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Review

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Olinga Ta'eed

All Aboard the Ethnic Community Train

Olinga Ta'eed outlines action being taken to overcome divisions in the black and minority ethnic community in Wales. 'Holland House' - named after the venue of the first meeting - is not only rebuilding trust and relationships, it also contains the seeds of a new approach to equalities.

Trust in a community, and even in a relationship, is always a very tenuous thing. It takes years to build and an instant to lose, it can be established for all the right reasons, and lost for all the wrong reasons - on a whim, on a misunderstanding and on a fundamental breach. Once obtained, however, it is a powerful tool in bringing cohesion within communities.

I don't honestly know how mistrust set in within the black ethnic community in Wales, but independent observers agree that it is now at an all time low and it has been destroyed from its roots upwards. It would be easy to blame 'the system' for the mess we find ourselves in. General Systems Theory tells us that, by definition, all systems fail regardless of what safeguards we put in. Astronauts always know this - when the system fails, the backup to the system fails, and the backup to the backup of the system also fails in a catastrophic string of events which are mysteriously connected. Modern day Chaos Theory is obsessed with these kinds of links.

As a safeguard, the Welsh Assembly Government set up both internal and external structures to guide umbrella organisations and agencies the government had help start up. It was a brilliant plan, but like all connected systems it suffered from a fundamental flaw - when one part failed all the other parts cascaded with it. It was a top down system without a bedrock of empirical support but it was implemented, originally at least, with honesty and integrity and nothing but good intentions in mind. This child, however, was doomed to die at birth as no matter how many conferences, government grants, high level appointments you throw at this kind of connected system - it is only as strong as its weakest point.

The consequence of such damaged relationships within the Black and Minority Ethnic community in Wales has been a great huge vacuum in the centre ground. Scarcely a week would go by over the last 24 months when the media, both television and newspapers, fed by various factions within the conflict, would tear strips off key players, and gate keepers appeared to be oblivious to the damaging consequences of their actions. Retaliatory strikes by involved parties, often easily dichotomised between the Africa-Caribbean and the Asian Muslims, serves no other purpose than to humiliate the Ethnic community in Wales, with a watching indigenous population shaking their heads in regret and tutting rhythmically - "look how they behave". With the centre ground being too hot both politically and in the media, the entire community chose to stay on the periphery of engagement and as a consequence the community deteriorated even further. With strategic intent these parties plotted against each other and we all lost.

Of course it was not meant to be this way. There is little merit in blaming the government, its agencies, the police, in fact everyone else but ourselves for the dire predicament we have found ourselves in. Black and Minority Ethnic issues are slowly becoming devolved from Whitehall, which means Wales came to the table rather late and our immaturity of engagement with our ethnic communities is embarrassingly obvious to witness. What became certain was that the only remedy to such a tense and suffocating atmosphere was the introduction of a new and unknown party. Not only did this bring impartiality, independence and objectivity, but this influence could be the source

of either united hatred or of agreement for the rest of the community - either way it is a form of fragile unity which is much needed. This is the point where we came in.

Derailment: if it's broken...fix it

A group of us decided that all though we were not necessarily part of the problem we were part of the solution and the first ground rule was not to blame anyone else but ourselves for the failures of our communities. We had played into the hands of our detractors and equally we must show that we can evolve our way out of the cesspit of hatred and animosity dug by ourselves and start looking upwards and beyond rather than behind all the time. We had to hone our autodidactic qualities and simply get on with it.

We first had to choose a venue for a meeting and this in itself was difficult. History is not a friend when almost every place has a memory and a consequence. With a kind of missionary zeal, the community had practised self-harm by leaving a trail of disastrous meetings which included at least two fist fights between heads of organisations where police were called. The new four star Holland House Hotel in Cardiff was the natural choice as the venue had yet to be compromised.

Our first meeting was almost our last and some anecdotal evidence points to the very deep roots of much of the problem. We invited up to eight people - some of them protagonists - together to discuss a way forward. One participant could not curtail his emotions and opted out the night before, and ironically the chair of another BME organisation refused to attend claiming that she mistrusted Muslim men.

Trevor Phillips and Rhodri
Morgan on 1st December 2004



The irony of the statement, which surprisingly was later put into writing by her CEO, contradicts the very statesman-like position that a Chair should take. It is odd that you can have in co-existence two parties of BME factions, both focussing with sincerity to deliver community cohesion, and yet both in complete rejection of the principles of the other; a form of modern Manicheism alive in Wales.

Despite a faltering start when even the word "black" in the phrase BME was rejected, nevertheless it was particularly touching to see at the end of the meeting that a wise elder on one side of the divide hugged, for the first time in two years, a young protagonist – relationships were reborn. That, in itself was a result; the current success of Holland House is partly owed to these gate keepers who attended the first meeting and set their differences aside.

At the second meeting some seventeen people came and we sought a

mandate and an agenda to move forward. What was interesting was that many of these new people had almost no history with the community and had stayed away previously due to the intensity of bickering and politics that had ensued over the last few years. It was at this meeting the analogy was first drawn that this was a train that had left the platform, it is up to people to get on or get off, but the ethnic community train will keep on going.

The third Holland House meeting was hosted by Cardiff County Council and attracted sixty people to the event, with forty sending their apologies. This meeting was all about endorsement of what we are trying to do and we certainly got it. People came up to us and said how much they've been waiting for this opportunity to put the past behind us, refusing to attend any meetings for the last two or three years because of ongoing feuds. We were certainly encouraged that we were gathering momentum and fulfilling the need within the community.

The fourth meeting in September at the BBC with over seventy attending, and partially paid for by South Wales Police, was to set out our strategic intent for the future and we did this quite uniquely through a vote on several key items. This has now given us a remit for what Holland House is really about and what we have to do but further discussions are planned to understand our agenda better.

We have had a few guiding principles throughout the course of the past few months to help ensure we keep integrity of Holland House alive. These include having independent observers and facilitators present at each meeting to document the event impartially. The funding for Holland House has been done largely privately without government money, to keep it non-partisan. We have not criticised any part of the government, community, the gatekeepers or agencies; it is not our job to do so. There are no bad people in this theatre but people do work with different efficiencies and believe passionately in their ontological priorities. Perhaps the most important principle has been that everyone attending the meetings has done so as an individual and are not representing any particular organisation. This way we overcome many of the barriers which hitherto have been hampered similar brave initiatives in the past. The Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) had summarised the same in a Memorandum of Understanding which has been accepted by Holland House attendees.

It has not all been a bed of roses, however. In the six months of Holland House we have encountered only two people whose *Weltanschauung* appears to be diagonally opposed to ours. But with true French Foreign Legion passion, our Code of Honour stipulates "tu respectes les ennemis vaincus".



The panel on 1st December (Olinga Ta'eed standing)

Arriving at a platform near you

The challenge for Holland House is to convert what is ostensibly a 'movement' into an 'organisation' while still containing the community both in terms of connected vision as well as the fallout from clashing diverse agendas. In order for Holland House to become sustainable and saleable it needs to translate to action at local level, to be democratic through electoral process whilst not ending up in a committee, and to be an open membership where the spark of truth leads to a vibrant community from the clash of differing opinions. At present the community works on a closed membership basis of different agencies and frankly these demarcations have become irrelevant not only to the outside world, but to within even its own internal memberships. Each agency must not only impact but they should matter, and each should have some touching point to an ever distant community; many BME agencies do this but not all.

In the next few months we will attempt to complete a process, which has already begun. Holland House has now started from its humble beginnings to be a small force with some momentum and a wide support not only in the community but also in gov-

ernment and its agencies. There is clear water ahead of the community to make of it what they wish. In our search for inclusivity and structure we have put together some key milestones. This includes the speech by Trevor Phillips (Chairman of CRE) organised by us in Cardiff on 1st December 2004 at Cardiff International Arena (hosted by The Disability Rights Commission), before which what may prove to be an exciting debate between community activists and leading senior delivery stakeholders. The BBC have kindly agreed to record, and distribute online what looks to be a mini-run of the 1970's 'Town Bloody Hall' debate on feminism involving Germaine Greer which became a milestone in the evolution of feminism in the USA. As I complete this article, to date some one hundred and fifty people have accepted to attend, so this indeed looks like a train that will not stop.

We have initiated several lines of approach to build a real foundation, including engaging with the Assembly Government to produce an online debating forum for the BME community as well as a freely available online demographic profiling for the BME community but made available to all (it seems surprising that no demographic filing of the BME community is available for Wales unlike the rest of the UK).

Holland House believes that the ethnic community in Wales should have a strong and respected voice and this voice should be heard. We believe in grass roots participation, and whilst appreciating that the gatekeepers had a role in the cycle of development, the future requires a different model of engagement that can lead to a vibrant and exciting dialogue in between us, with other people, and with the indigenous population of Wales. Once this has been established, perhaps we can perhaps address some of the symptoms of our own failure such as the complete lack of our representation within the electoral process in Wales. Interestingly, we are becoming increasingly approached by other diversity groups representing disability, gay activists, gender bias, gypsies, single parents, etc and asked whether we can open up our forum to the whole Single Equalities agenda in Wales. Now if this is not community cohesion, then what is?