

## RACE HATE

*View from the Chair. Tues 4 Feb 2014 Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland*

Last week we marked Holocaust Memorial Day – we could never be said to “celebrate” the memory of such a dreadful event. I have had the privilege of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau and there is no amount of prior research which prepares you to experience the outworking of institutional prejudice on that scale. In the words of Tim Holden “*The Holocaust illustrates the consequences of prejudice, racism and stereotyping on a society. It forces us to examine the responsibilities of citizenship and confront the powerful ramifications of indifference and inaction*”.

The sad thing is, 70 years on, racism – which lay at the heart of the horror of the holocaust - is still alive and well. We can neither ignore its reach nor downplay its impact. Racial prejudice has always been a potential counterpart of our coming together in communities. As people cohere in an identifiable group, there is a risk of considering those outside the group as “other”. Such prejudice mostly remains internalised, only occasionally finding verbal expression in conversations or being manifested in behaviours.

In this place we call home, over the past few weeks, we have witnessed some recent very open and troubling examples of racist behaviours, particularly against our Polish and Eastern European neighbours. While the PSNI assure us that those attacks are probably caused by small groups of people, this doesn’t diminish the impact on the families and individuals involved; or on a society which is trying to rebuild itself after decades of conflict. Though targeted policing, community safety policies and neighbourhood watch initiatives may serve to limit such activity, they cannot, in themselves, change attitudes.

There are protections available; and no one needs to put up with racial discrimination - in the workplace or in other areas of public life. Last year our legal staff in the Equality Commission received 422 enquiries on race issues, which was 13% of all enquiries. Almost 60% of these related to employment or the workplace but a growing number – almost 40% - are complaints about access to services, such as health, education or housing, or shops, restaurants and bars.

The Commission has been recommending that, in its present revision of the Racial Equality Strategy, the Northern Ireland Executive should seek to develop and actively promote values of acceptance and respect. We have asked that actions be taken to improve reporting of racist hate crimes and how such racist hate crimes are addressed. We need to reduce and prevent racist violence.

We have an increasingly diverse community. The 2011 census shows that there are more than twice as many people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland now as was the case a decade ago (c33,000- 14,000). In addition there are 45,000 from the European Union. As a society, we need to learn how to live with difference, recognising that the old "two communities" model is an outdated way of thinking about good relations. The challenge is not to become indifferent to racism as that risks us being bystanders to history, rather than becoming history makers.