

5 December 2016 Still shortcomings in UK race strategy, say human rights experts

UNA Westminster's branch meeting titled *'The UK response to the UN's race audit: blueprint for change or empty promises, to gather dust until the next submission to the UN in 2021?'*, chaired by Lord Ouseley, followed up that held in 2014 when Westminster UNA reviewed the UK's progress in implementing recommendations made in the 2011 audit conducted by the Committee for the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). That report had criticised the UK for its treatment of gypsies and Irish travellers and its record on the disproportionate use of 'stop and search' powers.

The CERD Committee's Periodic Review for the UK, published 29 August, had expressed concern on funding cuts to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the dilution of its powers and noted with alarm the sharp rise in race hate crime during the recent EU referendum campaign.

A key CERD recommendation urged the UK to develop a race strategy. Also, the EHRC had called on the Government to take urgent steps to tackle deep-seated racial inequality or risk societal disintegration. It proposed tough new race targets covering criminal justice, education and employment. Concerns for the state of UK race relations had been supported by its own research which evidences painfully slow progress and disproportionate outcomes in the life chances of black and minority ethnic people.

Upon becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May had committed the Government to an audit of public services to identify and tackle racial disparities and injustice. But many asked whether this indicated that 'Race' was back on the UK policy agenda after a prolonged period on the side-lines?

Andrea Murray, Human Rights and Research Director, Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC), stressed the Commission's role as one of the UK's three 'A' status National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) and its place in the CERD examination process. This matter had taken on extra relevance following the race hate spike following the Brexit referendum and had been addressed in the report [Healing a divided Britain](#) published in August. This document and the call for a race equality strategy was an example of UK civil society at work. She heralded the publication of a new shadow report on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and drew attention to the Commission's work on Gypsies and travellers and on the government's Prevent Strategy. Finally, notwithstanding the reduction of 25% in the Commission's annual grant, staff were determined to pursue their remit, submitting commentaries on key government policies and noted that while the next UPR is some years away, the issues to which refers remain priorities.

Barbara Cohen, Runnymede Trust, outlined the manner in which UK civil society had made the submission of a widely supported [Shadow Report](#) to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) regarding the UK Government's Periodic Reports. This included reference to the UN body's 'special measures which had highlighted weaknesses in the UK government's performance (hate crimes, gypsies and travellers and the Prevent strategy). She noted the start of [the International Decade for People of African Descent](#) (2015-2024) but awaited clarity from government on what strategy might address this. She drew attention to the vision in the original UK Race Relations Act (1965) and regretted that, in her opinion, such clarity and courage are not shown today.

Ian Naysmith, Senior Policy Adviser in the Integration and Faith Division at the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) spoke of the devolvement of responsibilities in this field throughout central government, to the devolved administrations and also overseas territories. Policy when collated must be presented to Ministers before and after sharing with the EHRC. He shared with the audience the environment in which governments and NGOs present their respective cases in Geneva to a panel comprising experts from Ireland, Jamaica and Turkey. NGOs may comment also and in August 2017, the UK must return to the UN's Human Rights Council to present its case on gypsies and travellers and on the Prevent strategy.

The meeting ended with a lively Question and Answer session, covering mental health, the empowerment of women, and the delicate balance between freedom of speech and the dangers of hate speech.