



**Diversity in Action Project
Think Tank Series
One World Centre, Seeds**

Tuesday 27 February 2007

NOT JUST ANOTHER ELECTION SEMINAR...

'Minority Ethnic communities and their participation in the electoral process'

Introduction

This is the first in a series of Think Tank events and is part of the work being undertaken by INCORE's Diversity in Action project. The project commenced in December 2006 and is funded by CRC for a 16-month period. The purpose of the DiA project, which has a particular focus on the North West area, is to help build the capacity of Northern Ireland's minority ethnic sector. The Think Tank series will therefore provide 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.

The theme of the first Think Tank was around Minority Ethnic Communities and their participation in registering/voting in the elections. The aim of the event was to provide the opportunity for participants to discuss issues such as the level of minority ethnic involvement in the NI democratic process; why the minority ethnic sector should vote and how we can increase the levels of participation.

Roisin O'Hagan welcomed all attendees to the first Think Tank event, and introduced Paul Hainsworth, University of Ulster and Patricia Murphy, Electoral Office and thanked SEEDS for hosting the event at the new One World Centre.

Paul Hainsworth, University of Ulster

Paul began his talk by focusing on some of the existing research available and made reference to NI in particular. He discussed how society in NI is changing due to increasing ethnic diversity with greater numbers of ethnic minority peoples moving to Northern Ireland.

Summary of research

The most recent research available on the participation of members of the minority ethnic community in the NI electoral process, was commissioned by the NI Electoral Commission in 2005. The research involved a public opinion survey of minority ethnic communities and focus groups. Some of the key findings from the research includes: 40% of survey respondents were registered to vote. This compares to 90%

of the general population of Northern Ireland. Only 48% of the respondents said they voted at the 2003 Assembly elections compared to an overall turnout of 64%.

It would seem members of the minority ethnic community register less and vote less than the population as a whole. By comparison, in the UK in 2005, just over 80% of black and ethnic minorities were registered. There are 3 interesting reasons why more register in the UK:

i. The Rise of the British National Party (BNP) - The BNP currently occupy 50 council seats and these numbers are on the increase – they are trying to refashion themselves and are winning more support. On the other hand, many areas, such as Blackburn and Oldham are becoming more involved and very active with the United Against Fascism campaign. The United Against Fascism campaign aims to ‘alert British society to the rising threat of the extreme right, in particular the BNP, gaining an electoral foothold’ in Britain.

ii. The work of Operation Black Vote - this was an initiative set up in 1996 to target marginal constituencies and to advise people about registering to vote. It has been a very positive development.

Paul made reference to an article published recently in the Irish News where it stated that with more minority ethnic community members registering in NI, it could make a difference when the electoral count gets to the 5th or 6th seat.

iii. There are 15 or 16 black MPs in the UK. There are also shadowing arrangements in place where young people shadow these MPs, thereby encouraging an interest.

Paul pointed out that there are very few minority ethnic candidates in NI. Anna Lo (Director of the Chinese Welfare Association) is standing for the Alliance Party in South Belfast and Stephanie Sim-Doran is standing for the Green Party in Strangford. Paul suggested that if there were more minority ethnic candidates standing, this would have a knock on effect on members of the minority ethnic community registering.

Paul suggested the following reasons as to why members of the minority ethnic community do not register or engage with the political process:

1. Language barrier - there is insufficient material produced in other languages. However, this is improving, eg the Polish Community produce a monthly magazine, Glosik, which gets distributed throughout NI. The political parties are beginning to reach out and use these publications.
2. There is a feeling of not wanting to take sides. Members of the minority ethnic community do not want to be seen to be pro this or that, or photographed with a particular politician. They do not want to be alienated.
3. Some do not know how to register.
4. Some are not interested in NI politics.
5. There is a mistrust of authority and a mistrust of form-filling.
6. There may be a feeling of social exclusion/alienation. Due to poverty and low incomes, there is less inclination to register.

However, many of these issues are slowly changing. More material is now being produced in different languages eg the Electoral Office and Electoral Commission are producing more information in different languages. Political parties are giving more attention to the minority ethnic community, for example there were many candidates from a range of political parties in attendance at the recent Chinese New Year festivities in Belfast. At a recent NICEM meeting, there was a minute's silence for David Ervine. Another example, contained in the recent Irish News article, where there was reference made to Alex Maskey of Sinn Fein building relations with ethnic minorities. However, have the political parties done enough? Many believe their actions are tokenistic, that they do not go far enough. The Electoral Commission report (2005) highlighted the fact that the political parties need to have more regular contact with ethnic minorities, not just at election time.

Having discussed the reasons why ethnic minorities do not vote, Paul went on to highlight the reasons why members of the minority ethnic community do vote, both here and in the UK:

1. Canvassing is important. When the Electoral Office has led a campaign and political parties have canvassed, it has made a difference and has been very appreciated.
2. They feel it is a duty, an obligation. They feel they need to vote in order to play a part in society.
3. They feel that people need to exercise their right to vote.
4. Voting empowers them. They feel a sense of belonging/engagement.
5. Solidarity - if friends and family see them voting, they will also be encouraged to vote.

Paul pointed out that voting is only one political activity. There is more to politics than voting. We must bear in mind the bigger picture. There are many other ways in which to take part, eg:

1. People could join an NGO.
2. They could join a campaign against for example water charges
3. They could join an anti racism group.

Therefore, voting is important, so what can be done to increase it?

1. Increased canvassing;
2. Increased translation;
3. Using outlets such as the example of United Against Fascism, in Oldham - United Against Fascism registered people in community centres, in supermarkets, and in libraries;
4. Holding the day to vote during a weekend, as they do in many European countries;
5. Twinning elections, ie local and European elections taking place on the same day. The turnout would increase;
6. Making polling stations more appealing – eg providing access to crèches, coffee etc.

Summary

Registration for members of minority ethnic communities is lower. There are good reasons for this and good reasons to change it. There is potential to change and it is

already happening. Voting is very important for members of the minority ethnic in order that they feel a sense of belonging.

Patricia Murphy, Electoral office

The Electoral office has existed for 35 years. It is an independent Government organisation and does not come under the umbrella of local councils. The Electoral Office looks after registration and local elections when they occur. Their office is in Queen Street, opening hours are 9.00am-5.00pm. There is a Helpline telephone no. available in Belfast: 028-90446688, which also has a link to local offices. The Electoral Office provides lots of information on their website – statistics, downloadable electoral registration form, postal vote application form etc, which will soon be more widely available in different languages by possibly May or June. The Electoral Office would welcome suggestions regarding which languages people would like the information to be available in.

In order to get on the electoral register, 3 things are required:

1. You have to be 18
2. You must be a resident in NI for more than 3 months.
3. Nationality – needs to be British, Irish, all European and commonwealth countries.

In order to complete the form, there are various requirements:

1. Name and address
2. Date of birth
3. National insurance number (if available)
4. Your signature (in order to prevent fraud)

The Electoral Office is undergoing major changes. The last canvas was in Autumn 2006 – this will be the last canvas for around 10 years as the legislation has been changed. The Electoral Office wish to engage, as part of their outreach programme:

1. They are reaching out to young people (through schools, universities, technical colleges); members of the minority ethnic community; the elderly; and those moving house.
2. In order to ensure that the register stays as accurate as possible, they are hoping to develop links with the Rates Office and Housing Executive.

Patricia pointed out that the Electoral Office is not just about voting. There is almost a commercial angle to becoming registered. The electoral identity card can be used for many reasons, eg opening bank account, for travel, applying for mortgage, hire purchase, credit rating etc. If you call to the Electoral Office, they can take the photograph for the electoral id card and no fee is required. The Electoral Office can also assist with the application form. If an election is forthcoming, you will receive your card in 7-9 days; if there is no forthcoming election, then it will take 8 weeks approximately.

The Electoral Office is doing its best to remove language barriers. When you are on the electoral register and are from overseas, the franchise is: local government (including NI assembly) and European elections. There is no franchise for

parliamentary elections. There are now 6,000 members of the minority ethnic community on the register in NI and the number is ever- increasing.

The Electoral Office produce 2 registers: a full all-inclusive register and an edited version. You can indicate on a box if you want your name to be excluded from the edited version, ie if you do not want your name used for commercial purposes. It is possible to purchase the edited register, eg, for promotion of new business.

Electoral Office staff are very friendly and aim to help in any way. Interpreters are employed at some of the larger canvassing areas and have had some success with this. Electoral Office canvassers carry a flash card with their ID details for doorstep canvassing etc.

Question and Answer

- Katrina Kordula, Polish Welfare Association mentioned the Polish magazine, Glosik, which is published once a month. The distribution of the magazine helped to encourage members of the Polish community to register as, an electoral form was enclosed in each publication.

She believes that members of the minority ethnic community are treated very unfairly – for example, they were recently asked to take part in the Talk Back programme and were not given any opportunity to actually contribute. The minority ethnic community feel that there is too much focus on NI issues and that politicians are continually talking about the past. There is nothing to interest ethnic minorities.

- Comments were made regarding the way that members of the minority ethnic community felt they were treated by the Electoral Office canvassers. It was pointed out that there is a feeling that members of the minority ethnic community are not properly informed and that the canvassers didn't want to speak to the ethnic minorities because they had a 'different face'. Some members of the minority ethnic community felt frightened and intimidated by this. Many from minority ethnic communities come from ex-communist countries and fear they are being subjected to intelligence gathering. This has created a level of fear.

Patricia Murphy, Electoral Office responded to this and pointed out that all the canvassers receive personal training from her, on how they should approach and communicate with members of the public. If complaints had been received by the Electoral Office, at the time, then these complaints would have been followed up. Patricia suggested that it would be useful if SEEDS or Polish Welfare Association could give an idea of the area where these particular members of the minority ethnic community were living. It would help if the Electoral Office were better informed on these details; they could then provide increased assistance.

- Eamonn McCann, Socialist Environmental Alliance commented that the Socialist Environmental Alliance have Polish language in their manifesto and that other parties are doing the same thing. However, racism in NI society is a major problem and a lot more needs to be done to combat racism.

- It was pointed out that trying to register to vote poses problems for members of the travelling community. The Electoral Office requirement of evidence of proof of residency is a real problem and without this they cannot vote – there needs to be more flexibility.

Patricia advised that the travelling community should put this in writing to the Chief Electoral Officer. He is new to the post and is very keen to improve the service and to make it more user-friendly.

- On the issues of racism, the comment was made that racism also exists between the various communities, within the minority ethnic community.

Louise Brennan, An Munia Tober

Louise Brennan, is the Educational Co-ordinator from An Munia Tober. She spoke of the difficulties that the travelling community face whilst trying to register. Literacy is a major problem, as is proof of residency. Louise showed the audience various photographs of the poor conditions in which the travelling community live. There is no incentive for the travelling community to vote given the conditions in which they live.

The Think Tank finished with a very focused discussion on action points/recommendations to take forward:

Action points

1. Communication: translation, interpretation. Only 6,000 out of 35,000-40,000 of ethnic minorities are registered, therefore the message is not getting through.
2. Democracy is a new phenomenon for many from Eastern Europe – they need to be educated on democracy itself and its practicalities so that they can be part of the democratic process.
3. Problems for the travelling community and members of the minority ethnic community need to be addressed – a lot of them are seasonal migrators. Transient nature. Transference of information can be difficult.
4. The population needs to accept/be willing to allow non-nationals to be part of the process of change. Acceptance is key.
5. The role of the media is important – there is currently a considerable lack of diversity.
6. Communication: role of employers is important eg employers and recruitment agencies could give out information packs.
7. There needs to be a change of attitude and more understanding shown to ethnic minorities. Members of the minority ethnic community are here to help, they need to be understood. They are being placed at a lower level.
8. Ethnic minorities cannot identify with our past history and local parties. They should be allowed to speak and to be understood.
9. There should be more facilities for them to learn English and why can't the local community learn their languages?
10. Differences between immigrants also exist - there is racism between the minorities.

11. A mock election could be held – procedures for voting would be better understood.
12. Change in the voting day eg weekend or over a period of days to increase participation.
13. A pro-active attitude is required – need to acknowledge non-locals.
14. Young people who can vote speak better English than their parents. They could help translate in their community.
15. Members of the minority ethnic community do not see the link between having what they want and voting for what they want.
16. Despite consultation, members of the minority ethnic community do not see any results. It would be better if they could see an outcome. If there were proof that something had been done, it would encourage more votes.
17. The phobia of persecution needs to be broken.
18. Many are afraid to stand out because of the neighbourhood they live in.
19. We need to encourage the government to alter the electoral law of the state. This would encourage members of the minority ethnic community to vote. This should be reflected in immigration legislation.
20. Asylum seekers face many difficulties regarding voting. Some have been here for many years, are married to nationals, and still cannot vote.
21. There needs to be more focus on young people. Previously they shied away from politics because of the troubles. Now we are moving into a safer period, they are integrating at school and can have an influence. They are the future.
22. Shadow youth council could help in building education round politics. Re-elections for the Shadow Youth Council take place in March/April. Young people should be encouraged to take part.
23. There should be a nominated person to sit on assembly to represent minority ethnic community.
24. Nationals should encourage non-nationals to vote. The ethnic minority vote should be seen as a fresh start, as a way towards peace.

Roisin O'Hagan thanked all the participants and speakers and mentioned the next Think Tank event which will take place on Wednesday 18th April on the role of the media. INCORE will keep in touch with participants regarding further details on this event.

The research commissioned by the Electoral Commission which was referred to during the event is available at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/14951>