

Race Equality in Scotland
8th March 2011
Scottish Parliament Committee Room 1

Panellists: Robert Brown MSP (Scottish Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Justice); Michael McMahon MSP (Labour MSP and member of Cross-Party Group on Race Equality); Humza Yousaf (SNP Candidate for the Glasgow Region); Professor Kay Hampton (Professor in Communities and Race Relations at Glasgow Caledonian University); Ephraim Borowski (Director of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities); Chair: Rob Berkeley (Director, Runnymede Trust)

Apologies: Jamie McGrigor MSP (Conservative)

Summary

Ahead of the forthcoming Scottish elections, Runnymede held a panel discussion with MSPs and community experts on the current state of race equality in Scotland. Key issues discussed were as follows:

Abolition of Commission for Racial Equality

Professor Kay Hampton expressed concern that the formation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and passing of the Equality Act has watered down discussion on race, and highlighted that the EHRC has less resources for each equality strand in comparison to when each strand was covered by a separate organisation (for example, the Commission for Racial Equality).

Sectarianism

Michael McMahon MSP drew attention to issue of sectarianism in light of last week's clashes between Celtic and Rangers, stating that it acts as a "function of racism". Other panellists criticised cuts made a few years ago to funding to tackle sectarianism.

Will equality take 150 years?

Michael McMahon drew attention to a striking statistic in the debate – that it took Irish migrants 150 years to achieve economic parity in Scotland. Some in the audience asked whether it will take the same amount of time for Scotland's other ethnic groups to achieve equality, whilst others suggested that such a comparison is unhelpful and could result in inaction to address equality in the short-term. Audience members also argued for the importance of pushing race equality issues higher up on the agendas of decision makers, stressing that Scotland must not be in the same position in four years time.

Workplace discrimination

Discrimination in the workplace was identified as a key issue by audience members and panellists, with some highlighting lack of progression within organisations as a key concern. It was suggested that an important next step would be to identify and record instances in discrimination in workplace more comprehensively in order to accurately determine the scale of problem.

Problems with localism and the Big Society

Ephraim Borowski identified the problems of the Westminster Government's localism and Big Society agendas in relation to race equality. Regarding localism, he highlighted that many ethnic minority communities are vastly spread out across Scotland, with some areas only having a handful of residents from a particular ethnic group. Given this, he argued that there is a danger that their needs will be neglected under a localism agenda. Regarding the Big Society, Ephraim argued that funding is still needed for charities to maintain their operating structures, adding that they will not be able to facilitate volunteers if they do not have at least a basic level of resources.

Diversity in parliament

Robert Brown MSP argued that more MSPs from varied ethnic backgrounds are needed in the Scottish Parliament. Humza Yousaf reiterated this point, and argued in favour of shadowing schemes for BME people interested in getting involved in politics.

Other issues

Humza Yousaf praised the Scottish Government's decision to retain race equality funding. He also argued that equality powers should be completely devolved to the Scottish Parliament, adding that a cross party consensus is needed on this issue.

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