

# MINISTERIAL ADDRESS: CONFERENCE ON “HOW PUBLIC AUTHORITIES PROVIDE SERVICES TO MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS

## Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Lord Rooker, Minister with responsibility for racial equality and good race relations has asked me to express his regrets that he cannot be with us here today and has asked me to read out the Ministerial address on his behalf. The Minister has also tasked me with giving him a full report on the day’s proceedings.

In what follows, the delivery is mine, but the words are Lord Rooker’s.

“I am delighted to have the opportunity to address this important conference on *“How public authorities provide services to minority ethnic groups”*. I cannot stress too highly the importance of how public authorities provide their services to minority ethnic people. If the delivery of public services is not set up to counter racial inequalities, then, inevitably, it will reinforce these inequalities.

Ensuring that people have access to opportunities and similar life chances and that public services will treat them fairly irrespective of ethnic and religious differences are essential principles of the Shared Future that we want for Northern Ireland. Racial equality is critical to delivering good quality public services and a better quality of life for everyone.

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has been pleased to fund this conference today and the research that is being presented.

The conference is a most timely event - the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Nigel Hamilton, is due to present a final draft of the action plan to implement the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland to the Racial Equality Forum on Thursday.

We will have the opportunity to “feed in” the results of the research and this conference as we develop and

enlarge the scope of the action plan over the coming years.

## **Northern Ireland and Racial Equality**

As many here today will know, Northern Ireland is, in many respects, a latecomer to the cause of racial equality and good race relations. We need to catch up – and quickly. We are acutely aware that we need to learn from the experiences of others - both good and bad – as we seek to implement our racial equality strategy.

We tend to forget that only 8 years ago, race was not included in our anti-discrimination legislation and that it was still lawful to discriminate in Northern Ireland on grounds of race.

In the mid 1990's there was an almost blanket denial that racism was a problem here. It was argued that there was no racism because there were no minority ethnic people – but this was in fact not so.

Minority ethnic people have long lived here. The life of Irish Travellers on this island is lost in the mists of time. There has been a Jewish community here for well over a century. The first members of the Indian community arrived here in the 1920's and 1930's. We now have 3rd and 4th generation Chinese Northern Ireland people.

More recently, minority ethnic people from Great Britain have joined the larger/and or established communities. And we are seeing substantial numbers of migrant workers living and working right across Northern Ireland and a small number of asylum seekers and refugees from many different countries.

The face of Northern Ireland is changing and changing rapidly.

A demonstration of how things have changed is quite easy. Simply walk down any main street in any city or town in Northern Ireland and you will see and hear for yourself the rich diversity of the people who now live among us and work with us. More and more people

want to visit, to work, to live and often, settle in Northern Ireland.

More and more migrant workers have moved here in recent times to provide the skills and labour that we need. Private and public sector health care providers and the agri food industry in particular employ staff from other countries.

Government has worked to change things over the past 8 years. The introduction of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 finally made racial discrimination unlawful here. Moreover, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 required public authorities to “have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group”.

However, let us not be under any illusions. The scale of the challenge that increasing diversity pose to us here in Northern Ireland, and to our colleagues in the Republic and Scotland, is immense.

It is a matter of profound regret that rarely a day goes by without a headline in the newspapers about violent racist attacks. For too many people, racial inequalities, racist abuse, harassment and the corrosive fear of racist crime is a daily reality. That is totally unacceptable.

Racism, in any of its manifestations, is an evil that can have no place in Northern Ireland (Peter Hain described it as “one of the evils above all other evils”).

But we need to understand that “racism” is not just about the fist, the boot, the offensive graffiti and the hurtful name-calling. It’s every bit as much about the failure to accommodate diversity in how we provide services to minority ethnic members of society.

That failure is often unintentional and can come about through lack of thought, lack of understanding, lack of adequate planning or the persistence of a ‘one size fits all approach’. The outcome of these processes can

contribute to failure in service provision to cultural and ethnic minorities. The fact that this failure is not deliberate doesn't make it any less damaging in terms of impact.

### **Racial Equality Strategy**

The Government's Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, which was published in July last year provides a framework that will allow Government – and others - to do 3 things:

- to tackle racial inequalities in Northern Ireland and to open up opportunity for all;
- to eradicate racism and hate crime; and
- together with A Shared Future – Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland (“A Shared Future”), to initiate actions to promote good race relations.

The strategy sets out six shared aims that Government in Northern Ireland will pursue in tackling racial inequalities and eradicating racism. These aims include

the elimination of racial inequality; equal protection and redress against racism and racist crime; encouraging participation; promote dialogue; capacity building and, last, but not least, equality of service provision.

Government recognises the key role that service provision can play in promoting racial equality. If minority ethnic people are to play a full part in our society, it is essential that we acknowledge their rights to have equal access to, and to benefit equally from, all public services, including health, education, policing, training and employment and that we act on this.

Service providers have not always responded appropriately to all the needs of people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The strategy should be a way of ensuring that structures and services are flexible enough – and staff are informed enough - to respond to the needs of minority ethnic people.

As I said, Northern Ireland is a latecomer to racial equality and anti-racism. Not only do we have to work

on hearts and minds but we all have a lot to learn – both about the issues and how we can tackle them. And that learning process will take time. This conference will make an important contribution to the learning process for public services in Northern Ireland. And I hope that it will be of benefit to the public service providers in both the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, too.

I have said quite a bit about the challenges that we face. But as well as posing challenges, the growing diversity in Northern Ireland offers enormous benefits: economic, social and cultural. It also offers a unique, exciting and never to be repeated opportunity. It offers us the opportunity to alter the way that people living here have viewed each other for too long.

Our growing diversity can have a genuinely leavening effect on a society that has long been frozen in a “two traditions” divide. And it has the potential to act as a powerful lever on the old attitudes to difference that have maintained that divide.

Thank you very much for listening to what I had to say, and providing me with the opportunity to address the conference. I wish you every success for the rest of the conference.”

The End.