

## **FROM LEGISLATION TO REALITY: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND EMPOWERMENT**

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Fellow delegates and friends, it is indeed, an honour to be given the opportunity to participate in a conference of such importance. I would like to thank the organisers, especially Mr Navid Hamid for pursuing me so vigorously and the British High Commissioners Office, especially Ruth Willis, for making this visit possible.

The past three days have been both illuminating and extremely informative. I came knowing relatively little about minority concerns in South Asia, but will certainly be going back much more informed.

The one thing that struck me throughout the course of this conference is that despite our very many national

differences, the core issues relating to inequality and unequal opportunities remain fundamentally the same. The most disadvantaged appear to be groups that are disempowered, marginalised from mainstream activities and are in most cases materially disadvantaged.

We focused quite a bit over the last few days, on specific groups that are disadvantaged, mainly religious. Someone mentioned that minority groups are defined differently in different countries. In fact they are defined differently in different contexts even in the same country! In some cases, minorities are academically defined in terms of numbers and others are socially, culturally or politically defined.

In Britain, our minorities tend to be numerically small and are mainly of immigrant origin. Recently we have noted changes in this regard, especially when we examine patterns locally. It is estimated, for example, that in 10 years time, the population we refer to as minorities, will in fact be the majority, dominant group, in certain areas of Britain.

This pattern is already noticeable in places like Birmingham and in the Northern towns, which comprise predominantly

people of South Asian background. And just for interest, more than 25% of London's population is currently made up of minority communities.

More generally, the groups that are referred to as minorities in Britain, tend to be ones that originated outside Britain. These include, Africans, Pakistani, Indians, Bangladeshi Caribbean, African Asians, Jewish and Chinese.

More recently, this description of so-called ethnic minorities in Britain has become questioned and debated, given especially since many from these groups, are British born and quite rightly consider themselves as British citizens, whilst still having the freedom to express their cultural and religious identities.

For the last 30 years, our main remedy for protecting the rights of these minorities has been legislation, in the form of the Race Relations Act of 1976.

I am not going to go into the detail of the legislation - when I was chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, I visited India and shared our experiences in the commission and

details of the legislation. I am happy to share this with others, outside this conference, but for now, I just want to make a few comments that are relevant to this paper.

The Commission for racial equality was unique in its day. The UK was the first to legislate against discrimination and to have in place a powerful body to ensure that the law was not breached. By the time we merged into the new body, the power of the CRE was such that it successfully took the police services, the health services, the prison services and the Ministry of Defence to court and legally compelled them to address their shortcoming in terms of the Act with a limited timeframe.

The outcome of 30 years of sustained focus on the issue is reflected in the current progress made by these groups, in terms of education, employment and quality of life.

But was it law enforcement alone that achieved this? On reflection, I have to say no. The law was there to deter and like all laws many regularly broke them. Indeed, the progress we made was due not so much to the law itself, but the way in which it was implemented and the way in which we

monitored and reported progress. Our commitment went beyond the written paper policies and touched real lives. And I must say that one of the biggest challenges we faced in the early days was bridging the policy–practice gap.

I would say that our success lay in the methodologies we used, a key one being empowerment and inclusion. Our empowerment strategy was two fold.

## **Institutions**

- We empowered government, public and private institutions by providing guidelines on good practice, toolkits to achieve equal opportunities, training and development programmes, incentives and advised them on how to place equalities and equal opportunities at the core of all their activities.

- But more importantly, we held them to account. Our institutions are required by law to have an action plan for addressing equal opportunities on an annual basis and are also required by law to publish annually their progress on equality.

Our Institutions have to demonstrate progress in recruitment, retention and progression of all within the workforce with statistics relating to ethnicity, sex and disability

Our institutions also have to follow good practice in procurement and purchasing, to reduce conflicts of interests

And our institutions have to demonstrate actions/ initiatives they have taken to address areas of under-representation, corporate social responsibility and a duty of care. This social agenda was foreign to many. So we focused on culture change.

## **Communities.**

Our key interventions with communities were mainly in terms of support, advice and information.

We educated people about their rights under the law and encouraged them to take full advantage of the opportunities available.

We funded and facilitated community based projects that were directed towards the most disadvantaged minority groups

We developed strong national and local networks so that organisations working with disadvantaged communities were able to share ideas and information, but also to make strong, collective representations on policy and other issues that might impinge on their rights.

We undertook conflict resolution projects.

## **Inclusion**

But most importantly in terms of inclusion, we worked hard to make equal opportunities a collective agenda. No single organisation was responsible for delivering equal opportunities. We actively promoted partnership work. In this respect, we undertook initiatives that were mainly in terms of identifying and unblocking barriers to change

In a nutshell, we took collective responsibility for the equality agenda, as we were keen to reduce the blame culture. In

this respect while government has a huge role to play in terms of leadership, we do not regard the government as solely owning or being responsible for equality. The key agents for change were the people themselves. Government's role was to enable communities to achieve the required change. Having collective ownership meant that we shared both the successes and the failures.

I must caution, that this approach is impossible to adopt without trust. Trust on the other hand can only develop when there is a track record of delivery on real outcomes not tokenistic gestures. Fortunately, in Britain, both the business and morale for change was quickly grasped.

Similarly, the commission worked hard to change the perceptions of the disadvantaged from one of being a victim to one of being confident enough to challenge injustices in constructive ways.

All our commissions, worked with the voluntary sector to develop active citizenship within local communities, and creating tangible opportunities for disadvantaged groups to progress. One of our key strategies is to keep a sustained



and open dialogue with communities - to create equal opportunities you must start by respecting people equally.

A key aspect of our work is one of honest broker, while we worked with government as relevant, we were totally independent of them, our key responsibility was to the public and the commission's main remit was to be the voice of the public and to protect public interest.

## **The future**

As some of you are aware, After 30 years of having 3 separate commissions and three separate sets of legislation to protect the rights of minorities, we recently changed our approach to equality. We now have one commission, the ECHR and we are in the process of drafting a Single Equalities Act.

## **So Why the change?**

The Race relations Act was enacted after 3 decades of grass roots campaigning, violent riots and sustained disadvantage faced by migrant communities. The focuses of

our intentions were therefore clearly internal. While we achieved a lot over the last three decades in this respect, a lot more needs to be done, as societies do not stand still. Our new and current forms of inequalities are linked to both external social changes as well as internal ones.

Given the rapid social, demographic and global changes since the turn of the century we felt that it was timely to review our approach to equal opportunities and to make it fit for purpose for the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

I am certain that the challenges we face as a nation are not unique to us. Despite being a developed nation we too have levels of poverty that are not acceptable. This might surprise you but we too have illiteracy and despite our efforts over the last 30 years to ensure equal opportunities, we are now confronting another wave of discrimination.

## **Globalisation**

The pace of globalisation has changed the demography of Britain. We have an aging majority population and a very youthful minority population. The minorities, as I mentioned

earlier, are fast becoming majority populations in certain areas and we are keen to break the cycle of majority-minority conflicts.

Patterns of discrimination are changing; we have found that the minorities are now discriminating against other minorities. There has also been a radicalisation amongst religious groups, some whom previously approached religion as a private rather than a public matter. Many of you will be aware of the trends towards fundamentalism and extremism. This has affected relations between communities especially since the July 22<sup>nd</sup> bombings. Needless to say this has had an increase in prejudice - innocent people are being targeted.

Moreover, Globalisation has also changed the face of our workforce and education establishments. Whilst this is fully embraced and even encouraged in many parts of Britain, we also have to deal with issues of integration and dealing with the prejudices that people bring with them.

Many who come to our countries, come from places that did not have democracy - eastern bloc, or from countries that

have cultural practices that conflict with human, women or gay rights. With the complexity of equal opportunity in this new era, we felt it required an approach that could create forums for open and honest discussions about individual and collective rights; crosscutting and multiple discrimination and balancing our rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities.

Further more, we felt also that we needed to expand the legal framework to include all rights, in the true spirit of equal opportunities.

## **Finally**

I just want to say, that given the growing social, political and economic networks across the world, we believe that the achievement of equal opportunities can no longer be seen as a national issue. The movement of people across the globe means that invariably, we transport both the good and bad from each of our countries. As such, it can no longer remain a national concern. The drive for equal opportunity has to be a global one. It is therefore imperative that we work together to share knowledge and experiences, to

support each other, but most importantly to condemn inequality irrespect where it occurs.

I hope that this conference is first of many which provides us with the opportunity to do so.

Thank You