

# Introducing the Government's strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion

Home Secretary Charles Clarke addresses the conference

What a real pleasure and honour it is to be here today to launch *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society*. This is a very important document. It is our strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion. I personally can take very little credit for the contents of the document, and here I want to make particular reference to Fiona's colleagues at the Home Office, also colleagues throughout many organisations, and many of you represented here, for the work that has gone into developing this strategy. For me, however, it is a personal pleasure to again be involved in this area.

One of my first jobs after leaving university and student politics was to work on what were then called the partnership initiatives in inner London, in my case in the London Borough of Hackney, and my job at the end of the 1970s/early 1980s was to see how we could encourage voluntary and community organisations, in particular in a place like the London Borough of Hackney, with a wide range of minority ethnic organisations and others. So I am absolutely committed to the ambitions that we set out here in this document. It's something I've always thought was tremendously important and the ability to be able to contribute in some respects in this post is something I am really delighted to associate myself with. That's why I am very pleased to launch the Government's Strategy today.

## A Strategy for All

This is a strategy for the whole Government and indeed for the wider community, and I want to highlight three particulars which I hope will be the style in which we go about addressing these issues.

### *Commitment to community cohesion throughout public services*

The first particular is that the obligation of increasing race equality and promoting community cohesion runs right across every part of government and indeed every part of society. It's not a question of having a Home Office unit which does a bit of useful work here and then asks everybody else to follow along. It's a question of working in a very coherent way across the greater public services, whether it's education, health, crime, local government, housing or whatever, and identifying for each of those areas what steps need to be taken to ensure that we can move forward.

So this is not a subject about which everybody can say 'well we've got that covered, the Home Office is dealing with it'; it's a subject for every organisation, every part of government, every voluntary organisation, every part of the local community, and that's a theme which I hope runs through this document as a whole and which will certainly run through the way we seek to operate more generally.

I remember very well, to cite personal experience again, when I was elected a councillor in the London Borough of Hackney in the 1980s and then appointed chair of the housing committee. The first person who came to see me as chair of the housing committee was Peter Newsome, who was then the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. He basically wanted to raise a complaint of discrimination in the London Borough of Hackney because it was discriminatory in its housing provision, and the choice I had to make was whether we would accept this and try and improve what we did, or reject it on the grounds that the charge was ill-founded. The decision which I made, which the full council agreed with, was that we should accept this criticism and decide how to work to

improve what we did by putting in place the strategies that were then proposed for us by the CRE. I think that approach is very much the one that has been taken in this document.

### *Configuring organisations effectively*

The second aspect that I want to highlight in the strategy, which I think is important, is that getting all this right can sometimes be an issue of money, but it is much more often an issue of how we do things and how we take decisions and how we run our different organisations in a way that carries things through. So in each of our organisations, whether it's a school, the housing authority, a housing association, the PCT, whatever it may happen to be, we have to examine for ourselves how we operate and what we do. It's not simply a question of putting in a funding bid to get x or y or z, though that funding can help make the changes which are necessary, but it's a question of saying and examining rigorously how we do things in each area of our life.

### *Targeted clarity*

And the third point that we really try and emphasise in this document is that this is not an area for generic sweeping statements. It's an area for targeted clarity about how particular communities and particular parts of the country are dealing with discrimination, and how those issues can be carried through. And so it's not just a question of how we deal broadly with issues that are raised but how we specifically address each particular.

### *Working together – commitment, configuration, clarity*

So those three points: this is an issue that every part of government has to work on together, alongside those who are not in government and those in government organisations with whom we work. This is a matter for all of us working as a team, not where the Home Office is going to simply come and preach to others. Second, it's about how we do things in each of our organisations, not simply about financial allocations, though they can help. And third, it's about understanding what is really happening, not at some theoretical level, but at a practical level for a particular community's relationship to particular services and particular things that happen.

### *Building on progress*

Those are themes in each case to which I shall return. But I do want to emphasise that the strategy we are publishing today does, I think, build on progress, which has been considerable in some areas.

It is the case, for example, that 75% of young people of Chinese origin now achieve at least five C grades in GCSE and that two-thirds of those from an Indian background do that. It is the case that 56% of young people from ethnic minorities are now going into higher education, compared to 40% amongst the population as a whole. Employment rates among ethnic minorities are up by 1.6% in the last reporting year, so the gap with the population as a whole, and there still is a gap, is down 1.4%.

It is the case that since the mid-1990s the proportion of minority ethnic households experiencing overcrowding has fallen from 13% to 11%; still far too high but going in the right direction. It is the case that racially motivated incidents are down according to the British Crime Survey by over 45%, between 1995 and 2003. It is the case that confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system has been increasing by 5% over the last reporting year amongst black and minority ethnic communities.

The work that's been done is a tribute to many organisations, many of you here in this room, many community organisations, many businesses, as well of course as government seeking to make

differences in these areas. And I highlight them because there are doomsayers and naysayers who say nothing can change, it's all hopeless, nothing happens. But the fact is there has been progress which has resulted from decisions, commitments, approaches followed by many individuals. But it's obvious too that there is a massive amount of work still to do in relation to each of those areas I mentioned, in particular for the most disadvantaged groups. Again four or five examples are informative.

### **Work still to be done**

Amongst those of black Caribbean origin almost 1 in 10 are unemployed compared to fewer than 1 in 25 amongst the population as a whole. That is a massive gap, one which still needs immense work for us to address it. Nearly two-thirds of children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent are growing up in poverty compared to one-fifth amongst the children of the population as a whole. Two-thirds compared to one-fifth is a massive massive gap, when we are talking about the ambition of all of us to reduce child poverty.

It is also the case that those from Asian backgrounds are up to five times more likely to have diabetes and those from African and Caribbean backgrounds three times more likely than the population as a whole. These are again enormous differentials which have serious impacts both for individuals and for particular communities. Heart disease is higher among South Asians. Perceived levels of access to the health service are still lower among some black and ethnic minority communities.

It is still the case that fear of violent crime is twice as high among black and Asian people compared to the population as whole: 40% of black and Asian people are frightened of violent crime compared to the population as a whole, where it's about 20%, about half that. And concerns about discrimination within the criminal justice system are still far too high.

I cite those examples to make it absolutely clear that I'm not suggesting we've solved these problems. They're massive problems that remain to be solved, but I do want to take it on the basis that we are making progress, rather than it's all just too difficult and too hard for us to address.

### **Focus on those in greatest need**

But I think there's a clear message out of those figures that I've just given and the message is that we do need to focus on those in greatest need. The fact is that though there is progress in some areas there needs to be greatest focus on those groups which need greatest support in the context of sustaining opportunities for and drawing on the talent of all. Such an approach on improving the life-chances of those in greatest need is what we tried to do and with some successes – and some not – in education. I do think we need to better target, for example, the ethnic minority achievement grant in helping raise the attainment of groups such as boys of African and Caribbean backgrounds, matched by general measures. We have for example increased the teacher training recruitment from black and minority ethnic communities from 5.1% going into teacher training in 2000 to 8.3% in 2003, with the objective of 9% for the next three years.

And in each of the areas of government policy what this report does is to try and set out the Government's intention to have that similarly tailored, targeted approach to meeting the particular needs of different ethnic minority communities as an integral element of public service reform. That means specifically tailored approaches targeted to supporting people back into work. It means community-specific NHS programmes to tackle particular inequalities such as high heart disease among south Asians, to which I referred earlier. But going through each of these areas to say how we deal with each particular problem. As I said at the beginning, how do we deal with it, how do we focus it, how do we target these resources, time, energy into solving particular issues in particular areas.

### **Build community cohesion with inclusive partnerships**

Of course, that idea of building community cohesion has to be developed in partnership with others. Improving life's chances for

all is an essential element of building a cohesive society but it is not sufficient. We also need to help people from diverse backgrounds, majority and minority backgrounds, to develop a sense of common inclusion and to work together practically. It's not something that the Government can or should do alone; building a cohesive society is something for everybody.

I have always thought that one of the most pernicious phrases in British politics of the last 15 years has been the idea that there could be 'no such thing as society'. Everybody, in practice, knows there is such a thing as society; the question is how we build it, how we strengthen it, how we make it cohesive in every respect.

However, I do accept on behalf of the Government that we should be taking a lead in supporting others in seeking to build that cohesive society, and a number of the ways in which we think we should do that are set out in this document, building on the lessons of the last few years.

### **Supporting the community-cohesive approach**

Just a few examples of where we are already: New money – £3million – to help promote understanding between different faith groups. I was delighted in the education field that we for example got to a non-statutory framework for religious education in schools, agreed by all the faith groups, with particular groups really seeking to explain their faiths to others in strong and positive ways. Better support for those in local authorities to take the lead in combating racism and extremism. More help for communities to resolve tensions. Using forthcoming improvements to youth services to help bring young people together and develop better understandings: that's a very important element of where we need to go to have a *proper youth strategy across government*.

It is one of our weaknesses: we have so many different bidding regimes, funding strategies and so on that it is sometimes difficult for particular communities to know where to turn to get the best support for what they need. And I acknowledge on behalf of the Government that we need to do this right and we are working with our colleagues in other departments, in particular Education, to try and do that. We are piloting the idea of a citizenship day to act as a focal point for the increasing work of museums, arts projects and others in exploring and celebrating today's inclusive nature of Britishness.

The strategy also seeks to outline a *thought-through approach* to dealing with difficult issues such as a balance between different rights. I am clear, for example, that freedom of speech is an absolutely essential element of an overall tolerant society. We have to defend the idea of freedom of speech against any that seek to take it from us. It is reasonable for people to joke about religion, to criticise religious beliefs and those freedoms must be maintained, but we have at the same time to ensure that there is an absolute protection from incitement to hatred, which some ethnic groups experience and some religious groups currently experience too, and that is why we have the clause in our legislation, to ensure that the defences that some racial groups have are extended to all others in those circumstances. But it is the *incitement to hatred* we have to attack and marginalise at all times, with the full power of the law.

### **Partnership against problems**

All of these aims have to be achieved in partnership between government, the local services, civic organisations, businesses and communities themselves. None of them are easy to achieve. They all require confrontation of problems that are hard to resolve.

But what I am confident of, and I know this from many years of political experience and many different communities and different circumstances, there is a strong determination and desire from organisations up and down the country to build that cohesive, strong, tolerant society. On behalf of government I hope this strategy will help to address that, to increase race equality, to develop community cohesion. And I am grateful for the chance to launch it here today, with such an informed group, at this conference. □