

Mr Mark Carroll
Director of Race, Cohesion, Equality and Faith
Home Office
Room 1374
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT

5 April 2004

Dear Mr Carroll,

Thank you for your letter of 29 March 2004 confirming that Government has decided that it will not after all develop a national action plan against racism (NAPAR). The Commission is deeply disappointed at this abandonment of an important undertaking already given by Government.

We would remind you that Government committed itself to producing a NAPAR following the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban in 2001. Since then it has reaffirmed that commitment through a number of forums. We could cite many such instances but no doubt you are quite familiar with the history.

In 2002 the Race Equality Unit of the Home Office established a Steering Group, in which this Commission participated along with a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies, with the purported aim of producing a UK NAPAR. The REU produced in November 2002 a document entitled *Building a National Action Plan Against Racism*, which included the following passages:

One of the key recommendations of [WCAR] was that states should develop national action plans against racism in consultation with non-governmental organisations. The idea of the national action plan (...) was supported by the UK Government and its European Union partners.

The Home Office is working with other government departments, the statutory equality commissions and the devolved administrations in the development of this national action plan for the United Kingdom. Individual departments and the devolved administrations are developing their own race equality strategies and schemes and these will be important elements of the final plan.

This document formed the focus of the UK Follow-Up Conference in Manchester, at which Government repeatedly stated its commitment to developing a NAPAR.

In its 16th Periodic Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Government wrote:

[The Race Equality Unit] is also leading the United Kingdom's follow-up to the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) and in particular the drafting of a national action plan against racism, as called for by the WCAR. This work is being undertaken in close consultation with non-governmental and community-based organisations.

That UN Committee consistently requests reporting states to account for progress on their national action plans and expects a further update on the NAPAR to be contained in the UK's next periodic report, due in April 2006. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee wrote:

The Committee recommends that the State party take into account the relevant parts of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, and that it include in its next periodic report updated information on the action plan that it is in the process of drafting in order to implement the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action at national level.

Furthermore, in Northern Ireland the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in its Race Equality Strategy stated explicitly:

It is intended that the Race Equality Strategy will form the backbone of Northern Ireland's input to the United Kingdom's National Action Plan to combat racism, arising from the world conference against racism held in Durban in 2001.

In your letter you state that “the government is fully committed to implementing the outcomes of the Durban Conference in a way that makes sense in the UK”. Yet you give no explanation as to why Government promised to deliver the NAPAR following Durban, has told a UN Committee that it plans to do so and held a major conference and several steering group meetings on the NAPAR process over the period 2001-2003 before deciding that the NAPAR did not ‘make sense in the UK’. In any case the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission cannot accept that view. This Commission recently held a meeting with ethnic minority organisations and it was a source of amazement to them that Government could not see the need for a NAPAR given the sharp increase in racist attacks here and the continuing lack of a co-ordinated approach to tackling racism.

You must also be aware that this Commission, along with a number of non-governmental organisations in Great Britain, has contributed significant time and effort to advising Government through the steering group that was set up by the Race Equality Unit to take forward the NAPAR. Over 100 NGOs took part in the UK Race and Europe Network (UKREN), which co-ordinated the NGO input to the discussions around NAPAR. To abandon plans for that NAPAR without, as far as we have been able to establish, even seeking the views of the organisations participating in that group appears to show a

serious lack of concern for the views of key stakeholders on the part of Government. Having been brought so far along the road of a purported consultation exercise, the whole ethnic NGO community cannot but feel betrayed and abused by a unilateral abandonment of the objective.

It is also of concern that Government has decided that there is no need for a separate NAPAR even before a consultation exercise has been undertaken on the community cohesion and race equality strategy that is intended to replace it.

It also seems that Government has failed to inform Parliament of its new plans. While we are open to correction on this point, we do not think that there has been any statement, even in the form of an answer to a planted Parliamentary Question, setting out or seeking to explain the abandonment of a process that Parliament had previously been told was well underway.

In your letter you also refer to an international seminar hosted by the Home Office on the community cohesion and race equality strategy. This seminar took place after your meeting in Belfast with representatives of this Commission. From that meeting I am sure you understood that this Commission has a deep interest in the NAPAR and, by virtue of that, in any strategy that is intended to replace it. We are therefore further disappointed that you failed to extend an invitation to this Commission to that seminar. Given the numerous references in the WCAR documents to the role of national human rights institutions in following through on the Conference, it is alarming that Government failed to see the benefits of inviting the UK's only statutory human rights body to such an event.

We would urge Government to reconsider its stance regarding the NAPAR and to meet its commitments, and indeed duty, to consult with and work with ethnic minorities in the UK. We hope that you will give this letter careful consideration and look forward to your response. In the meantime we may need to raise these matters through other domestic and international channels.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Brice Dickson
Chief Commissioner