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The Pressing Need for a Racial Equality Strategy

The horrendous loss of life and terror inflicted on people in Paris and elsewhere over the past few weeks has had a deep impact on all of us. The suffering caused by those atrocities has generated an outpouring of public sympathy across the world, as well as increased levels of fear and suspicion of “the other” in many societies. These are responses which, at times like these, are too easily exploited by people who have always opposed efforts to develop greater tolerance and respect between people of different cultural and racial backgrounds.

In Northern Ireland, almost every week, we are confronted by reports of abuse and attacks on people because of their race or ethnic origin. When people attack those who choose to live with us here, whoever they are, however well earthed they might believe their views to be, they diminish the whole of our society as well as themselves.

We all have a responsibility to challenge expressions of racial prejudice and speak up when people are being abused and treated unfairly within our community because of their race or ethnic origin.

The Equality Commission has particular responsibility under the Race Relations Order and racial discrimination in employment and service provision has consistently been among the top three causes of complaints received every year.

As a society, we need to resolve that future generations do not have to grow up in a place which appears to put more emphasis on winning than sharing. Northern Ireland has evolved into a multicultural society and we need to create a public consensus which promotes an appreciation of the diversity of our community.

To do this, leadership is needed from those at the highest levels of our society. As a start, we urgently need the delivery of an updated Racial Equality Strategy. The delay in finalising the Strategy and putting it into operation is a cause for real concern.

It is vital to leave those who perpetrate race hate crimes in no doubt that their attitudes and behaviour are deplored by the vast majority of people here and that their actions will not be tolerated.

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