

## **European Day for Victims of Hate Crime 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2014**

### **Five reasons to be proud.**

On this day we stand united with the victims of hate crime. It has been three years since the abhorrent acts perpetrated by Anders Breivik shocked the world. We must remember this day in order to remember those lost, but to also construct a brighter future for all. It is not an exhaustive list, but detailed below are five developments of which I believe we can all be proud regarding tolerance and equality since the infamous events of July 2011. The developments are not listed in order of importance, but they do illustrate the range of ways in which progression has taken place.

**The introduction of subcultures as a protected characteristic** - As of April 2013, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) has recorded attacks on members of subcultures, such as 'goths', as hate crimes. This has no doubt been a consequence of GMP working with the friends and family of Sophie Lancaster who was murdered in 2007 because of the alternative subculture she was a part of. The Sophie Lancaster Foundation set up by her friends and family after Sophie's death seeks to change attitudes towards those who have different life styles. Although GMP can only record subculture hate as an element of a crime since there has not a change in legislation, this is still a move towards recognising the impact hate has on those of alternative subcultures. What is more, this development demonstrates that pressure groups and victims can influence change. It also sends the message that hating somebody for their chosen identity is wrong not just in the eyes of civil society but in the eyes of law enforcement.

**The story of Conchita Wurst** - Conchita Wurst became an international icon after winning the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. Wurst is the drag persona of Thomas Neuwirth, an Austrian singer. Wurst's victory is significant not just because of her musical talent, but also because of the socio-political debates during and after the contest. I believe that Wurst managed to expand peoples understanding of gender diversity, in a world dominated by conservative views of what a man should be and what a women should be. By being a woman with a beard, Wurst put into question gender binaries against the backdrop of transphobia and homophobia in Russia. Wurst has allowed for further understanding and

tolerance whilst defying the views of the intolerant. In the words of Wurst after winning Eurovision - "*We are unity and we are unstoppable*".

**Groups with the aim to counter hate and intolerance** - As each year passes, more and more people gain access to the internet and obtain increasing internet speeds. Positively, this has allowed for the mass transfer of information to educate and inform society unlike any other comparable information sharing platform in history. However, like many innovations, the internet has been used negatively. Increasingly the internet has allowed for the spread of hate and intolerance through specific sites and social media sites which has direct impact in the real world. Thankfully, we have movements in opposition to this. The No Hate Speech Movement aims to reduce the acceptance of hate speech, especially online. The movement looks to civil society to take action and not to criminalise hate speech and freedom of expression. The No Hate Speech Movement provides campaigning and educational tools to help raise awareness and lower the acceptance of hate speech. This development demonstrates that people can campaign and tackle hate speech even in the new era of increasing internet usage.

**Facebook updates its policy** - In 2013, Facebook agreed to update its policy regarding hate speech on its pages. Facebook agreed to change its policy after over 100 advocacy groups pressured Facebook to take action on content which promoted violence and hatred towards women. The social network updated its policy by increasing the accountability of content creators and by training its staff to be more responsive to complaints. Facebook originally ignored the complaints by advocates citing freedom of speech. Facebook gave way after advocates gained support and companies such as Nissan UK took their advertisement off of their site. Facebook released a statement stating their effort to balance free speech with banning hate speech; "*We prohibit content deemed to be directly harmful, but allow content that is offensive or controversial*". This development symbolises a move towards sites taking responsibility for content on their site. Moreover, it portrays that the right to free speech comes with responsibility.

**Police in Norway establish a hate crime unit** - It would be appropriate to end this piece on a development from Norway. Police in Oslo have set up a unit dedicated to combating hate crime earlier this year inspired by a Swedish initiative. This development

comes after a review into a Norwegian hate crime last year. I believe this development is relevant on a day in which we remember the victims of hate crime. In dedicating a unit to combating hate crime, the police in Oslo are highlighting hate as an issue and sending a message to victims that law enforcement will take action. As Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Børge Brende said recently;

*"If victims of hate crime suffer from lack of response from authorities and offenders are not prosecuted the whole society suffers and ultimately democracy fails".*

On this day, we remember and acknowledge the victims of July 2011 and the victims of hate crime. I have chosen to do this by listing five developments that those who support human rights should be proud of. There is however more to be done. More efforts should be made to inform all members of the human family of the intolerance in this world and how to resolve it through the teaching of respect, understanding and equality.

Michael Hatfield