

At the first Question and Answer Session of the morning, **Samir Shah** is in the Chair, and **Charles Clarke** and **Fiona Mactaggart** are answering questions put to them from the floor.

(Samir Shah, Runnymede Chair)

Fiona, thank you very much. We have about ten minutes or so for questions and answers.

[Q1]. Just a point of clarification required actually. To what extent will this strategy apply in Wales, bearing in mind that, for example, Wales has its own schools inspectorate and other aspects also of a sort of self-government?

[Q2]. I'm very pleased to hear that you want to work in partnership with voluntary organisations, so I wanted to hear a bit more about that. But also, does the government think that perhaps the derogation from the Human Rights Act on detention at Belmarsh undermines this kind of strategy and could we move to freeing the detainees at Belmarsh please?

[Q3]. We work on a lot of European equality projects. This question could be towards either Fiona or Charles. There was a reference to focusing on the criminal justice system and the police, and I am sure most of us are aware the recent Morris Inquiry said that despite the Race Relations (Amendment) Act and the Macpherson Inquiry police forces were still failing to come anywhere near meeting the requirements for change. I myself personally worked for one of the major forces within the country for a while as a legal adviser and I very much felt I was a political appointment, that the internal culture wasn't interested in changing that much. It was just the ability to show to other organisations 'we're doing something about it, we've got a strategy, we've got a legal adviser'. But, internally, there was no real commitment to change, and I wonder how you are going to focus on that in the action plan to deliver.

[Q4]. I am pleased to hear there is a real focus to challenging racism and the far right extremists and that's very welcome. However, I think on increasing race equality I am slightly perplexed at the progress that has been referred to, which seems to be very slow, because race equality is not a newly found idea. It's been around for a very long time and it seems to me also that progress in employment and so on is extremely slow. Are there any concrete projections in terms of figures and such, in public-sector employment for instance, across the different departments of government? This new strategy will actually concretely deliver race equality for our communities, which remain discriminated against and under-represented at all levels of public life in Britain today.

Charles Clarke replies:

Firstly on Wales. The government in Wales is obviously devolved to the Welsh Assembly and I can't speak on behalf of the Welsh Executive in relation to the particular areas which are devolved, e.g. education and so on. That said, I believe it is fair to say that there is a very substantial commitment in Wales across the Welsh Executive to the ambitions that we have here. But it illustrates the point that I was trying to make earlier on which is that actually the way in which things work in Wales, in Cardiff for the sake of argument, is different from the way in which things work in Birmingham, and our strategy needs to reflect that and actually devolution, in my opinion, will help us to do that. But the broad answer is yes but without a commitment. I can't commit the Welsh Executive: that is, of course, a matter for them.

On Karen's point we will work very closely with voluntary organisations and the nature of the work varies with the area that you are actually talking about, for example. Another example I always give is in education, where the Runnymede Trust produced a good report, I can't remember its title, published about four or five years ago [*Improving Practice: A Whole School Approach to Raising the Achievement of African Caribbean Youth*, launched in December 1998], about discrimination in education. And one of the powerful recommendations of the Runnymede Trust report was that a school should work in conjunction with the community which it serves in a very explicit way, because there were too many schools which were apart from the community that they were serving in terms of their governors, whether parents came

into the school, dialogue with the community about what ought to be done at weekends and after school and all the rest of it. And that is a different set of relationships to some of the social care relationships within each area, and we have to work that through.

I don't agree about Belmarsh. There is a set of issues which are important that I have to resolve. But the point I think I should make in this gathering – the fact that there are individuals whose aim is to physically destroy us and our society – is not a comment on the communities in this country at all but on those individuals and the organisations which support them whose ambition is to do that. That's not a view shared by any of the organisations in this room or any more widely, but the fact is there is a trade-off, which is a difficult trade-off to get, between liberty and security. It is my responsibility to get that right and I will in due course respond to the Law Lords' judgment in a way that I hope will respect both of those issues.

On the Morris Inquiry, I've already talked since taking on this job with the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of the Met and one or two other forces as well about some of the issues arising from the Morris Inquiry and I think the answer fundamentally is that it varies from force to force. There are some forces which have taken this issue seriously, other forces which have taken it less seriously; and even the forces which have taken it most seriously would say there is still a long way to go to change the practice, in the ways and means we have to carry it through. But I can certainly give the assurance, if that is what you are seeking, that as Home Secretary I believe the issues raised, both in the first originally and now in the Morris Inquiry, are issues not only for the Met but for the police service as a whole, and we will be continuing to work in that way. And I think the police would say that the best of the police would accept that and work with that, but there are elements which need to be addressed as one goes through.

My final points are really just on this phrase 'the progress is slow'. Yes, progress is slow and the reason why I celebrate that fact rather than the other way round, if I can put it like this, is that there are people who have a view it is possible to get instantaneous progress in all of these areas and I reject that view. There are people who are despairers in this. Sometimes when I'm listening to the 'Today' programme I think they are linked up with journalists in the 'Today' programme, who believe that there is no change in society and nothing can be done. I fundamentally reject that. I think there is progress. It is slow progress. It is steady progress. But there is progress. Now, anybody who comes to me and says progress should be faster, I would agree with them, and we need to go through and accelerate progress in any of these areas. We have to go through and say how we might make progress faster.

That is an absolute obligation ...

... and we accept that and people should challenge it and say progress should be faster. But I think some progress is a lot better than no progress, and I also think there is an illusion which needs to be contested that there is some way for you to suddenly get progress in these areas.

I hesitate to use the language of my old, much younger, days, but it is a struggle; and there is even, I hesitate to suggest, a dialectical process involved here that needs to be dealt with, and you just have to keep going around certain principles. So if it's an impatience which serves why isn't progress fast enough, I share the impatience – good question, asked in the right way. But if it's cynicism that says actually there's nothing you can do, it's all hopeless, then I don't share that view because I think we have to acknowledge it's hard to make progress.

Fiona Mactaggart adds:

On the question of where can we find out what's happened and what's going to happen, I talked about producing an annual report, Race Equality in Public Services, which is published today. It's available on the Home Office website [www.homeoffice.gov.uk]. You will find in it the targets that we have set for employment within the public service that in most respects have been met, but there are issues about employment in the police and issues about promotion that we are still tackling. But that will give you the picture that you specifically asked for.

Three more questions are taken:

[Q 5]. In light of the statements from the CRE recently, which said that gypsies and travellers have been excluded from the race debate in the last 20 years, it's disappointing that this group weren't included particularly in Mr Clarke's speech. How does Mr Clarke expect his government to deal with this exclusion and what does he consider his own personal responsibility in that to be? And can I also add a question to Fiona: in the housing plan work that she talked about, is that housing need going to include the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers because I would suggest that is a clear step forward that needs to be made.

[Q6]. I would like to draw the attention of the Home Secretary and the Minister to this poverty gap between youths, Asian youths and other youths, especially Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, which is huge, 21 compared to 66. What kind of project do you intend to carry out and what is the action plan to remove this gap? This is connected with educational achievement as well. You mentioned the ethnic minority achievement grant too. Mostly this grant is used by schools in mainstream funding and not for the benefit of the ethnic minority children. I think we try to put this right locally but something has got to be done at the centre. And then we come to racism and prejudice and discrimination. There is still institutional and other racial discrimination everywhere. Although the level has come down – I have been in this field for over 40 years and I have noticed there is a reduction – still there is huge racial discrimination and now faith discrimination as well. But you in central government I think are trying to fold up this commission, the CRE, and trying to bring in the commission for equality and human rights, which will deal with so many different things, gender and disability and other things, but I think we need to have some independent monitoring body which would carry on working on race equality. Unless we have the independent monitoring body, faith discrimination cannot be implemented.

[Q7]. I am delighted that there's a new framework for religious education because it is the basis of knowledge and understanding. But I think it could be toothless if parents can still opt out. I've found in my 15 years of teaching religious education that the ones who do opt out are the very ones who need that education.

Charles Clarke replies:

First on gypsies and travellers. I'm sorry if you were offended that I didn't mention that particular group. That's certainly part of the strategy and the fact is that on the various consultative committees and so on, certainly in education [I haven't briefed myself fully on the Home Office situation], there is full involvement. They are a classic community, gypsies and travellers, where what I said earlier – that it's not a question of general discrimination, but particularly what do we do for this particular community with their particular life circumstances, and so on – is absolutely true. I think that's particularly true in the education area by the way, but it's true in a number of other areas as well, that we have to focus what we can do and the support that we give. But my general point would be that I'm certainly very ready, the Home Office and other government departments are ready, to hear what your proposals are for how we should address some of the particular issues on which that community needs responses.

On the point you made from Luton about the 'gap', there are a whole set of different measures to talk about in relation to particular communities. I hope you won't think I am too prejudiced in saying that I still think education is the core, and when Jim Rose from Ofsted did his analysis of educational achievement by particular groups, some of the most alarming results were for Pakistani and Bangladeshi children in those circumstances, and that relates back to the ethnic minority achievement grant point. I think most schools would now say that their mainstream funding is in a better position than it was and so they haven't needed to deal with it in that way. But there is a real problem for my colleagues at Education, which is that the ethnic minority achievement grant was used and was distributed originally on a bidding regime which doesn't necessarily reflect where the greatest needs now are. But getting through a process of change is a very difficult thing to do without creating quite serious arguments and difficulties and problems. But again I know that my Education colleagues, because when I was the Education Minister we were thinking about this, absolutely welcome thoughts on this question.

On racism, prejudice and discrimination I was glad you acknowledged that discrimination has reduced. I think the most worrying thing that we have to target is this question of incitement to hatred, and these groups who are all about trying to foment dissension, distrust and fear in a variety of different ways. That's why I am in favour of strengthening the law in that regard, which I think is an important thing for us to do, and then we have to carry it through in the way that Fiona was describing – in monitoring and looking at the situation right across the line.

I appreciated your comment from the General Teaching Council. If I am being frank about this, and I've said it before in other contexts, I think there is a long way to go to improve the quality of religious education, and the first starting point for it was the establishment of the non-statutory framework in my view. Once that is established a whole question of continuous professional development and teaching and training for teachers for themselves, the development of materials, for example, comes into being. I launched a very very good initiative called Muslim Books for Schools, where a set of materials has been developed by the Muslim community to educate about the faith, but more generally very powerful stuff, very strong. The development of materials and the improvement of the quality of religious education is very important, and the fact is that not all of the teaching has been as good as it should have been. This is not a criticism, I emphasise, of teachers. The material has not been there to really take it forward in a particular way, but I think we now have a basis on which to do that. Now the parents' opt-out may be a factor in certain circumstances and I can acknowledge what you are saying in that regard.

But I think the much bigger problem to address is raising the quality and the nature of religious education in schools in a way that ensures that everybody who goes through school understands the nature of faith and the nature of faiths, i.e. all faiths, and how they are. That is the key question, and the amount of work to be done there is very substantial. Now is the opt-out central to it? Well I'm not completely against it, but I think it's a second-order question compared to the ones I mentioned earlier, despite my acknowledgement of the truth of your remark about some of the people opting out who maybe need most help in this regard.

I'm sorry that I'm going to have to leave at this point, but I just wanted to say how much I've appreciated coming to this event this morning and to apologise for being a relatively short time here. But the message I want to send above all others is a commitment on behalf of the Home Office and myself as Home Secretary, Fiona and our colleagues, to work with you to get these things right as we go through, and to be prepared if necessary to re-examine the ways we've approached things to see how we can do it better on the basis of how we can take it on. I've enjoyed the exchange this morning and am only sorry I can't stay longer.

Fiona Mactaggart adds:

On gypsies and travellers, if you look at page 32 of the document, you'll find the answer to your question.

The First Question and Answer session ends here.