

**An Coiste Comhairleach Náisiúnta
ar Chiníochas agus Idirchultúrachas**

**National Consultative Committee
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National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

Submission to the Sub-Committee on Seanad Reform

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INTRODUCTION

The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) was established in 1998 as an independent expert body on racism. It is a partnership body, which brings together government and non-government organisations to develop initiatives and to provide expertise in tackling racism and promoting interculturalism. The overall role of the NCCRI is

- To act as an expert body to develop an integrated and strategic approach to racism, to focus on its prevention and to foster interculturalism within Ireland
- To inform policy development and seek to build consensus through dialogue in relation to the issues of racism and interculturalism
- To promote the understanding and celebration of cultural diversity within Ireland
- To establish links with other organisations or individuals involved in issues of racism and interculturalism arising from developments at European Union and international levels.

The NCCRI welcomes the establishment of a Sub-Committee to review and make recommendations on the composition and functions of the Seanad. Our main concern focuses on the provision of representation for ethnic minority groups in Ireland as one key mechanism to facilitate their participation in society and thereby contributing to a more intercultural Ireland.

CONTEXT

The minority ethnic population has risen significantly in recent years. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2002 Census of Population Principal Demographic Results indicates for the first time that Irish non-nationals make up 5.8% of the population, of which almost half were UK nationals (2.7%). Other EU nationals and the nationals of other European countries were the next numerous, followed by Asian, African and US nationals. This was the first time a nationality question was asked in the Census and it gives an indication of the extent of such diversity in Ireland.

The 2002 Census does not however, provide a complete picture of ethnic diversity in Ireland because the ethnicity question, which is a separate question to nationality in the 2002 Census, was limited to a question on the Traveller Community. A separate question on nationality is needed because there are many people from minority ethnic groups in Ireland who are Irish nationals and who would not be covered by the 'nationality' question.

One of the key factors that have resulted in greater nationality and ethnic diversity in Ireland is inward migration. Contrary to widespread perceptions, most of the recent immigration into Ireland is as a consequence of returning Irish emigrants and migrant workers rather than asylum seekers. In 2002, for example there were over 43,000 work permits and visas issued to non European Economic Area nationals to work in Ireland as opposed to 11,634 applications by asylum seekers for refugee status.

The 2002 Census is also a far more accurate reflection of the size of the Irish Traveller population in Ireland. Close to 24,000 Irish Travellers, representing 0.65% of the total population was enumerated in the 2002 Census. This is more than double the figure in the previous Census when coverage was only partial.

The religious profile of Ireland has also changed significantly over the last 10 years, which is also an indicator that we are now a more multicultural society. The number

of Muslim people in Ireland has quadrupled to 19,000 from the 1991 Census, when the religion question was last asked. The number of Orthodox Christians has increased from 400 in 1991 to over 10,000 in 2002, representing migrants mainly from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The new figures reveal that current and future governments now need to ensure that there is an overall range of policies in place to ensure that ethnic diversity is accounted for. The NCCRI advocates that the forthcoming Government National Action Plan Against Racism¹ provides an important opportunity to both tackle discrimination and to promote inclusion of people from different national and ethnic backgrounds.

National Action Plan Against Racism

The United Nations World Conference Against Racism was held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. One of the key outcomes of the Conference was the commitment by participating countries to develop National Action Plans Against Racism. The development of a National Action Plan Against Racism in Ireland represents a significant opportunity to both build upon and enhance existing policies and strategies to address racism in Ireland and to identify new priorities, aspirations and arenas of work that can be drawn together into an overall cohesive plan.

The National Action Plan will reflect the outcomes of the consultative process undertaken by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform between March and December 2002 which was overseen by a broad based Steering Group representing government and non-government organisations with support from the NCCRI. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform have recently published the summary of outcomes of the consultative process entitled “Diverse Voices”.²

One of the key objectives identified in the summary of outcomes of the consultative process for the National Action Plan Against Racism is participation. There was a strong emphasis on supporting the full participation of minority ethnic groups in Irish society, including a focus on participation in decision-making. In the chapter on participation, the following was stated:

*There have been members of minority ethnic communities who have served as public representatives in the Oireachtas, although this representation has declined in recent years. Positive action measures should be considered to ensure that the diversity of public representatives is more reflective of the diversity in Ireland and that the interests of minority ethnic groups are effectively represented at political level. The role of Seanad Eireann in facilitating such participation was identified as one possible mechanism.*³

The NCCRI would endorse this recommendation and would further suggest that Seanad Eireann and its related functions such as the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women’s Rights have a defined role in the implementation of the forthcoming National Action Plan Against Racism which is due to be published in 2004.

¹ See also Sustaining Progress p26

² The report, entitled ‘Diverse Voices’, is available online at www.justice.ie

³ p31 of Diverse Voices

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The NCCRI would recommend to the Sub-Committee on Seanad Reform that any review on the composition and functions of Seanad Eireann should seek to take into account the diversity of the electorate.
- The reservation of two places in Seanad Eireann for spokespeople on behalf of minority ethnic groups as a way of providing representation and facilitating participation of ethnic minorities in Irish society.
- Regarding the functions of Seanad Eireann, it is important that Seanad Eireann has a role in overseeing the implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism and that the members have an opportunity to review its progress. The National Action Plan Against Racism will be a Government Plan and it is important that all branches of Government have a role and responsibility in ensuring its successful implementation.

The NCCRI would welcome an opportunity to elaborate on the issues and recommendations presented in this submission by way of a presentation to the Sub-Committee on Seanad Reform at a later stage.