

C O N F I D E N T I A L

THE DIVIDED SOCIETY : REDUCING COMMUNITY DIFFERENTIALS

INTRODUCTION BY MR R B SPENCE

1. This presentation is based on work carried out (under the aegis of the Social Steering Group) over the last year by an interdepartmental group which has been seeking to examine the underlying problems in NI society.

The divided society

2. First, it is necessary, I think, to remind ourselves of the basic realities and, in doing so, I am very conscious of the risk of over-simplifying some complex issues. NI is a deeply divided society. From that division flows the violence, the political instability, the area's poor image abroad. All these carry heavy penalties in human and economic terms.
3. It is essential to bear in mind the reality that, even if the violence ended and even if acceptable political structures were created, the fundamental divisions in NI society would remain; and they would threaten any progress achieved on the security and political fronts.

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4. Government policy in NI has concentrated on 4 main and inter-connected themes:-

- defeating terrorism
- developing the relationship with ROI
- establishing political structures which would command respect across the community
- strengthening the economy

This presentation suggests that we need to add a further major theme to Government's strategy - tackling the underlying divisions in NI society. At present it is there, but implicit rather than explicit.

5. In exploring how the underlying divisions might be addressed, we have focused on 2 broad aspects which we have characterised as "the soft issues" and "the hard issues".

The soft issues

6. First, the soft issues. By this, we mean expanding cross-community contact and the development of mutual respect and understanding; increasing the opportunities for people from the two sides of the community to meet and do things together; broadening understanding and respect for the views, aspirations and traditions of the other side.

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7. Over the last couple of years, a number of new measures have been taken or are being initiated:-

7.1 the schools cross-community contact scheme - over 450 schools now involved; the scheme has recently been extended to include parents;

7.2 the inclusion in new school curriculum of the two cross-curricular themes of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage;

7.3 increased support for wide variety of cross-community activity; essentially seeking to enable people from 2 sides to do things together; including a promising response by elected representatives in some district councils;

7.4 the cultural traditions programme, launched by an influential conference last March, to open up a more constructive debate about how best to handle the existence of the different cultural traditions in NI; followed in June by the announcement of a new programme of action through the schools, arts, museums and local cultural and historical bodies;

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- 7.5 backing the creation of a NI Community Relations Council which will provide support for all those working at local level in a variety of ways, to improve community relations; this will be an important step forward; Government will be responding to initiatives which have come from within the community.
8. Although we have used the label "soft" to describe these measures, they are by no means easy, straightforward or non-controversial. But, provided adequate resources can be allocated, these measures will, over time, help to greatly increase cross-community contact and mutual respect and understanding.

Hard issues

9. But tackling the soft issues is not enough. We must also address the hard issues.
10. By this, we mean ensuring that individuals throughout the community enjoy, and are seen to enjoy, equality of opportunity and equity of treatment, irrespective of the side of the community they come from. If we are to heal the fundamental divisions in NI society, the two sides of the

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community must live together on equal terms, and perceive this to be the case.

11. In spite of all that Government has sought to do over the last 20 years, and in spite of a number of special initiatives - like Making Belfast Work - progress in tackling the hard issues remains very difficult - as the next part of the presentation will show.

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