**Response to OFMDFM’s document ‘A Sense of Belonging’ on the development of a Northern Ireland racial equality strategy for the decade ahead**

The OFMDFM strategy seems to compound the mistakes of the recent past in England by almost entirely ignoring the host community. The word ‘white’ appears in the document but only once, negatively, in terms of the majority white community’s “general lack of understanding”.

If races are to be equal, all of them need to be taken account of, not least the majority one.

The notion of a 7th Shared Aim relating to the right to maintain one’s cultural identity is quite inappropriate in a strategy to promote racial equality. Just as we should not have a policy of assimilation, we should not have one promoting different identities. Maintaining or enhancing one’s cultural or racial identity is a voluntary matter in which government should not be involved.

There needs, if anything, to be a peace process in Northern Ireland between the races as we are constantly reminded of the huge numbers of racial attacks by whites. The attacks can only effectively be reduced by police action. At the same time, concerns expressed by the host community need to be addressed or there is no likelihood of an underlying change in attitude by those who are frightened and hostile.

And those concerns have first to be conceptualised, explained and put in context. There is next to no sign of that in this document.

A serious gap is in relation to integration. The concept only gets mentioned in terms of unspecified criticism of UK immigration policies and is actually used to justify a separate set of Northern Ireland immigration rules, a “regional immigration policy.”

The notion of a regional policy is unworldly. It would be impossible to operate outside of Ulster an independent state and says a lot about the whole document that it gets mentioned at all. If immigration rules are more relaxed and generous in this part of the UK, the result can only be a movement of population inwards and the document does not face up to that.

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t feed into the policy-making process in London, adding any useful Northern Ireland experience to the mix.

On the more specific point of different types of immigrant being governed by different rules, that is just fact. It should not go unmentioned that there are and will continue to be different categories under both UK and EU law. One difference, as is well known, ended this year when Romanians and Bulgarians became entitled to claim a number of social security benefits that were previously unavailable.

Asylum seekers without leave to be in the United Kingdom or to remain here have no entitlement to NIHE rehousing. Their housing needs are the responsibility of the UK Border Agency. This is hardly known, and never said, not least by the BBC in Northern Ireland which majors on racism stories. The differing housing rights of non-nationals need properly explained otherwise resentments will grow through confusion and misunderstanding.

The lack of useful statistics in the document is concerning, especially as many of those produced by government that might add to the discussion do not get noticed. For example, over 100,000 people have come to Northern Ireland in the last decade to seek work. The figure can be ascertained from the issue of national insurance numbers but is not so mentioned in media stories to provide context.

No such drastic demographic change can happen without community concern, a degree of antagonism and even criminal acts. However the fact remains that the host community here has, in the main, shown commendable tolerance and restraint and this should be said.

Many concerns were raised at the recent election in Belfast regarding immigration, particularly in relation to housing.

Some schools in the city are heading towards becoming ethnic-only schools on the lines of St Mary’s in Divis Street. Indeed, over 10% of primary children in South Belfast do not have English as their first language.

Integration will be seriously delayed, or more likely made impossible if children are not educated together. Resources directed toward English teaching need prioritised to reduce effective segregation in education. There is no mention of that in the document.

The strategy is inadequate for the task of promoting racial equality, let alone integration. Overall the issue needs reviewed and a different mind-set applied, one based on democratic principles and the need for integration alongside equality.

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