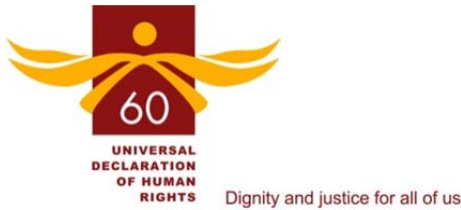


United Nations Association

Westminster Branch

Campaigning for a strong, credible and effective UN



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UNA Westminster questions political parties on their race policy

In a packed meeting in the House of Lords chaired by Lord Herman Ouseley an expert panel tackled the subject *Does the UK have a credible race equality strategy or is a new vision required?* The meeting was themed around the UK's obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

Lord Ouseley, in welcoming the work of CERD and the opportunity it afforded to apply pressure on Government, questioned whether the UK has a coherent strategy on race let alone a vision. He feared that the decline of the ethnic minority voluntary sector would make it more difficult to make an impact. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was represented by Rachel Zaltzman, Head of its Human Rights and Respect programme, who explained how civil society could use the CERD mechanisms to influence UK policy on race. EHRC in its role as a National Human Rights Institution was seeking to facilitate Government compliance with CERD recommendations on hate crime, educational under-achievement, stop and search and issues relating to Gypsies and travellers. She stressed the role of civil society in monitoring institutions' performance on race issues and urged greater use of the provisions of the public sector equality duty.

Barbara Cohen, a former UK NGO delegate to CERD, said that the key tenets of UK race relations law were set out in the CERD Treaty as drafted in the 1960s. Noting the UN recognises NGO concerns, she urged maximum participation in the next state examination due in 2015.

Baroness Thornton, a Labour Party equalities spokesperson, argued that race issues had suffered badly after the Government stopped monitoring the impact of its policies. An incoming Labour Government would reintroduce equality impact assessments and lead a major drive to improve ethnic minority representation in key institutions such as the police, judiciary and the civil service.

Journalist Lester Holloway argued that the country's growing ethnic minority population would have a big sway on the UK's electoral politics in the future, as with the pensioners' vote, it would be unwise of politicians to neglect or take for granted this powerful voting force.

The numerous contributions from the large audience included a robust debate around affirmative action vs. positive discrimination and the need for a level playing field. Concerns were expressed about the lack of access to legal assistance to fight discrimination cases and for the declining career progression/life chances options for certain ethnic minority groups, especially since the economic downturn. Others highlighted the cultural, economic and social origins of discrimination, including disadvantages faced by white working class males.

In thanking the speakers, David Wardrop, UNA Westminster Chair, observed that the UK had never fully followed up the recommendations of the ill-fated UN World Conference on Racism (Durban 2001) which ended only days before the 9/11 attacks on New York. From that time, he observed, the Government's overall narrative had shifted from tackling issues of racial inequality to combating terrorism and that this largely remained the case today.