Opening speech… Runnymede Launch: Achieving Race Equality in Scotland

8ᵗʰ March 2011, Scottish Parliament

Intro…

First, I would like to add my gratitude to Runnymede Trust for initiating this project and Robert Brown MSP for hosting this event. I would also like to thank the four main parties for sharing their views on race equality in Scotland. I feel privileged to be sharing a platform with those who have a particular interest and concern for race equality.

This event is timely not only in light of the forthcoming Scottish elections, but is especially significant in the context of the current climate of financial cuts and budget constraints.

If past patterns are anything to go by, then issues of equality, social justice and human rights are more likely to be sidelined or seen as areas of lesser priority by governments and related institutions.

Yet on the contrary, these issues are likely to become more of a concern during such challenging periods as it does not take a genius to work out that those most vulnerable in societies take the hardest hit during less prosperous times.

Logic therefore dictates that during these difficult times, even closer attention needs to be paid to the rights of individuals and communities to freedom from discrimination and abuse.

In this respect, I am pleased to note that the parties represented here today overtly decry any form of racism, and all openly express positive views towards diversity and the presense of different cultures in Scotland.

Scottish context…

We are fortunate in Scotland to have a cross-party group on race. This allows us to openly and directly discuss matters relating to racism with those who are in positions to make changes. We are also fortunate that unlike elsewhere in Europe, the 'race card' is not overtly played during times of elections in Scotland.

Personally, I find that a strong sense of civic culture predominates Scotlands communities and people living here like to believe that they are inherently fair and just.

So we need to ask: Why then do we find ourselves in a situation where entrenched racist ideologies continues to persist in Scotland – with evidence of sustained levels of racial disadvantage?

And why does the evidence suggest that the levels of reported racial incidents are not declining but are instead mutating into different patterns of abuse?

One might argue that we have done everything that the race laws suggests.

We ticked the boxes and written the hefty documents to prove that we are doing all the right things. We even employed so-called 'experts' to train us, and lawyers to ensure that we are not caught short of the law.

Moreover… Despite a hightened public awareness of racism due to the high profile campaigns run by the Scottish Government, the rafts of race legislation passed during the last 10 years and the concerted efforts by dedicated race watchdogs to eradicate racial disadvantage, we still find ourselves saying: "there is a lot more to do"….

While this acknowledgement is a good sign, we need to pause and consider whether there is something fundamentally wrong with approaches taken thus far.

We all know that racism will not simply disappear or be done and dusted once all the policies are in place… but we need to keep in step with rapid developments in this field so that we can respond more appropriately to new and different challenges in this regard

I remain concerned at the significant levels of racial disadvantage (as acknowledged by many of the parties) in Scotland and the evidence of growing levels of discrimination directed towards certain individuals and groups in our societies.

It is a known fact that the culture of a society is led and influenced by its political leaders and to some extent by broader public perceptions and debates.

Whilst the media is regularly and quite rightly blamed for igniting racism and promoting racial discrimination, those in power positions have the ability to instigate fundamental changes, so my focus today is on the role of politicians. Are they part of the problem rather or part of the solution?

They can be both!... looking at the problems here…

I relate the presistent levels of racial disadvantage and racism to several political trends noted over the past 10 years: - some might argue that these are driven from Whitehall, given that race (equality) is a reserved matter:

Political context…

1   A fragmented knowledge (on part of political elite) of the rapid developments in relation to the nature of post-modern understandings of races and features of racism.

2   Politicians have not kept the pace with developments in race thinking/research, so they continue to associate racism predominantly with the experiences of visible minorities thereby seeing racism as a being a minority group problem, imported from elsewhere.

3   Politicians tend to associate personal and group identity with extremism and violence and thereby create a culture of fear associated with difference.

4   Politicians cannot make up their minds on whether Multiculturalism is a good bad or evil! The current view is that multiculturalism is a failed project as it is divisive and contributes to segregated and broken societies.

5   And, last and in my view the most important factor, is the failure on the part of politiions to accept that freedom from racial discrimination is a fundamental, unqualified, human right.

Solution?…

In the 21st century racial discrimination rears its head in different ways, affecting different sectors of the community, but this does not mean that the traditional patterns have disappeared completely.

We need go no further than to examine the pattern of recent racial incidents in Scotland to appreciate this sentiment.

Despite accepting that racism is unacceptable, many in Scotland still do not fully understand what freedom from 'racial' discrimination means in reality.

Is it simply about ensuring equal access to jobs and education? Or is it a case of prevening discrimination on the grounds of 'Race' however defined? Does equality necessarily guarantee respect, dignity and fairness?

The uniqueness of 'race' and 'racial discrimination' lies in its complexities. While we all share different perspectives in this regard, we are united on one issue in Scotland: **we all share a central goal of achieving racial justice**. That is why we are here today!

While the current legislation guides us towards viewing race from an equality perspective, I believe that racial

disadvantage can be more effectively challenged if viewed through a Human Rights lens. This perspective is based on indivisible dignity and fairness for all human beings.

Yes, 'race equality' as a piece of legislation is legally reserved to the UK government, but in practice I believe that Scotland should not be constrained by law alone.

And even if we find it difficult to detach ourselves from the legal framework, why not consider the Scotland Act, 1998 or International remedies? Like the European or UN Declaration of HR?

Surely freedom from racial discrimination is more than a legal concern. Is it not instead, a fundamental moral and social imperative for modern societies? In this respect, the meaning of freedom from racial discrimination, is best expressed within the framework of Human Rights.