

SPEAK!

An opinion piece on topical issues relevant to BME communities – December 2006

'The Politics of Integration'

Integration is back in the news again - as if it ever went away. In case you did not know, integration is that most complex of issues. There are no quick fixes for it, only a periodic recognition that we need to do something about it. In truth, concerns about integration actually reveal a deeper fear - segregation.

But even this is an over-simplification. For example, some of the most segregated communities are, in fact, faith communities. And far from living in ghettos, many have established strong and highly successful socio-economic and cultural networks that greatly enhance the quality of our community life.

'Is it that people don't want to integrate (have chosen to segregate)? Or is it that they are not being allowed to integrate (are being segregated)?'

Clearly, we need to better understand the issue here. Is it that people don't want to integrate (have chosen to segregate)? Or is it that they are not being allowed to integrate (are being segregated)? The point being made is that one cannot always imply that segregation is untoward - although for many years and for very good reasons, this is the label that has stuck to it.

Rather, the underlying judgement should be one of intentions and rationale. It is somewhat easier to understand if a decision reflects a lifestyle choice or value judgement that is not about discriminating against or disadvantaging others. However, if the intention is to exclude and based on bigotry then this cannot be right. Indeed it would be socially irresponsible not to challenge such a position.

The undeniable fact is that people cannot be forced to integrate and for reasons of economic status, education, faith, and even race, may actually prefer not to. Despite this, it is essential that we promote the positive value of integration as a social glue. Perhaps the real challenge, for us, is to establish what is reasonable to expect, from our diverse community, as a basic commitment to integration.

Summing up, it is probably fair to say that integration is so often a measure of a successful community and segregation, so often a measure of its failure.