

**Baroness Ashton's Speech to the OSCE High-Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding:
Bucharest, 7 June 2007**

Opening Session

Introduction

- Chair, I am delighted to be leading the UK delegation to this important conference. My Government fully subscribes to the statement by my colleague from the German Presidency on behalf of the European Union. I am pleased to take the floor on behalf of the United Kingdom and as a member of the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers.
- This is my third visit to Romania and I would like to thank the Romanian Government for hosting this conference and Foreign Minister Moratinos for his work as Chairman-in-Office.
- In the UK, we very much welcome the OSCE's continued work to combat intolerance. We encourage the OSCE to continue to work closely with the Council of Europe and the European Union to ensure that the work that we all do complements that of each other. We also welcome regional and national efforts to integrate Europe's largest, and perhaps most excluded, ethnic minority, the Roma. We also encourage continued cooperation with civil society and we are particularly pleased to see the development of pan-European NGOs, such as the European Roma and Travellers Forum. These provide a voice for excluded communities right across Europe.
- My Government is firmly committed to the elimination of all forms of racism and intolerance and to developing policies which address discrimination, intolerance and violence. Our aim is the creation of cohesive communities where every individual is able to fulfil their potential because they enjoy equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities.
- Every delegate here knows that this is not just a matter of words and declarations. Nor is it just a question of having legislation in place, important though that is. If our laws and policies are to have any impact, there must be a wholesale commitment to implementation at all levels of government. And we must work in close partnership with communities themselves, the private sector, and civil society.

Fighting discrimination

- In January 2005, we launched a Government strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion called *Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Society*. This has formed the basis of a renewed programme of action across Government to deliver improvements in these areas. We had our first annual review of the Strategy in August 2006 and our second will be published

shortly. It is supported by detailed ethnic monitoring so we can identify areas of need and target efforts and resources in the most effective way.

- The UK has a comprehensive body of legislation to combat discrimination, which has been strengthened as we have incorporated the European Race, Gender and Employment Directives into domestic law.
- In 2000, we took the law in a new direction. We put a positive duty on public authorities to promote race equality. This means they have to be pro-active in promoting equality, rather than being reactive to discrimination after it has happened. Building on that, we have introduced similar duties relating to gender and disability.
- Most recently, we have extended the law to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services and public functions. We have also conducted an extensive review of our discrimination law with a view to introducing a single equality bill that will provide a clearer and more streamlined law on equality.
- Later this year, our new Commission for Equality and Human Rights will start work in Great Britain, focusing the enforcement of equality law in a single powerful body.

Fighting hate crime

- The fight against hate crime and extremism is also a priority. Such crimes, as delegates know, are not just attacks on individuals or particular communities, they are attacks on the whole of our society. We have strong and effective criminal legislation in place to tackle racist and religiously motivated violence, with higher penalties for such crimes. We have recently extended the law to prohibit threatening behaviour intended to stir up religious hatred. Our prosecuting authorities have published guidance to staff to ensure that hate crimes are prosecuted effectively. Our judges can impose higher penalties where the crime is motivated by hatred of the person's sexual orientation or disability.
- Disapproval of a person's beliefs, lifestyle, or personal characteristics can never justify violence or hatred. Victims of such crimes deserve the full protection of the law. We in Government across the world must ensure that they get that protection.
- Earlier this year, the UK All-party Parliamentary Committee on Antisemitism, represented here today, published a comprehensive report on antisemitism, which shows that antisemitism is sadly much alive in the UK, and manifesting itself in new ways, on the internet, for example, and on university campuses. We believe that this is an extremely important report, and we will ensure that it leads to renewed effort to rid our country of this oldest form of hatred.

Building cohesion and understanding

- Part of that effort must be directed towards building understanding between our diverse communities.
- We have established a Commission on Integration and Cohesion which is looking for practical solutions, with a view to building shared values in our communities and building up resilience to threats and tensions.
- Inter-faith forums – a number of which the Government funds – are also helping us to build cohesion and promote tolerance
- Education is plainly a vital means to fight extremism. We need to ensure that the curriculum in schools provides opportunities to challenge racism, to understand the positive sides of migration, and to value diversity. School twinning can help develop cross-cultural understanding.
- As the distinguished Congressman noted earlier, this year marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. It is an opportunity for us to reflect on the legacy of this abhorrent trade; to consider how the roots of modern racism lie in that trade; to ensure that young people from all our communities understand this painful aspect of our shared history.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, I hope I have summarised some of the actions we are taking in the UK. More than that, I look forward to learning about what is being done elsewhere in the OSCE area. I hope that we will all leave this Conference committed to implementation and resolved to real action to combat discrimination and intolerance in all their forms.
- Thank you.