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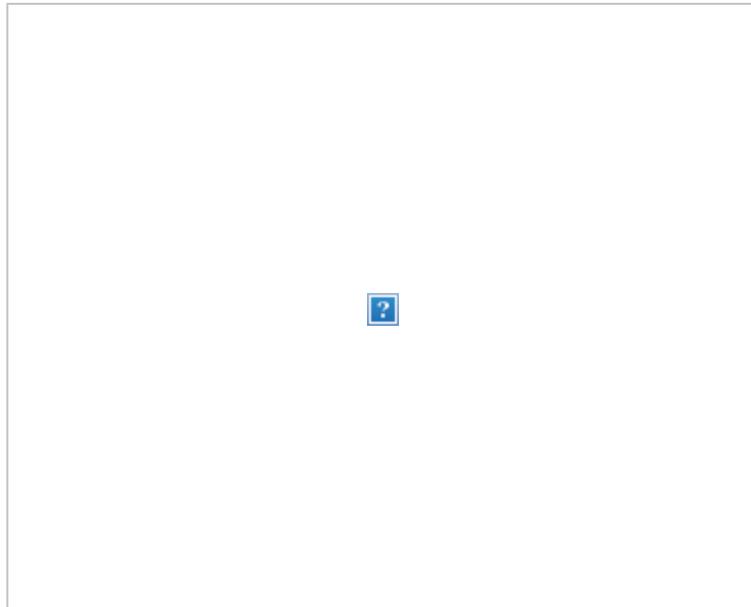


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 LARGE PRINT / Standard Print.Institute for Social Cohesion

Institute for Social Cohesion – first National Colloquium

ON TUESDAY, MAY 7, the Institute for Social Cohesion, established by the National Assembly as a way of engaging with some of the serious problems facing British society, held a national colloquium. The colloquium, on the question of “What makes a society cohesive?”, took place in Westminster Central Hall, a well-known conference venue, close to the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, and is intended to be the first of a series of annual conferences.



National Secretary, Barney Leith, on the final panel session at the end of the colloquium

Invitations to the colloquium were sent to a large number of people in central and local government, parliament, organisations of civil society and the faith communities. In the event, maximum attendance reached about 130 people.

The audience was very diverse in terms of ethnic groups and societal sectors represented, and came from many parts of the country. There was a good attendance by local government officials from different parts of the country. Three Home Office officials, one from the Race Equality Unit and two from the Community Cohesion Unit, stayed all day, as did a number of senior police officers, including the Head of the Metropolitan Police's Diversity Directorate. Significant non-governmental organisations represented included the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations (CEMVO), the Citizenship Foundation, and BUILD (an ethnic minority mentoring and networking organisation from the East Midlands).

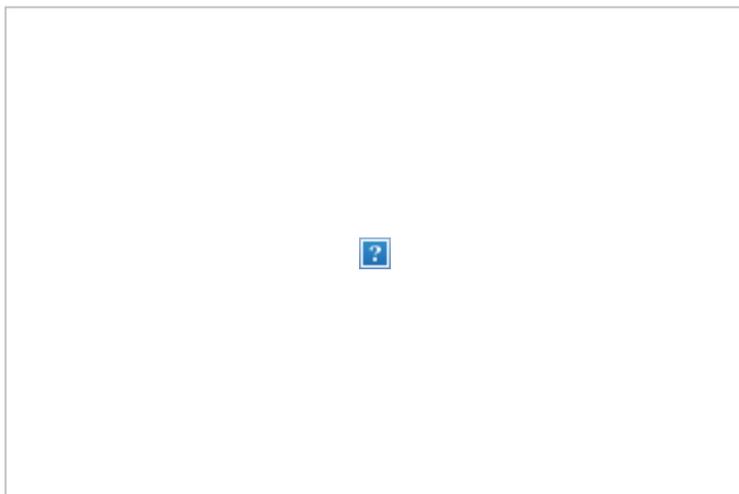
The colloquium opened with an introduction from the Secretary of the National Assembly setting out the philosophy behind the Institute for Social Cohesion, focusing on Bahá'í principles of unity and consultation underpinning the Institute's work, and explaining the future development of the Institute in providing a forum for dialogue and consultation between a wide range of people and organisations around the question “What makes a society cohesive?”

This introduction was followed by a keynote presentation by Ted Cante, who chaired the Home Office team that reviewed the inter-communal rioting that took place in Bradford and other towns and cities in the north of England in the summer of 2001. Cante concluded that consideration of how to resolve the tensions and divisions in British society must begin

...with values and attitudes. Conflict is not resolved by material means alone, but ways must be found of establishing and promoting common values.

After Mr Cantle’s presentation, participants moved into breakout groups to hear presentations on a range of themes, such as Race Relations, Youth, Community Development, Interfaith, Immigration, Gender, Education, Law and Order. The presentations were made by representatives of a range of civil society groups and foundations and were intended to illustrate best practice in the promotion of social cohesion.

The afternoon session began with a very stimulating presentation by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a columnist for The Independent newspaper and commentator on multiculturalism. She is dismissive of the dominant pluralist paradigm – often short-handed by saying that Britain is a “community of communities” – and some of her ideas come quite close to Bahá’í understandings about the essential oneness of human nature.



One of the workshops in progress

The afternoon breakout sessions continued the discussions of the morning and were intended to lead to the establishment of a number of Special Interest Groups whose members would remain in contact with each other and perhaps carry forward pieces of work through the year; they would then be invited to report back to next year’s annual colloquium.

The day finished with a panel discussion, chaired by John Battle MP, the Prime Minister’s informal interfaith adviser. The panel members were Shamsheer Chohan, London Regional Director of CEMVO, Detective Chief Inspector Stephen Lovelock, Head of the Diversity Directorate of the Metropolitan Police, and the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly.

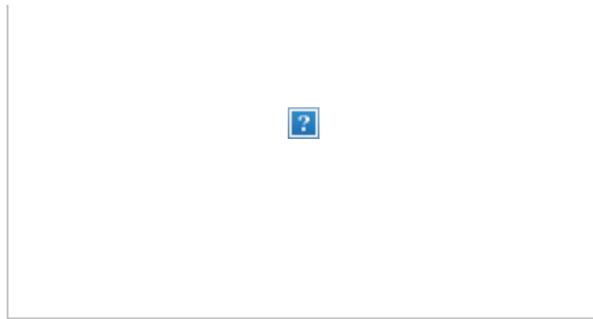
Some excellent questions and comments were made from the floor and a lively discussion ensued. This was generally non-confrontational and the responses from the two non- Bahá’í panel members were very positive and overlapped with Bahá’í principle in a number of areas. Mr Battle reluctantly brought the panel to a close about 10 minutes after the scheduled end of the session, since the staff of the venue were anxious to close down. It was clear that the discussion could have continued.

During the panel session, Steve White, head of a large multi-ethnic comprehensive school in Leicester, publicly thanked the Bahá’í community for running this colloquium, a view that was shared by Mr Battle in his closing remarks. A number of participants expressed their thanks to the Bahá’ís and there were those who said that no one else had tried or been able to bring together such a diverse group of people to discuss such an important issue.

There is no doubt that the success of the colloquium marks an important advance in the ability of the National Spiritual Assembly and its external affairs agencies to influence processes towards world peace and to play a role in healing the rifts in British society. The seminars and conferences planned and run by the Office of External Affairs and the Office for the Advancement of Women are increasingly recognised by officials in central and local government, by parliamentarians and by organisations of civil society as worth attending and as addressing important issues and as places where useful ideas can be gleaned. The increasing need expressed by policy makers for coherent ideas and policies based on principle means that these two Bahá’í offices are being offered ever-increasing opportunities to engage with the British

opportunities to ensure that Bahá'í principles and practices can be offered to those who shape the way in which British society is governed.

National Assembly staff and a team of young Bahá'í volunteers worked very hard to make the day run smoothly and the National Assembly is very grateful to them for their efforts, as well as to the Institute Task Force for its year's work in planning the event.



Michael Henry, Chief Executive of BUILD, conducting a workshop

National Spiritual Assembly,
Barney Leith, Secretary

