of public services.
- The shaping of policies, practices and institutions that will enable trust and good relations to grow.
- The promotion of dialogue between, and mutual understanding of, different faiths and background.
- The achievement of a shared society where people can live, work and play together.
(2005: 10-11)

The emphasis on equality in relation to community relations is paramount: “The good relations agenda is not – and should not be – in conflict with the equality agenda” (2005: 13). The economic imperative in order to create a shared future is additionally addressed. Despite the recent period of prosperity in Northern Ireland there remain high levels of unemployment in socially disadvantaged areas. Linked to the policy objectives, Part 2 of the document –*Towards a shared society* – identifies priority areas and a range of illustrative actions that serve to develop a shared society. It is worth examining a couple of these for illustrative purposes. In order to tackle the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism, hate crime legislation will deal with crimes motivated or aggravated by “hatred based on” race, religion, disability or sexual orientation. Additionally, the “removal of ‘inappropriate and aggressive’ displays of flags (specifically paramilitary flags and any other displays which have the effect of intimidating or harassing), murals and painted kerbstones” is proposed (2005: 19). The threatening nature of ethno-national symbolism is evidenced by survey responses which elicited a total of 66% who believed that paramilitary flags should be removed. Policy action involves a coordinated effort involving the PSNI, the Housing Executive, individuals and field workers. In relation to shared communities, Government commits to support and protect existing areas where those of different backgrounds live together and explore the possibility of mixed housing. Principle actions are that the Department for Social Development, through the Housing Executive, aims to ensure that residence in a particular area will be on the basis of housing need, rather than on an “insistence that only ‘one sort’ live on certain streets or districts” (2005: 30). The Housing Executive, as a matter of priority, should bring forward “as soon as practicable its proposed pilot schemes on integrated housing” (2005: 30). An interagency approach is advocated where the Housing Executive will work with the PSNI and others to protect mixed housing areas and build relationships at neighbourhood level (2005: 30).

In addition to identifying actions in specific policy areas, Part 3 outlines Government proposals for action at central, regional, local government, community and individual levels that are aimed at driving forward the strategic framework and policy. These actions include:

- The establishment in Central Government of a cross-departmental Good Relations Panel, chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, to prepare a coordinated triennial plan, underpinned by Section 75 (2005: 47).
- Support for a regional body, independent of Government to promote good relations (2005: 50).
- The phasing out of the District Council Community Relations programme by March 2007, in line with the Review of Public Administration, and the creation of a Good Relations Challenge Programme (2005: 53).

Part 4 of the document concerns monitoring and evaluation; Government committing to the development of “meaningful, measurable and relevant indicators” (2005: 58). Monitoring and evaluation of is to be assessed in light of both external (North/South, East/West) and internal (between and within communities in Northern Ireland) relationships. Part 5, in a final assessment, defines ‘Community relations’ referring specifically to communal divisions between Catholic and Protestant and ‘Good relations’ referring to Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which includes persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) Policy Document: **Summary**

With the resumption of devolution in May 2007, the Northern Ireland Executive initiated the development of a new strategy on community relations. On 27 July 2010, after much deliberation between the parties of Government, OFMDFM launched the *Programme For Cohesion, Sharing And Integration* for public consultation. In *Cohesion*, Government commits to a shared and better future for all, offering a vision “to build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect” (2010: 1). *Cohesion* sets out the goals that are crucial to achieving a shared and better future for all built on the foundation of cohesive community. These goals place particular emphasis on young people, fostering positive relationships with those from minority ethnic backgrounds and tackling conditions that perpetuate urban interfaces and rural segregation. The Programme sets out the main aims under a number of key headings:

- People And Places
- Empowering The Next Generation
- Respecting Cultures
- A Secure Community
- A Cohesive Community
- Supporting Local Communities
- Looking Outward

The scope of policy is laid out in Chapter 1, reiterating that all government policy is developed within the context of the equality of opportunity provisions set out in section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Particular relevance is paid to the Good Relations duty, recognising that the promotion of equality of opportunity is an essential element of building good relations. An interagency approach is advocated: the *Cohesion* Programme “is one of a family of policies which seeks to tackle prejudice and hate. We will bring complimentary policies to promote equality, fairness, rights, respect and responsibility for all”(2010: 4). Additionally, the Programme does not aim to supersede or replace the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2007). It provides the framework, rather, for delivery of aspects of that strategy relating to good race relations in a co-ordinated, joined up process. Chapter 2 addresses proposals for Political Leadership/Community Engagement coordination, with Government committing to the establishment of a new Ministerially-led Panel for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. The panel is to be headed by OFMDFM Ministers with the

support of all Departments, local Government and key stakeholders, with the specific aim of developing an inclusive structure to review and monitor the implementation of the Programme. The Ministerial Panel in conjunction with the Racial Equality Forum and other stakeholders aim to address the key goals of *Cohesion*, which are:

- To address the physical and community division caused by interfaces.
- To ensure and promote the safety of vulnerable groups.
- To tackle the visible manifestations of racism, sectarianism and other forms of prejudice.
- To adopt a zero tolerance approach to incidences of attacks motivated by sectarian, religious, racist or hate prejudice.
- To promote equality of opportunity and tackle disadvantage.
- To provide safe and shared spaces.
- To promote cultural diversity in society.
- To create a framework for the management and regulation of parades and protests.
- To achieve the full participation of all sectors in all aspects of society.
- To support the local community to resolve local issues through local solutions.
- To take action which will address sectarian behaviour at spectator events.

(2010: 6)

Specific matters requiring attention relate to the development of ‘Shared Space’ in the short term, addressing the relationship between young people and the community in the medium term with reducing segregation identified as a long term aspiration. As with *Shared Future*, it is worth examining some of the chapters outlined for purposes of illustration. Chapter 5 of *Cohesion* identifies the need to promote and respect rights in a culturally diverse Northern Ireland. It is stressed that respect for cultural manifestations are to be compatible with human rights. Government commits through the Ministerial Panel for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration to identify ways of ensuring and promoting intercultural respect and dialogue. Respecting cultures in education is advocated by Government in order to nurture an ethos of mutual respect in an inclusive environment. The Department of education continues to play an important role in this through the Citizenship Education element of the revised curriculum. In relation to symbolic premises and cultural expression, the Programme’s focus on promoting greater intercultural understanding and respect aims to foster changes in attitudes and reduce the recent rise in the number of attacks on symbolic premises. Progress is to be monitored through the Good Relations Indicators and the continued work with the PSNI in tackling hate crime. Government aims “to normalise and streamline the process relating to notification of Public Assemblies, including parades and protests and attempt

to address any issues that may arise at local level” (2010: 31). The regulation of Public Assemblies is based on the respect for the rights of those who parade and respect for the rights of those who live in areas through which parades will pass. The economic benefit of cultural diversity is highlighted with community festivals and cultural tourism such as the Orangefest initiative providing a positive impact both to economy and wider community in general. A review of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DACL) Cultural Diversity Policy is proposed to align current policy with objectives of the *Cohesion* Programme. In Chapter 8 Government commits to supporting local communities with District Councils identified as playing a vital role in delivering good relations and continuing to play an important part in meeting the aims of the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. Government aims to develop criteria for core funding to ensure consistency with the aims of the Programme: “We in Government will: set the framework for action; the principles to be applied at local level; and will support community initiatives” (2010: 52). The Programme places community at the heart of decision-making by providing an opportunity for representation on the Ministerial Panel for good relations.

Chapter 10 of the Programme outlines the mechanism to oversee the implementation of *Cohesion*. The key features of implementation are:

- A Ministerial Panel chaired by OFMDFM Ministers, key statutory and community partners.
- A Senior Officials Steering Group which will be tasked with co-ordinating the cross-departmental alignment of activities and allocation of resources.
- An Advisory Panel of practitioners and experts to provide advice to Government.
- A Funders Group that will advise the Ministerial Panel on good relations funding issues and seek to improve the targeting and co-ordination of funding from many different sources.

(2010: 58)

In Chapter 11 Government outlines a range of options for the delivery of funding and advice to Government on good relations policy to support the implementation of the Programme. The following options are provided:

- Option 1: Advisory Panel And Direct (Or Contracted) Funding.
- Option 2: Services Provided By Organisations.
- Option 3 (a): Developing A New Statutory Non-Departmental Public Body.
- Option 3(b): Statutory NDPB Without Funding Function.

In Chapter 12 Government assesses options for the future of OFMDFM funding for good relations work, acknowledging that funding from Europe, the International Fund for Ireland and various

philanthropic sources have been vital in tackling sectarianism and racism and building more cohesive communities. In recognising current economic constraints, the Programme seeks to establish a framework within which available resources can be more effectively managed. In developing funding options for the delivery of programmes under the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, 3 levels of funding have been identified: (1) Local District Council Programme, (2) Thematic and (3) Targeted And Emergency. The final chapter in the Programme reiterates that all government policy is developed within the context of the equality of opportunity provisions set out in Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Government commits to the recognition that “the promotion of equality of opportunity is an essential element of building good relations” (2010: 75).

Analysis

From *Shared Future* to the *Cohesion*: Contrasts and comparisons

Shared Future was written when devolved government was not yet restored to Northern Ireland. It begins with Prefaces by British ministers, and has benefitted from inter-departmental input. *Cohesion* is written in a context of achieved devolution and presented by the First and Deputy First Ministers.³ In 2010 recession and the prospect of imposed spending cuts are also central to the context of the document. These contexts affect the style of the documents, with more direct, common-sensical language, more frequent emphasis on the involvement of local communities and on the need to avoid duplication of resources in *Cohesion* than in *Shared Future*. In addition, some of the key concepts in *Shared Future* are dropped or changed in *Cohesion*. If this signals a change of political focus and values, it needs to be explicitly highlighted and debated. In the table below, we show changes in emphasis and conceptualisation, and proceed to discuss the issues involved.

TABLE ONE: CONCEPTUAL CONTRASTS

	<i>Shared Future</i> 2005	<i>Cohesion</i> 2010
Community relations norms and good relations duty	Reconciliation, Partnership, equality and mutual respect Mutual recognition and trust	Sharing, cohesion, integration
Cultural Norms	‘Cultural variety’ in constant motion preferable to a limited ‘variety of cultures’ set in aspic (1.19). The complex make-up of each individual is what gives us our distinct identity (1.12)	‘a society where cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated and to promote pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities’ (2.3) An ‘intercultural’ society where different cultures and communities interact, learn about and question their own and each other’s cultures. Over time this may lead to cultural change. ...or /’mutual

³ It is unclear how much inter-departmental consultation has taken place and if input from different departments has been incorporated into the text.

		accommodation’ (7.1)
Social Norms	Shared society, shared future, shared spaces	Shared space, Shared and safe spaces Shared work spaces and education
Equality duty	Good relations must be built on partnership, equality and mutual respect	Equality of opportunity. ... underpins and influences all that we do

- **Reconciliation**

The concept of ‘reconciliation’ is emphasised in *Shared Future* (1.1.12) and omitted from *Cohesion*.

There are indeed problems with some reconciliation-literature, which implies a set, unilinear path to (even a formula or recipe for) reconciliation. This is rightly rejected by those in Northern Ireland who know that there are different routes to mutual respect and mutual recognition, and that this is always an individual and difficult process. Some individuals and groups reframe their traditions, others privatise from them, still others are willing to compromise politically while asserting their valued traditional identities. Each choice is valid, and ‘reconciliation’ has to be conceived as a future-oriented interactive process, in many varieties and forms, which can build a cohesive society and move beyond communal antagonism. This is the sense of *Shared Future* where reconciliation is defined (1.4.1) in terms of movement from relationships based on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust.

To leave out ‘reconciliation’ totally in *Cohesion* permits a much more conservative reading of political aims, as if ‘mutual accommodation’ (7.1) is all that is required. But this privileges one set of cultural choices – political compromise from existing cultural standpoints – over other choices that are equally present in Northern Ireland. Just like some reconciliation-literature, it suggests a one-size-fit-all goal. It is to fail to harness all of the goodwill and positive potential and cultural energy in the society and to lose out on this positive cultural potential. It is far from clear that the norm of ‘compromise’ or ‘mutual accommodation’ is enough to hold off the dangers of re-sectarianisation especially among the young. There is a need for official validation of the different types of choices and changes underway, and of the variety of routes beyond antagonism.

- **Equality**

The equality duty is reiterated more often in the text of *Cohesion* than in *Shared Future* but the actual formulations are no stronger. The emphasis on 'equality of opportunity' in *Cohesion* is relatively weak.⁴ Equality of condition, although never a statutory requirement, was present as a benchmark in the attempts to strengthen legislation between 1989 and 1998. The norms of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998, including 'parity of esteem' go considerably beyond 'equality of opportunity'.

It is clear that equality of opportunity should be an underpinning of good relations and that the obligation to good relations cannot prejudice the obligation to equality (1.4, *Cohesion*).

But the really difficult questions are not tackled by this emphasis. Once gross and measurable inequalities are overcome, how are the more difficult issues of parity of esteem and participation between populations with asymmetric identities and aspirations to be conceived, let alone achieved? Once gross inequalities are overcome, equality – in the appropriately strong sense - can only be tackled by a sensitivity to the very different aims and values of the different populations. It is as dependent on the good relations duty as the latter is on the equality duty.

▪ **Sharedness, shared futures, shared spaces**

The strong emphasis in *Cohesion* on shared and safe spaces, builds on the *Shared Future* document, as does the emphasis on sharing in housing and education. The survey material reiterates the public desire for such sharing and safety (*Cohesion*, 3.25, 3.7). However this document does not appear to have advanced the practical agenda already set out in *Shared Future*, particularly in the field of education and for young people more generally.

▪ **Culture**

The two documents differ most of all in their assumptions about cultural difference. The language of *Shared Future* is one of individuals making their cultural and identity choices in a socio-cultural context of division but also of cultural permeability and uneven levels of sharing and mutual understanding. There is the explicit view that permeability, sharing and understanding is preferable to segregation and separate development. The language of *Cohesion*, in contrast, is one of autonomous and distinct 'cultures' which come in contact. It is 'cultures and communities' which 'interact' (7.1), and the aim is 'pride' and 'confidence' in our 'distinctive cultural identities' (2.3). Change is something which may happen in the future (7.1).

⁴ See Baker, Lynch et al, *Equality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and the research in Northern Ireland that builds on their conceptual framework by Paddy Hillyard, Eithne McLaughlin, and others. See also the publications on changing fair employment legislation by Christopher McCrudden.

This in our view reifies culture and ignores the continual and constant cultural change – indeed cultural flux – which is shown in ordinary people’s re-evaluations of previous assumptions and aims and their search for new understandings of themselves and their world. This cultural flux often retains the same identity-labels, but those labels mean different things today than they did twenty years ago. Now many more people in Northern Ireland see themselves as British *and* Irish (rather than British or Irish only) (NILT 2007 Identity module). The Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys show that an increased Irish identification among Catholics, and particularly among the young, goes hand in hand with a steady or even falling voiced desire for Irish reunification, even while large sections of young Protestants are moving from a British to a Northern Irish identification. These are real changes whose significance is not immediately evident and which are elided when ‘cultures’ are reified. The concepts of equality, mutual respect, mutual accommodation, need to be seen in the context of these changes, not as respect or recognition between ‘cultures’ which mean very different things to different populations and sub-groups within them. The language of *Cohesion*, by focussing on ‘cultures and communities’, misses out on the multiplicity of individuals faced with choices and changes, and liable to reversions. There is too little sense of cultural dynamism, and change is put into the future rather than recognised as a part of the present. This poses a practical danger: by focussing only on dominant ‘cultures’, the questions posed by many individuals, including those in interface communities, remain unanswered and their attempts at repositioning are not facilitated: in this context it is easy to revert to sectarian opposition.

The conceptual focus on relatively stable cultures and identities which need to be accommodated, recognised, validated makes the task of community relations seem easier than it is. Thus it feeds into policy recommendations discussed below.

Conclusion: The Policy Impact

Cohesion differs from *Shared Future* in its more frequent emphasis on local community engagement, policy coordination and international exemplars. All are undeniably important, although as noted above, Northern Ireland is a leader in the field of conflict resolution and may find few international models to follow. Equally the commitments to address the issue of duplication in health and leisure services (3.18), to work towards effective provision of shared housing (3.28) and to provide better joined-up provision of community relations and equality services are among the many recommendations to be applauded.

However the conceptual shifts noted above seem to have had an impact on strategic aims in at least two respects.

First, there are clear indications that the strategically central features of community relations policy are pushed into the long term: in particular the aims of 'encouraging shared neighbourhoods, tackling the multiple social issues effecting (sic) and entrenching community separation, exclusion and hate' are defined as long-term (2.6). But if we take seriously both the potential and the danger of current processes of cultural change, then these aims are as important as the immediate tasks of tackling interface violence and sectarian incidents. Indeed without programmes that deal with these strategic aims, the immediate problems will continue to be reproduced. It is too simple to see these as issues that will sort themselves out in the longer term.

Second, there is a seeming reversal of one strategic priority of *Shared Future*: the institutionalisation of an independent accountable agency (a 'revamped CRC') tasked to push forward the community relations/good relations duties and to provide a 'challenge function', to promote 'high risk' action and to look critically at the role of existing political and local organisations and councils and assure best practice in addressing division and diversity (3.2.4). Such an independent agency is replaced in *Cohesion* by an advisory panel or 'arms length' body, which has an advisory role and acts as a 'critical friend' to government (10.9). This threatens to submerge the independent critical and strategic-advisory role envisioned by *Shared Future* in the immediate political imperatives of government, district councils and local communities.

Is it necessary to provide for an institutionalised critical voice in a time of recession? Yes, if it is the case that the good/community relations duties require strategic thinking and social intervention. Yes, if it is the case that small well-judged interventions may have large consequences. The state-level changes of 1998 and 2006-7, together with the development of the equality agenda, have

already set the stage for change in community relations. But such structural changes affect community relations in unpredictable ways. For individuals, they disconfirm old assumptions and expectations, and make older habitual responses, values and even identities seem anachronistic. Individuals are as likely to react to these challenges in sectarian and exclusive as in reconciliatory and inclusive ways. The social, cultural and interactive mechanisms that allow some groups to move to accommodation, some to explore new understandings, others to de-politicise, and still others to reassert old antagonisms are still not fully understood. We need sensitive models of the multiple ways that change occurs and that individuals come to terms with a violent and conflictual past. Key policy objectives – including the difficult but important aim of ensuring ‘parity of esteem’ – can be pursued effectively only with such models of the varied aims and choices of the different populations.

Without an independent agency tasked with the critical, strategic aims, there is only weak provision for criticism and correction of the perspectives of those concerned primarily with practical policy. Given the complex mechanisms involved in community relations and the bleak comparative lessons – post-conflict relations are most likely to turn out badly – this is dangerous. Politicians and parties, particularly strong ‘ethnic parties’ such as those presently in government, have other priorities and other skills, and may through the best of motives put forward counter-productive policies. The language of political common-sense tends too often to reify cultures and identities in a way that does not always recognise what is necessary for good relations at the micro-level. An effective strategic and critical voice is necessary alongside the practical political common sense of the dominant parties and local communities. This critical strategic role has to be institutionalised if it is to be effective: individual experts are easily silenced or marginalised in larger politically-dominated panels and the same is true of advisory panels. *Cohesion* uses the language of ‘critical friend’ (10.9) but effective critical friendship requires equality of status which does not exist when one of the ‘friends’ is the government. It is in government’s own best interest to create a watchdog, not a poodle.

Arguing for the institutionalisation of such a critical strategic voice leaves open for discussion how best to organise the institutional delivery of the community relations imperative.