



Elected representatives and minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland

SEMINAR

Tuesday 12th February

**Room MI022, Aberfoyle House
University of Ulster, Magee Campus**

Roisin O'Hagan welcomed speakers and audience members to the Seminar and explained how the event was a collaboration of the research project on Elected Representatives & Minority Ethnic communities in Northern Ireland (NI), (coordinated by Dr Aidan McGarry), and INCORE's Diversity in Action (DiA) project. Roisin described the aims of the seminar as being firstly to present the initial findings of the research project and secondly to provide the opportunity for focused discussion on the initial findings and other issues pertinent to representatives from minority ethnic communities with regard to elected representatives in NI.

Roisin provided a brief background on the DiA project, the purpose of which is to help build the capacity of Northern Ireland's minority ethnic sector, with a particular focus on the North West area. DiA has held a series of seminars to date which have provided the opportunity for focused discussion on issues particularly relevant to the minority ethnic community sector, with a view to taking recommendations forward, generating ideas and influencing policy. Roisin explained that this seminar was part of the series of DiA seminars.

Roisin outlined the programme for the event and pointed out that despite their best efforts INCORE staff had found it very difficult in finding politicians who could come and speak at the event. Whilst it was acknowledged that MLA's are involved in Assembly business early in the week, it proved problematic in finding local councillors who were able to make themselves available to speak at the event. This was disappointing and frustrating and it was suggested that this could be a matter which should be included in the event discussions.

Roisin introduced Dr Aidan McGarry, Project Coordinator, University of Ulster.

Dr Aidan McGarry

Aidan began by outlining the aims of the research project:

1. Examine the attitudes of elected representatives and political parties towards minority ethnic communities
2. Assess the extent and nature of politicians' contact with minority ethnic communities
3. Examine elected representatives awareness of their parties' policies relating to minority ethnic communities

Aidan highlighted the three research components to the project:

- Examining and researching political manifestos
- Interviewing political representatives and minority ethnic representatives
- Conducting a survey which comprised the bulk of the research. Each Councillor and MLA received a copy of the survey.

Aidan summarised the analysis of the manifestos as follows:

DUP

In the context of EU enlargement the DUP warns of “benefits tourists” who will come to NI to “abuse the social security and healthcare systems” (DUP, 2004). Aidan pointed out that the language here is speculative, inaccurate and it plays on society's fears. He also highlighted the change in language which can be detected one year later with a section in the 2005 manifesto maintaining the DUP's “zero tolerance approach in relation to racism” (DUP, 2005).

Sinn Fein

Aidan pointed out that more than any other party, Sinn Fein uses the language of equality and human rights. Sinn Fein also comes out on top (along with SDLP) in terms of quantity of references to minority ethnic communities. Aidan reported that Sinn Fein also targets discriminatory behaviour towards asylum seekers (SF, 2001), the Traveller community (SF, 2003) and the Muslim community (SF, 2003). Again the 2004 manifesto is instructive: “The EU must ensure non-discriminatory work practices” and Sinn Fein make the point that Ireland shares an affinity with “the economically marginal former Eastern bloc states” (SF, 2004).

UUP

Aidan reported that UUP maintains its commitment to a tolerant, pluralist society (UUP, 2001). However in 2004 a section entitled ‘Governed according to our laws and customs’ leads in with a discussion on international terrorism and international crime and then proceeds to mention asylum seekers and migrants (UUP, 2004). Aidan pointed out that when interpreting language, context is key. Thus the inference here is that asylum seekers and migrants are associated with terrorism and crime. The 2007 election manifesto was condensed and translated into several languages, and placed on the party's website.

SDLP

Aidan reported that SDLP and Sinn Fein have the most references to minority ethnic communities by some distance. The 1997 manifesto contains one of the most

comprehensive and elaborate references to minority ethnic communities in NI (SDLP, 1997). Whilst the 2004 DUP and UUP European manifestos warned of increasing migration, the SDLP states: “evidence shows that migrant workers make a net contribution to the economy” (SDLP, 2004).

Alliance

Aidan pointed out that the Alliance party maintains that its Councillors would combat discrimination on grounds of race (Alliance, 1997). Similar to SF and SDLP, Alliance condemns the practice of placing asylum seekers in detention centres (Alliance, 2003). Aidan also commented on how Alliance consistently draw attention to the link between sectarianism and racism (Alliance, 2007).

Interviews

Aidan went on to talk about the interviews that were conducted. The initial findings from the interviews which were carried out with minority ethnic community representatives and advocates highlighted the infrequent interaction of elected representatives with minority ethnic communities. The interviewees cited several instances of good work by individual elected representatives but were broadly critical of the level of interaction with political parties. The findings also showed that different minority ethnic communities have different interests for example housing, healthcare, employment rights, racism. Aidan pointed out that when asked ‘who best represents your community?’ interviewees replied ‘NGOs’ and ‘community organizations’, not ‘political parties’. It was felt that political parties are only interested at election time.

The interviews with elected representatives again highlighted the infrequent interaction with minority ethnic communities. Aidan pointed out that the interaction tends to be problem solving constituency work. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that there was a problem with racism in Northern Ireland society but did not think that political parties were racist. The interviews also highlighted that most of the interviewees were not aware of their party’s policies and initiatives relating to minority ethnic communities. Most elected representatives maintained that minority ethnic communities do not represent a substantial voting block as yet.

Survey

Aidan explained that the survey questionnaire was sent to all Councillors and MLAs in Northern Ireland (650 in total). The total response rate was 32%. Initial findings from the survey highlight that in terms of interaction, elected representatives interact with: Polish, Chinese, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani), Central and Eastern European (Lithuanian, Slovakian). Initial findings also indicated that the Traveller community have infrequent interaction with elected representatives.

Aidan discussed a few example questions from the survey. One of the questions asked ‘Do you consider yourself to be prejudiced?’ Aidan indicated that the responses were as follows:

- The majority of respondents from all political parties report that they are not at all prejudiced (83.1% of respondents).
- The majority of DUP respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (82.1% of the DUP respondents).
- The majority of Sinn Fein respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (82.2% of the SF respondents).

- The majority of UUP respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (72.7% of the UUP respondents).
- The majority of SDLP respondents report that they are not at all prejudiced (94.6% of the SDLP respondents).

Another example which Aidan highlighted was: 'Do you agree with the UK's decision on immigration restrictions for Central and Eastern European Countries?' Aidan indicated the responses were as follows:

- The majority of DUP respondents disagree with the U.K decision on immigration believing that there should've been restrictions placed on immigration (87.2% of DUP respondents).
- The majority of Sinn Fein respondents agree with the U.K decision on immigration (54.5% of the SF respondents).
- The majority of UUP respondents disagree with the U.K decision on immigration believing that there should've been restrictions placed on immigration (77.3% of the UUP respondents).
- The majority of SDLP respondents agree with the U.K decision on immigration (55.6% of the SDLP respondents).

Aidan concluded his presentation with some initial observations:

- Political parties are simply not doing enough. There is no substance behind the rhetoric.
- No coordinated policies exist.
- Politicians only interested in minority ethnic communities at election time.
- Anti-racism has become a 'common cause' amongst political parties.

Question & Answer

Q Is there any previous research to compare these results to?

A Nothing like this has been done before. The only other available research is the attitudes surveys carried out by Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey.

Q What definition of prejudice was used for the survey? What one person considers as prejudice another may not.

The definition of prejudice for this study was replicated from the Northern Ireland Life & Times survey. Aidan agreed that what one person considers as prejudice others may not. With this particular survey question there were many additional comments to clarify the written answers.

There was some discussion around a petition that had been distributed amongst some communities to try and put a stop to the travelling community being offered housing executive homes. It was pointed out that a Sinn Fein Councillor had stood up in the community and said that this was wrong.

The role of the media and how the media creates a fear in its portrayal of the travelling community was discussed. It was also pointed that when Councillors make comments

about particular communities, that are clearly out of line, there is no common code of practice in terms of language, and as this does not exist it makes it very difficult to reprimand Councillors.

Concillor Barry Monteith – Mayor of Dungannon

Barry Monteith is the current Mayor of Dungannon and Sinn Fein Councillor. Barry began by describing the benefits experienced from inward migration to Dungannon. Almost 1000 people migrated to Dungannon within 6 months. The migrant workers were pre-dominantly Portuguese speakers and at first many thought that the migrants would not stay and there was almost a refusal to accept reality. The migrant workers were here to stay and were part of the community. Barry pointed out that the first task was to ensure the statutory agencies were responding accordingly. Issues such as language proved to be challenging particularly for the lesser used statutory agencies eg the Electoral Office. There were difficulties providing translators for voter registration, voting, marriages, registering of births and deaths. Barry pointed out that when the need for a translator arises in the Registrar offices, the council has to pay for this.

Barry reported that there is an advice centre in Dungannon which receives approximately 100-120 people every week, 20 of which are from a minority ethnic background. Their issues are the same as the indigenous population – the need for better jobs and better healthcare. Although language remains a barrier and on many occasions members of the Timorese community have to pay for interpreters themselves. This is extremely problematic.

With regard to political elections Barry pointed out that he accepted to a certain extent the earlier statement that politicians are only interested in people during election time. Barry pointed out that it is impossible to be in everyone's living room but that as a Sinn Fein representative he ensures that his party are as accessible as possible.

With regard to racism Barry agreed this was hard to eradicate, but pointed out that systematic/institutional racism was detrimental to the community in the long term. Racism is not just about hate crimes or removing barriers to public services but we also have to look at other issues such as the lack of resources for elected representatives for translation costs or interpreting costs.

The Good Friday Agreement caused a lot of confusion for immigrants as to where to go for visa assistance. This resulted in many going back and forth between Dublin and London with no real help from either city.

Barry concluded his talk by pointing out that some of the work with minority ethnic communities can take the shape of for example a Cultural Celebration Day and how we need to be careful in getting the balance right with these sort of events/presentations. We should be careful about putting people or groups 'on show.'

Eileen Chan-hu, Director Chinese Welfare Association

Eileen Chan-hu is the new Director of Chinese Welfare Association and previously worked in Ballymena as Coordinator of the Ethnic Minority Forum. Eileen began by providing a background of the Chinese community and explained how they have lived and worked in Northern Ireland since the 1960's. For many of the Chinese Community, they feel they belong to NI and NI is their home. Indeed many of the second generation Chinese community living in NI were children of the Troubles who have now grown up and integrated into the community.

Eileen expressed her sense of pride in working for the Chinese Welfare Association (CWA) and she described how the CWA is supported by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and OFMDFM. There is a commitment and acceptance of the Chinese community by the different political parties and this is evident from the top table set-up at the recent Chinese New Year celebrations which brought the political parties all together.

Eileen talked about Anna Lo and how her success in being elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly was major news for the world-wide Chinese community. This raised the profile for all minority ethnic communities. Eileen pointed out that the political parties do represent the Chinese Community. All parties have made an effort. With regard to voting representation Eileen pointed out that 4 out of 10 from minority ethnic communities had registered to vote and 25% only did so because a canvasser came to their door. Eileen stressed that the language barrier has a huge impact. Eileen felt that through Anna Lo's success in the South Belfast ward, which has a huge mix of different ethnic communities, this helped to bring minority ethnic communities together, as they all supported Anna in voting for her, and it was not just the Chinese community who supported her. This has been a very positive event as there have been high levels of racism in South Belfast.

Eileen concluded that in order to reach minority communities political parties need to move on the Racial Equality Strategy and stressed that the Shared Future document should not be forgotten and the importance of Section 75.

The above discussions have fed into Aidan McGarry's final research report and recommendations. Roisin closed the seminar by thanking all the speakers and participants for their input and pointed out that the notes from the seminar will be made available on the INCORE website.