Written Submission from BEMIS

Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to last week’s discussions and meet with you and some members of the Committee.

Whilst the meeting produced some interesting points, I felt that too much of the discussion revolved round a lack of action on the part of public institutions and how they could comply with the requirements of the equalities agenda and legislative framework whilst coping with the impact of impending cuts on service provision. It was also a little disappointing that the debate was diverted from the core of discussion as relayed to us prior to the meeting, that of “Race & Religion”, to issues of statistics and the like which I felt were a distraction.

Similarly, it was a bit confusing to see limited representation from race equality groups and that only one faith group was represented at the meeting. Almost no discussion took place round the issue of faith and belief beyond the sectarian issue, which struck me as disappointing given that neither "side" in that debate was present. In addition it seemed to me odd that some of the discussion that did take place seemed, albeit obliquely, to be implying that positive discrimination could effectively be used as a positive action tool, something which BEMIS would not be comfortable with at all.

As I said at the meeting, whilst acknowledging the need for on-going specialist service provision, the current budget offers an opportunity to move the whole race equality agenda onto a new level of debate and action.

It is incumbent upon us all to change the focus away from repetitive discourses on the failings or otherwise of public bodies to meet the needs and aspirations of our ethnic and cultural communities. Bemis is firmly of the belief that fundamental to making substantial, rather than tokenistic, progress on the race equality agenda is the need to move the debate, and perhaps some of the available money, into the area of Active Citizenship and Human Rights Education as a way of enabling minorities to participate fully in civic and public life.

Key to the answer is to capacity build organisations and individuals through Human Rights Education and Active Citizenship, which as I am sure you know is at the heart of successive Scottish Governments’ agendas since 1999.

Insofar as it relates to your own committee’s scrutiny of the current budget and possible lines of questioning for the Cabinet Secretary I would like to respectfully suggest that some of the questions should be asking the Government how it intends to use the current budget round to move the agenda as I have outlined above.

Rami Ousta
CEO
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10 October 2011