

ANTI-RACISM MOVEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND: THE FIRST DECADE OF NICEM

Speech of Mr. Patrick Yu, the Executive Director of NICEM at the Tenth Anniversary Celebration on 28 February 2005 at Whitla Hall, the Queen's University of Belfast

Mrs. Bunting, Mr. Head, Lord Mayor, on behalf of NICEM I would like to extend our warmest welcome to all of you attending this great event to celebrate our first decade fighting against racism. Without your support and partnership our anti-racism movement cannot have much impact in a divisive and conflicting society.

We use this unique opportunity to share our struggles with you and at the same time we conclude our first chapter by sharing our vision and direction to prepare our next decade.

Introduction

The issue of racism in Northern Ireland is quite distinct in the UK context. Cultural diversity in the make-up of our society has until recently as result of the new arrival of migrants from the EU Member States, as well as other migrants as part of the international capitalism and globalisation process. Racism has not been identified, to be more precise the denial of racism, as an issue within Northern Ireland context. Racism in Northern Ireland can be understood in the context of the extension of sectarian divide in a conflicting society. It is quite natural, in the common sense, to rationalise that we have too much troubles in our conflicts. The denial of racism pays a heavy price in terms of legislative protection and policy and practice. We are thirty something years later to outlaw racial discrimination that the same law has applied to United Kingdom since 1976.

“Orange” and “green” symbols serve to identify differences, but only within a notion of a society which is mono-ethnic in which Christian and white supremacy prevails. Interestingly both Protestant and Catholic communities throughout the island of Ireland have a long history of religious mission in the former colonies of British Empire – the so-called New World. It was, and for many still is, the mission of superior white people to progress God's salvation of the “New World”. This colonial experience in terms of religious mission and former rulers or civil servants perpetuates the discourse of white supremacy through oppression and exploitation.

This mono-culture and strong tradition to defence their orange and green identity creates a xenophobic sentiments when something goes very wrong. The recent upsurge of racist attacks in Belfast and beyond as the result of excessive media coverage gives you perspective and political context. In order to defence their identity and avoid differences ethnic minority are being asked to assimilate to the local cultures and traditions. Do we really want to be “orange” or “green”? Can we be a rainbow to cultivate and embraces

differences and traditions, culturally and linguistically. Different traditions and cultures are an invaluable assets to our society and should not, indeed must not, be considered a threat.

There are common-sense ideas in Northern Ireland that reinforce such views. A point often made by local politicians that there are only small group of racist people and that the majority are welcome ethnic minorities. This appears partly true because local indigenous people are not aware that racism does exist; they tend not to understand equal treatment can have much significant negative impact on ethnic minorities and put institutional racism under the carpet.

Four dimensions of racism

Based on the experience in Northern Ireland, racism can be seen to operate in our society in four dimensions: 1. denigratory stereotyping, hatred and violence; 2. a cycle of disadvantage; and 3. the negation and even obliteration of culture, religion or language; 4. exclude, expel or repatriate.

Denigratory stereotyping, hatred and violence

It is not about objective characteristics, but about relationships of domination and subordination. To put it into the local political context it is the territorial issue. It is the hatred of the "Other" in defence of "Self". It was perpetrated and legitimated through images of the "Other" as inferior, abhorrent, even sub-human. The "Yellow People" leaflet distributed in Donegall Pass is a good example. I quote the followings from the leaflet:

"These immigrants occupy a vast amount of our houses stopping any Protestant families moving in that would be more beneficial for the betterment of our community in all aspects of community life. The overwhelming mass of Chinese immigrants in Donegall Pass are driving our youth to move out of the area where they were reared, because they see no future for them in the Chinatown/Donegall Pass. The Chinese only take form our community and provide nothing for it. These foreign immigrants have no sense of Christian values or decency and have no respect at all for our community.

I firmly believe that it is our duty to defend our community and our Protestant way of life within it.

The influx of the yellow people into Donegall Pass has done more damage than 35 years of the IRA's recent campaign of republican propaganda and violence waged against the Protestant community of Donegall Pass....."

This view is not just the loyalist paramilitary UVF who made and distribute the leaflets. It is also share by majority local community based on false information. The White Nationalist Party leaflet described asylum seekers as bogus and also shared the same by the local majority.

Another good example is the recent arrival of migrant workers from Portugal, Eastern Europe EU countries and overseas nurses (predominant from Philippine) in our health care system, both public and private. The fear of

outsiders taking insiders' jobs means that the local people need to defend themselves, not just the jobs but also their cultures and identities. As a result, petrol bomb and pipe bomb were thrown into houses of migrants, racist attacks have been widely reported in those areas where they are working and living.

Interestingly the post-September 11 not only does it have more attacks against Muslim alike (local people have no distinction between Sikh and Muslim who wear turban). It also transforms the international conflicts between Palestine and Israel into local sectarian politics. Therefore, it is not surprising that the loyalist areas display the Israel flag and the republican areas display Palestine flag to show their support. More interestingly Combat 18, the extreme UK right wings group disassociate with the UDA and UFF as the result of the Israel flag.

The cycle of disadvantage

Racism serves the needs of advanced capitalism and it is no coincidence that racism has its roots in slavery and colonialism, both driven by economic imperatives. Its modern manifestations are equally based on economic dominance. Unlike in Great Britain, Northern Ireland only recently has the acute shortage of labour in rural economy (food processing and farming produce), as well as nurses in both the local hospital trusts and private nursing home. This need has frequently been highly specific, namely to fill the jobs not wanted by the indigenous population. Policies, through immigration law, aimed at ensuring that newcomers remain in such jobs are justified and apparently legitimated by characterizing workers as inferior, not fit for any other work or preferring to remain as they are. In general migrant workers are working in an insecure employment with low pay in Northern Ireland.

On the other hand the long settled Chinese community works exclusively in catering business and the same Asian community works also exclusively in catering and shops or as traders to sell goods. These are typical economic segregation. At the same time we have the highest unemployment rate in Northern Ireland within the Travellers community.

Racism as assimilation

It requires as a condition of equal treatment, an individual should conform to the social, cultural and language structures of the dominant group. This general accepted policy is frequently formulated as one of strict equality or formal equality. But it rests on two problematic assumptions: first, that the dominant culture is not just one of many cultures, but represents universality, truth and justice; and secondly, that there is no positive value in the culture of the subordinate group. Moreover, assimilation remains a condition of equal participation in political institutions or other aspects of public life.

The issue of access to the basic public services due to language, cultural or religious barriers in addition to unfamiliar to the local system create a much disadvantage position in our society. This links, intrinsically, to the wider issue of institutional racism as the MacPherson Report defined as:

“The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin which can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people.”

Racism is insensitive to diversity between ethnic groups. Thus it is not uncommon to refer to “ethnic minorities” as a homogeneous group, without noting the differences between those groups. The assumption of an undifferentiated “Other” assumes that a group has a fixed essence, and that individuals can be wholly defined by their membership of their group. This in turn makes it easy to stereotype individuals, often linking their group identity to denigratory ascriptions. Such essentialism creates a rigid and static view of culture, described from the outside, ignoring the dynamic evolution of culture and religion.

In addition, while membership of a cultural or religious group is an important aspect of people’s lives, many people belong to several different overlapping and intersecting groups. It is therefore more appropriate to speak, not of racism but of multiple racism (disabled Muslim women).

Racism as exclusion

This most usually takes the form of immigration controls, which frequently impact most heavily on people from the Third World. Ironically, strict immigration control is often justified as the necessary complement to “good race relations at home”. Race discrimination legislation in Great Britain was coincident with the imposition of stricter immigration control, and it may be no accident that the EU Race Equality Directive came soon after the agreed imposition of immigration control around “Fortress Europe”. Therefore it is not uncommon in the UK immigration law to invoke citizenship exception to legitimate the treatment of aliens as second-class people, often with racist implications.

A similar manifestation is in the current attitudes in Great Britain, to certain extent in Northern Ireland, to asylum seekers. Those seeking refuge in Great Britain and end up in Northern Ireland for political reasons, and therefore not viewed as performing an economically useful role and in fact they are banned from work, are characterized as bogus, cream off our benefit system, manipulative and unwelcome intruders.

Address Racism: racism is the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms

In order to address racism we need to shift the focus from non-discrimination to human rights protection and the equality principles under human rights. It is about mainstreaming race into government policy and practice and the positive duty of the state to ensure that fundamental rights are guaranteed without discrimination and distinction. It is also the use of affirmative action to

redress the inequality of the past and the social institutions, as well as disadvantage position of ethnic minorities in our society. It is also the recognition, acceptance and accommodating social and cultural differences of minority ethnic people in our society.

Firstly we need to break the cycle of disadvantage of ethnic minority. It must be asymmetric and targets disadvantage of groups. It should place the importance of the equality of result, rather than the usual equality of opportunity. Equally important is to equalising capability of minority ethnic people in order to have more power of influence and the issue of equitable redistribution of resources.

Secondly we need to promote dignity and worth for all. Dignity means equal recognition at law as human beings. There is no superiority or inferiority. It is about dignity and worth for all. It never be acceptable to denigrate the dignity of any individual. Dignity does not connote an isolated, sovereign individual; but a relationship between individual and community. It is a relationship that resolves conflicts within the community and to the wider extent to the society. Dignity also addresses the inequality of power and status in our social institution. Reverse discrimination does not infringe dignity, but creates a social condition to achieve dignity for all.

Thirdly it is the affirmation of community identity in order to promote wider diversity in our society. There is no abstract and universal individual. Individuals partly constituted by group membership no matter what community background constituted. The group membership maximise positive consequences of social capital, namely mutual support, cooperation, trust and institutional effectiveness. It also minimise negative manifestations of sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption. A group rights approach can, and should solve racism and the conflicts in our society in a much more imaginative way.

The last but not the least is to facilitating full participation in society. This is the only meaningful means to compensate for the absence of political power or the democratic deficit in our society. Participation, therefore, is an indicator in achieving equality. Or put it into another way: equality principle is to promote wider participation for those disadvantage groups in our society.

The roles of NICEM in the next decade fighting against racism

18 months ago we started to review our key roles and functions in the next decade fighting against racism. As a result, we develop our five years strategic plan 2004-2009 and our new vision and mission statement.

Vision: Our vision is of a society where differences are recognised, respected and valued, a society free from all forms of racism and discrimination, where human rights are guaranteed.

Mission: NICEM works in partnership, to bring about social change, by achieving equality of outcome and full participation in society.

And the Strategic Aims of the Plan are as follows:

1. To create an environment that supports and enables individuals and groups from black and minority ethnic communities to participate fully in accessing their group identity and group rights;
2. To mainstream ethnic minorities into government policy and practice;
3. To raise public awareness on racism and multiple discrimination and bring about a positive change;
4. To promote equality of access to education, training and employment for black and minority ethnic young people; and
5. To ensure that priority areas of work are supported by appropriate organisational structures and resources.

Under each Strategic Aim we also develop the specific objectives to achieve the aims with priority. We still keep under review in each year on the prioritisation of the said objectives against the circumstantial change.

Challenges ahead

NICEM is prepared the challenges ahead in order to bring about social changes of the anti-racism movement into the next decade. It is also the challenges for all of us to commit ourselves to human rights protection and equality principles of human rights. These include the followings:

1. Irish Travellers: a case of gross violation of human rights. Irish Travellers are the most socially excluded and socially deprived groups in our society their basic rights must be recognised and respected;
2. Power of influence and the issue of equitable redistribution of resources for everyone in the society;
3. The vision of the two Commissions on human rights and equality on racial equality, in particular how the two Commissions are effectively use their powers and functions to redress racism and discrimination?;
4. The minority protection and the equality provisions under the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland;
5. How effective of the future Single Equality Bill for Northern Ireland to enhance positive equality on one hand and address discrimination on the others taking into account the issue of multiple identities and multiple discrimination? ;
6. How can we translate the actions from the six Strategic Aims of the pending Race Equality Strategy across the 11 Departments? How ethnic minority people participate in the process to develop the action plan of each department in terms of capacity building and required resources to implement the action plan? Will all political parties in Northern Ireland support the Strategy with sufficient resources for the full implementation;
7. How and to what extent the new Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, as the result of the consultation of "A Shared Future- improving relations in Northern Ireland", works hand in hand with the Race Equality Strategy? How far the framework to enhance a better good relations to all groups within the community without diminish equality agenda? Or alternative how far the principle of equality can accommodate and enhance a better good relations?
8. How can we transform the tick box exercise cultures into equality outcome of the section 75 process? When do we have the monitor data

across all groups in each departments and next step agencies in order to ascertain the negative impact on policies? How effective of screening and equality impact assessment without monitor data? Can we have legal redress if certain public authorities are fall below the standards? Can we streamline each department and its next step agencies under one single Equality Scheme as we argue in 1998?

9. How we address the issues and needs of the second generation ethnic minority children and young people? Do we need to develop second generation leadership within the community? How we develop a role model of leadership for ethnic minority young people?
10. How best the sector can work together and create a united voice? What sort of professional standards do we need within the sector? How can we improve it? These all link into the wider issue of governance and accountability for the long term sustainability of the sector.
11. The increasing powers in Brussels to make law, policy and practice in the area of race, including immigration control and anti-terrorist legislation. What is our future roles in Europe (both EU and Council of Europe) taking into account the majority centre right government across Europe and within European Parliament, as well as our influence in the first decade?