



## Understanding Social Change

### *Divided Society*

#### **Sarah Neal**

I think the picture that you're both painting is that of increasing complexity in social relations and the delay in terms of the responses that welfare provision can make to those complexities and shifts. Now I wonder if you could just conclude then by thinking about the question of whether we are a more divided society today than we were in the 1940's when the welfare state was first created.

#### **Rob Sykes**

Well yes I think we are. Most statistics indicate that up until Mrs Thatcher came to power there was a very small but noticeable diminution in the gap between the rich and the poor as a result, basically, of taxation systems and so on. There's a little bit of redistribution there, and then after that period and continuing, one has to say, into the current government that gap has got bigger again. But it's not just between the rich and the poor, there's also a sense in which we're a more divided society in a spatial sense. I've mention Sheffield, one could quite as easily talk about Liverpool, or the south-west or Newcastle in the north-east. There is a sense in which because of the complex changes in the employment patterns and labour markets, whether or not these areas have managed to fight against deindustrialisation and find some other economic hook upon which to base their future regeneration, there is nevertheless a sense in which there are these complexities and variations, and increasing divisions. There are also, of course, spatial divisions within cities. One increasingly sees in any large city now those areas which are in very severe disadvantage and social exclusion. Others which are at the other extreme, one thinks about the house price boom, and so on, and one of the things that one notices that wherever you are, even though the prices may not be as high, say, as in London, nevertheless in Sheffield and the north-east and so on, there are certainly areas where there are very high house prices. Somebody must be paying these, how are they paying for them? There is also the sense in which there is a rural urban divide we hear quite a lot about in terms of issues to do with fox hunting and the Countryside Alliance, and so on, but from a more sociological point of view to do with these issues there is a sense in which there is in the rural area, if you're living in a rural area, a real sense in which you can well be deprived – why? Well because there are very few jobs there, that in terms of transport provision there's not very much of that, etcetera, etcetera, so unless you're to give an image which is probably incorrect, but I'll use it anyway, if you're an owner of a Landrover and a nice house, then fine, carry out your business perhaps by telephone, computer, or whatever it might be, even travelling into the city, but if you ain't, then you've got a problem living in a rural area, so there all sorts of senses in which yes, I suppose we are a more divided society.

#### **Sarah Neal**

And in this society that is more divided, despite having almost six decades of welfare provision, certainly New Labour and Tony Blair, and figures like David Blunkett, who's the Home Secretary, there's been a stress on the idea of social cohesion. How successful, Heidi, do you think the idea of social cohesion has been in this divided Britain?

#### **Heidi Safia Mirza**

Well firstly I just wanted to add to Rob's point about the divided Britain because I was shocked – Row tree has just written a new report on poverty in Britain and there are fourteen million people in poverty in Britain, one of the most sort of advanced, democratic, industrialised countries in the world – and that's shocking, it's one of the highest rates of poverty in Europe, and over half of the families, half of those in poverty are families with children so there's a lot of child poverty as well, and I think that's quite shocking. And in that

context to talk about social cohesion, I think we have to move some way to find solutions because what we do find is a Britain where we've had race riots in 2001, there's a lot of resentment amongst the white British poor who've been left on the margins and totally deserted by New Labour, so we have policies looking at self esteem, mentoring, educational policies that search out the gifted and talented, all sorts of things that are focused on the individual, and not on the kind of huge restructuring issues that need to be looked at. We have entrenched sexual and racial divisions in the labour market that have grown, so not only have we got a divided society along poverty and class lines, but also along racial lines, even though we had equality legislation very little of that legislation seems to be really working, because it's still based on individuals taking cases forward in order to change business practices.

**Rob Sykes**

I was just thinking one thing that the European Union is thinking of introducing a new constitution and this is exercising some of those on the right, the Conservatives and others in the country who see it as a step too far towards the super state. Now one of the things that I should have indicated at the beginning, and am very interested in, is the way in which there may be a, maybe a shift from the market more towards a rights' approach towards social provision in Europe anyway, not so much in the UK. What's very interesting to note, and I was thinking of it as Heidi was talking there was the way in which I think the Government and others are going to find it increasingly difficult to resist the claim by trades unions and others to say, well look, what's so wrong with workers having some rights here? And of course really what's wrong with it seen from the perspective of the continuous shift through from the 1940's to the New Labour Governments of today is that, as we keep reiterating, the market has been seen as the basis for welfare, and once you move towards a rights-based approach, that really does challenge all of the questions and assumptions about what really constitutes social citizenship, and on the basis of which people do or don't gain access to welfare, so I think it's going to be very interesting to see what happens in the context of the European Union and the UK's relationship.

**Sarah Neal**

Thank you both for raising some fascinating and interesting points about welfare provision in contemporary and historical Britain. Thank you.