

**'The challenge of change:
a convention about diversity in a
society still struggling with division'**

**Newry and Belfast,
Northern Ireland
5 - 7 June 2006**

**'The challenge of change:
Northern Ireland in a global perspective'**

Keynote address by Dr. Jeff Crisp

**Special Advisor, Policy and Evaluation, UNHCR,
former Director of Policy and Research
Global Commission on International Migration**

Lord Mayor, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let begin by thanking Mediation Northern Ireland for the opportunity to be with you today, and for the honour of having the opportunity to make this keynote presentation.

It is a special occasion for me, not only because of the importance of the issues that we will be discussing over the next three days, but also because this is, in fact, my very first visit to Northern Ireland. Given the warm hospitality that I have received from everyone I have met since I arrived in Belfast yesterday, I certainly hope that it will not be the last.

I would like to begin with a personal story. Just a few months ago I was visiting my mother in England, who decided that it would be a good idea to sort out all of the family photographs that she had accumulated over the years. There was nothing very unusual about the collection: a typical assortment of pictures portraying new-born babies, birthday parties, Christmas celebrations, weddings and family holidays.

But one picture really caught my eye: and that was a picture of my primary school class, taken in an inner city area of North London at the end of the 1950s. And the striking thing about that photo was that of the 32 children who were pictured, 31 had white faces. In other words, just three per cent of my class came from what the Canadians refer to as the "visible minority population."

When I got back home to Geneva, I decided to see how the school had changed in the years since I had been a pupil there. And what exactly did I

find? Well, thanks to the internet, I found an official inspection report which described my school as “a large inner-city school whose pupils reflect the area’s rich ethnic and cultural diversity, including many pupils with families originating in Africa, the Caribbean Islands, the Asian sub-continent and Turkey.” The report went on to say that the proportion of pupils for whom English is not the home language is very high – nearly 45 per cent, including significant numbers of children of children who speak Turkish, as well as the West African languages of Yoruba and Twi at home.

Turning to the school’s own website, I discovered that the school’s attainments had been celebrated at the annual African and Caribbean Academic Excellence Awards. I found that pupils and staff had just enjoyed a special party to celebrate the beginning of the Chinese New Year. And I found that my old school, a school that had been almost completely mono-ethnic when I was a pupil there, now runs a daily Turkish and Kurdish Homework Club.

As I hope that story demonstrates, schools, communities and societies as a whole can undergo quite rapid and fundamental change in their cultural and ethnic composition. I understand that such changes may not yet have had a major impact on Northern Ireland: according to some of the estimates I have seen, ethnic minorities constitute less than one per cent of the total population.

But in the next few minutes I would like to suggest that in the years to come, it is highly likely that more and more people from different countries and other continents will make their way to this Province, a development that will raise some important social, economic and political issues for the people and institutions of Northern Ireland.

Let me now try to substantiate the assertions that I have just made, drawing upon some of my activities over the past two years, when I had the privilege of working for a group of eminent people, including former Irish President Mary Robinson, who had been asked by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to submit a report to him on the issue of international migration.

During that two-year period, we travelled to many parts of the world, consulted with hundreds of individuals and organizations with an interest in international migration, and undertook an extensive programme of research and data collection.

The principal conclusions that we reached, and which were communicated to Kofi Annan in a report that we submitted to the Secretary-General last October, are quite clear: international migration is a dynamic and rapidly expanding phenomenon which now affects countries at every level of economic development and of every cultural and ideological persuasion. The

number of international migrants has doubled in the past 25 years, and now stands at around 200 million, equivalent to population of Brazil, the fifth most populous country in the world. Well over half of those migrants are people who have moved from relatively poor countries to the more prosperous, industrialized states, and it seems almost certain that this trend will continue in the decades to come.

While people and governments in the richer countries of Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific region are expressing concern about the number of foreign nationals arriving in their midst, states are beginning to acknowledge that international migration is driven by some very powerful factors and forces – factors and forces which states find very difficult if not impossible to regulate.

What exactly are the factors and forces that underlie the recent growth of international migration, and which seem likely to a growth in the size of Northern Ireland's ethnic minorities. I would like to highlight three, all of which are related to the process of globalization, a notion that refers to the growing interconnectedness and interdependence of economies and societies in different parts of the world.

First of all, while the globalization process has lifted millions of people out of poverty, especially in countries such as China and India, it has not yet narrowed the differentials that exist between the South and the North of our planet. In the report we submitted to Kofi Annan, we referred to those differentials as the '3Ds': development, demography and democracy.

With regard to development, it has become clear that many of the world's poorer countries are unable to provide jobs for the many young people who are entering the labour market. According to UN figures, around 185 million people around the world are unemployed and a staggering 2.8 billion are earning less than two dollars a day.

Because they are unable to find adequately compensated livelihoods at home, increasing numbers of people are trying to escape from such situations by looking for work abroad, sometimes on a permanent but more often on a temporary basis, pending the time when they have been able to make some savings, send some money home, learn a new skill and gain some better qualifications. It is for this reason that I refer in this presentation to 'migrants', rather than to 'immigrants', who are usually considered as permanent settlers in their country of destination.

Migration is also increasing in scale because of demographic differentials. In simple terms, while developing countries have people to spare, while the richer nations are running short of working-age people who are prepared to do the more difficult, dirty and lower-paid jobs that are available.

Many of the world's more prosperous states, most notably those in the European Union, now have fertility levels that are below replacement rate, with the result that their populations are becoming steadily older and smaller. Economists generally agree that our rates of economic growth, our pension and social security systems will prove unsustainable as a result of this trend. The recruitment of foreign workers, both unskilled and skilled, seems likely to be one of the ways in which these gaps can be filled.

On the issue of democracy, the good news is that more people than ever before live in countries with pluralistic political systems and in which human rights are generally The bad news is that millions of women, men and children are the citizens of states characterized by armed conflict, violence, political instability and authoritarian forms of government.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that so many people should look for a future beyond the borders of their own country, taking the difficult decision to become asylum seekers and to request refugee status. As we know from the stories in our newspapers, becoming an asylum seeker is not exactly the easiest way to gain social acceptance in contemporary Britain. And yet such is the desperation of the people concerned, that they are prepared to make enormous sacrifices and to take huge risks in order to reach our shores.

Turning to my second point, I would like to suggest that while large numbers of people have an incentive to move from one country and continent to another, the globalization process has also provided them with the means to do so.

In the past 20 years alone, international communications and transportation have become far cheaper and much more efficient, providing people in towns and villages across the developing world with the information and infrastructure they need to migrate.

At the same time, the expansion of international migration has led to the growth of diasporas and ethnic minority communities which make it much easier for people to leave their own country and to find work, accommodation and a supportive social network in countries in other regions or on the other side of the world. Northern Ireland, I would like to suggest, will prove no difference in this respect to other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe. Migration creates the conditions for increased migration to take place.

A third and final dimension of the globalization process that I would like to highlight concerns the issue of regional economic integration and, more specifically, the changing nature of the European Union. As our next speaker has far greater expertise on this issue than me, I will not speak on this matter at any length.

Suffice it to say that in expanding its membership and in progressively dismantling the obstacles to freedom of movement between member states, the EU has embarked upon a highly ambitious process that will inevitably encourage greater human mobility within the expanded Europe. With an economy that is expanding rapidly and a peace process that has made the Province a much safer and more attractive place to live for the outsider, it seems very likely that significant numbers of foreign nationals from both within and outside of the European Union will in future consider taking up residence here. And it is, of course, that likelihood that presents what our hosts have referred to as the 'challenge of change' in Northern Ireland.

As a first-time visitor to Northern Ireland, and as someone who has a very limited understanding of the longstanding social and political divisions that have characterized the Province, it would be presumptuous of me to comment on the way in which the 'challenge of change' might be met in this particular context.

But in concluding my presentation, I would like to bring your attention to some of the conclusions that the Global Commission on International Migration reached when it looked at the question of migrants in society. Given the limits of time, I will restrict myself to five observations.

First, we must look for the benefits as well as the challenges of change. There is now growing evidence to suggest that diverse communities are often socially dynamic, culturally innovative and economically successful. Indeed, cosmopolitan and multiethnic communities are especially well placed to capitalize on the new trading, investment and business opportunities that have been opened up by the process of globalization.

Second, we must seek to understand and address the concerns that are generated by increased diversity, especially when migrants arrive in substantial numbers, when they come from unfamiliar cultures and when they appear to compete for scarce public goods and services such as housing and health care. Politicians and the media have a particular obligation to ensure that the debate on migration and diversity is conducted in a calm and responsible manner, so as to limit the extent to which that debate is influenced by racism and xenophobia.

Third, recent experience in a number of countries suggests that we would be wise to avoid the two extremes of integration policy: assimilation, in which foreign nationals are expected to become exactly like the majority population, and multiculturalism, in which minority communities are able to retain a high degree of distinctiveness and separation from the rest of society. If I could quote from the report we prepared for Kofi Annan, "integration is a long-term and multidimensional process, requiring a commitment on the part of

migrants and non-migrants alike to respect and adapt to each other... Integration recognizes and accommodates differences, but requires a sense of common belonging amongst both nationals and newcomers." [repeat]

Fourth, the Global Commission concluded that the challenge of change must be addressed in a way that scrupulously respects human rights and the rule of law. On one hand, the host society should legislate against all forms of discrimination, intimidation and exploitation, and ensure that such law are upheld. On the other hand, migrants must respect the obligations they assume when they are admitted to another country, including the obligation to desist from any activity which is in violation of the law and which impinges upon the rights of other people.

Fifth and finally, in examining the integration of migrants in society, we concluded that the issue of diversity both occurs and is resolved primarily at the local level: in the workplace, the school, the hospital, the place of worship, the court of law, the sports centre and even in the pub. National policies and strategies are evidently needed, but as you will know better than I, such policies and strategies may be of little value unless people from different social, ethnic and religious groups are able to interact in a peaceful and positive manner as they go about their daily life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to see that the programme of this convention adopts this grassroots perspective, and that we will have an opportunity to examine the issues of migration, diversity and integration in a multidimensional manner. I am confident that gathering will play an important role in assisting the people of Northern Ireland to meeting the challenge of change in the years to come, and I look forward to participating in your discussions.

Thank you for your attention.