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Network for diversity and integration – a project of the Party of European Socialists

With progressing globalisation, the traditional notion of nation states as ethnically, religiously and culturally homogenous entities is turning more and more into a relic from the past. For reality already looks very different: to an ever greater degree, diversity will become the dominant structural characteristic of most European societies. Before the backdrop of this development, Gary Tiley, MEP and chair of the PSE's "Diversity and Integration Network", reports on projects and possible solutions in Europe that aim at facilitating the entrance and the participation of minority groups in societal and political life and, by these means, head towards a society which no longer defines itself along ethnic and religious criteria but by common social aims and values.

Gary Tiley*

The nation state was built around the principles of one country, one ruler, one people and one religion. Interestingly though, communities that stuck rigidly to these principles, generally found themselves stagnating, while those countries which adopted a more pragmatic approach, generally thrived economically from the skills of immigrants, many of whom were fleeing religious perse-

cution. In reality, most European nations today are the result of centuries of successive waves of immigration. In the past, most of the immigrants were gradually assimilated over generations becoming often indistinguishable from the native population. Nonetheless each wave of immigration brought with it issues of integration and discrimination little different from those prevalent today.

* Gary Tiley, since 1989 a Labour Member of the European Parliament, who works in numerous committees, is leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party and chair of the PSE's „Diversity and Integration Network“. Founded in 2007, the Network aims to facilitate discussion and the exchange of experiences between citizens of the EU and PSE's socialist and social democratic member parties. Its focus is on the challenges of the increasing diversity of European societies as well as the opportunities and difficulties faced in the integration of migrants and other minorities. Note that though they are the first group for the Network to work on, Muslims are not its sole focus.

Globalisation has enormously accelerated the movement of people. More than 175 million people live outside their country of birth. The motivation for this mobility has either been economic, with migrants looking

for a better life and developed countries desperately searching for suppliers of often cheap labour; or humanitarian with people fleeing from persecution or wars. As before migration has brought enormous benefits to the host societies. We have to be clear that Europe needs migration as part of a wider solution to its aging populations, shrinking workforces and low birth rates. It is also important to remember that freedom of movement within its borders is one of the founding principles of the EU.

Nowadays most European countries are multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith. This has created issues of community tension and discrimination. Indigenous populations often feel threatened by 'difference', while migrants feel unwelcome and feel that their contribution to the national benefit is unrecognized. Whereas first generation migrants were likely to accept the situation, second and third generations are less prepared to accept not having an equal stake in their own land. This has led in many cases to disaffection and alienation. Modern communications also make it easier for people to establish trans-national identities, which can reject the values of the society in which people live.

The left have attempted to deal with these issues by pushing for legislation, which outlaws certain behaviour, for example with anti-discrimination laws. In the European Union it was the Socialist commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou who introduced

European directives to outlaw discrimination in employment on all grounds, including age, race and religion. Yet we have to recognize that minority groups still suffer higher unemployment, poorer housing and poorer educational attainment.

The section of European society, which most feels itself under the greatest pressure, is estimated between 13 and 20 million Muslims.¹ Islam has played an integral part in the evolution of European history. However, it is since the Second World War that we have seen large-scale migration of Muslims to Europe. In some member states, Islam is now the second largest religion. Ethnic and faith divisions appear to be replacing those that previously were based on race. Furthermore, these divisions are being presented as if they were rigid, unchangeable and alien to prevailing culture and values. This gives rise in turn to the view that social solidarity is being undermined by cultural diversity. Add to that the fact that the global reach of Islam allows, at least on a superficial level, the development of trans-national identity and we can see the process, which has led some people to talk of a clash of civilisations within European society.

The PES has always believed in the principles of equality and social justice. As a progressive European party it is furthermore committed to understanding the deeper issues around integration and equality. Accordingly, it tasked the Network for

Diversity and Integration to look into issues of diversity, discrimination, integration and equality. The Network, chaired by Gary Tittley MEP and Vice-chair Emine Bozkurt MEP and open to representatives of all PES member parties, held a series of fact-finding missions in five European countries, all of which are grappling with hot to make the most of diversity and how to manage the challenge of integration. Members of the Diversity Network travelled to Spain, the UK, Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Sweden to learn from sister parties, politicians, governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as from Muslims themselves about the practical challenges and realities of today's global, diverse Europe. By selecting these diverse countries, the Network was exposed to very different perspectives on the integration and diversity questions. For example, despite a shared history of empire, countries like the UK and the Netherlands have taken very different paths over the past half-century or so to addressing the integration question. Some Muslim minorities in those countries now date back three generations; even after this amount of time neither country can be said to have got the integration question entirely right. Conversely, Sweden faces a relatively new, alternative challenge in trying to integrate Muslim newcomers from war torn parts of the world, such as Iraq. Sweden, in common with the other Nordic countries, has also had until relatively recently a more homogeneous society than has been the case elsewhere in Europe. Bulgaria on the

other hand has a very long established Muslim community.

It was immediately obvious that it is a mistake to talk about a Muslim community as if it were a cohesive whole. There are in fact many Muslim communities. We were particularly impressed by the presentation in London by the Institute for Community Cohesion,² which analysed the plethora of Muslim groupings. Even on a more superficial level, it became apparent to us that a Muslim woman coming from a rural community in Somalia would probably have a different outlook to a third generation British Muslim man of urban Pakistani origin. For governmental and non-governmental organisation to work with Muslim communities, they first need to define exactly which Muslim communities they are dealing with.

Faith can be the greatest area of difficulty for social democratic parties, given the secular origins of many of our parties. Yet, it was clear to us that for people of faith the opportunity to discuss further faith-based issues is important. If we as social democrats deny people that opportunity, then we run the risk of alienating potential supporters. We were struck by the evidence we received in Sweden from the Christian Socialists who provided a forum for Muslims and other religions. We also heard evidence from the British Prime Minister's ambassador to the faith communities who is developing a dialogue with a range of faith groups.

Muslim women feel doubly discriminated as Muslims and as women. They also face different challenges to integration from Muslim men. The debate about the headscarf is a particular example. At the same time the role of women as “agents of integration” was a positive theme that emerged and re-occurred throughout the course of the project. Women of all creeds often have more opportunities to interact with one another in places like the school gates or in community based activities, which works towards cohesion and integration. Dialogue with Muslims can sometimes exclude women, though, and their needs differ from those of men. It is clear that Social Democratic parties need to do more to reach out to Muslim women and encourage their participation in society as the UK’s European Parliamentary Labour Party did recently. Also the Dutch party PvdA has reached out to women of different ethnic origin and created the Multi-Ethnic Women’s network.

For Muslim youths there are major issues of identity – they feel unwelcome in the society in which they were born, but equally they have little empathy for the land of their parents and grandparent’s birth. Many young people do not want to be seen purely through the prism of religion but also as a young person concerned with the issues all young people identify with. However, it is in their search for an identity that many feel more closely associated with Islam than was the case with many of their parents.

The PES needs to develop a strategy for connecting with Muslim youth.

In terms of the broader debate about community cohesion, the working party felt concern at the concept of multi-culturalism, implying as it does different communities operating in the same geographical space but not relating to each other. There is a danger that multi-culturalism has become the vehicle by which divisions and inequalities are re-enforced. The embracing of multi-culturalism can prevent the serious study and understanding of how minorities relate to society as a whole and of how to tackle the underlying causes of prejudice and discrimination. In reality, multi-culturalism can provide a superficial sense of community cohesion when in fact nothing has changed underneath and we have little real idea of how communities related to each other and how mutual respect and understanding develop.

This in part provides us with the answer to the question as to why anti-discrimination legislation has had only a superficial effect. Using the law to change behaviour does little to address underlying attitudes and values. It can also reinforce a belief that minority groups are inferior and can only progress with special help.

The key to breaking out of the cul-de-sac of multi-culturalism was set out for us in the Spanish Government’s programme for integration, which emphasised the need for

communities to work together to tackle common challenges and was based on the concept of inter-culturalism. It is only through constant interaction, dialogue and shared experience that mutual trust and a common sense of belonging can develop. In this context, the way things are done is as important as what is done. Integration is more about a process than an end point.

There is a need to encourage a more active engagement a more active engagement by communities on their own future. We noted work done on this field in Rotterdam. Further, the chairman recalls the views of a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that the requirement by the EU that European money should only be spent on projects where there was agreement across communities was a crucial factor in the Northern Ireland peace process, because it encouraged communities to work together.

Such active engagement is dependent on a number of factors.

First and foremost, there needs to be investment in skills development and knowledge of the key players. It is clear that too often politicians and officials have no training in the nature and make-up of their communities. We noted the work done by the UK's Institute for Community Cohesion on population mapping, which enables decision makers to define the particular needs of communities. We were struck also by the former British MP Oona King's comments

that if when she became an MP she had known what she now knows about community dynamics, she would have approached the challenges of her very diverse constituency of Tower Hamlets in a totally different way. Training is therefore essential.

The second factor needed for more active community engagement is to move away from the situation prevalent in many areas, whereby community relations are left to voluntary and non-governmental organisations that often have limited resources. Community engagement has to become a mainstream activity of all public bodies and also the private sector, which need to acknowledge their responsibility in this field.

The third key factor is the provision of adequate resources to reduce the competing demands of different groups. Repeatedly we heard of the importance of housing and education in community relations. We noted with concern the news that the current Swedish government is cutting back resources, which will inevitably increase local tensions.

The fourth factor is leadership. There is a need for politicians, senior civil servants and business people to take the lead in increasing community interaction. Too often society's leaders are prepared to take the advantages that newer communities bring, but not to give anything back. Too often leaders are prepared to tolerate separation and not make a stand against intolerance.

We were struck by the story of the failure of political leadership in Dudley in the UK over the issue of planning permission for a new Mosque. Good community relations depend on good leadership. Society's leaders have to give a clear and constant message that a modern society is multi-cultural and diverse and that diversity should be a source of strength and be celebrated. We were impressed by the measures taken in Newham in the UK to celebrate its diversity. By active celebration of diversity, we can hopefully ensure that the debate about the balance and relationship between different cultures can be discussed in a more mature way.

Too often the debate about community relations is conducted in terms of past differences. Encouraging active participation in resolving local and national challenges ensures that we can focus on building for a better future. Climate change is one example of a challenge where society has to work together in the face of a serious common threat regardless of ethnicity, faith or cultural difference. We must remember that society is not static. It is dynamic, constantly changing and adapting. That dynamism will itself transform community relations provided we can break out of a culture of separation and backward thinking.

A great deal of discussion was held in the network about citizenship. One participant in our fact-finding visits stated, "If you do not treat people like citizens, you cannot expect them to act like citizens". The ques-

tion, though, is what do we mean by citizenship? In the days when societies were more homogeneous, the concepts of nationality and citizenship were generally intertwined and frequently defined in shared experiences as in 'a Norwegian is someone who eats brown cheese and likes to go skiing'. In Sweden the need to move towards a definition of citizenship, which is inclusive and not exclusive, was very strongly recommended. Increasingly people talk of each nation having a set of common values that all must share. The problem arises from defining these values in anything other than a theoretical way. It would be better to move from the theoretical to the practical, to set out a political concept of what a nation is striving to achieve for its citizens and for the wider world. Within that political concept will be an understanding of what level of difference is acceptable in a society and also of the extent that in modern societies it is possible to have multiple identities. Also within that political concept will be a definition of shared goals, which our society is trying to achieve and the encouragement for all to share in achieving these. That is why the idea of active citizenship is so important. People have to feel they have a stake in deciding their future.

Inherent in the debate about citizenship is the need to oppose the tendency to conflagrate being a minority with being an immigrant. In the Netherlands, for example, the reality of the "eternal immigrant" was brought home clearly. This describes the

situation whereby second, third and even fourth generation Muslim minorities are still deemed by some to be immigrants, despite being born, bred and fully paid up European citizens. Integrated societies are founded on a sense of belonging; the concept of the eternal immigrant flies in the face of this. The PES needs to develop inclusive language within the party and in its external communications and messaging, and avoid at all costs clumsy, albeit mostly unintentional blunders, which can fuel feelings of alienation and exclusion.

The right of participation and the power to change things underpin the sense of citizenship and of belonging. It is essential therefore to ensure that all our political, business and community structures are open to representation from all communities, so that there is cross-cultural contact and understanding. The PES should take a lead on this to actively encourage minority representation at all levels of governance.

We need to ensure that the PES is the party of choice for Europe's Muslim minorities, the party that provides them with the platforms they need to fully participate in society. This means making our parties across Europe more representative of the population, so that the faces we see in party meetings reflect Europe's diversity. The mission to Sweden taught us something about this: by allowing non-citizens to become members of the party, the Swedish Social Democrats have shown themselves

to be inclusive and progressive. In the UK we met with a wide range of Muslim councillors, MPs and members of the House of Lords. Examples like these should be rolled out and held up as best practice, offering guidance to all and marking us out as being the political party that practices what it preaches on diversity and integration.

Language was another common theme raised in our enquiry. Should we compel our minorities to speak the host country's language? Many Muslim representatives we met agreed that language proficiency is a crucial pre-requisite for integration, so long as this doesn't preclude Muslims from speaking other languages too. Some countries have developed relatively strict language tests for new immigrants, many of whom originate from Muslim countries. But this still does not address language proficiency for Europe's second and third generation of Muslim minorities. Research in the UK has demonstrated social mobility of second and third generation Bengalis remains stuck and it is often concluded that language is the principal gateway to social mobility and this is where we should focus efforts. What the PES must not do, though, is shy away from these tough, risky questions of language. Failure to have a candid discussion about these kinds of issues plays into the hands of the right wing, giving them a welcome vacuum to set the tone of the debate and drive it down a less progressive path.

The findings of the PES Diversity and Integration Network project form an integral part of the PES Manifesto for the 2009 elections. We need to act on what we know: that integration requires a means to participate in political and civic processes and that the way ahead for modern society lies in ensuring that there is constant interaction and shared experience between communities.

A German-language version of this article is available on www.feslondon.org.uk/public.htm.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the FES London.

¹ http://fra.europa.eu/fra/material/pub/muslim/Manifestations_EN.pdf and <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleases/Action.do?reference=SPEECH/06/235&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>
² <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/icoco>