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SECTARIANISM, INCLUDING BOYCOTTS AND CHURCH BLOCKADES

LINE TO TAKE

The Government condemns all manifestations of sectarianism. This has been a negative feature of life in Northern Ireland for too long. The boycotting last year of traders on the basis of their religion was not only wrong in itself, but harmed community relations and business life. The harassment of innocent Churchgoers as they attend their place of worship, as happened in Ballymena over a period of months, is deplorable and was condemned by a broad spectrum of opinion across the community.

BACKGROUND

Northern Ireland society is deeply divided along religious and political lines which reflect conflicts dating back centuries. The divisions between the Protestant majority, which is overwhelmingly Unionist and British in cultural identity, and the Catholic minority, largely Nationalist and Irish in identity, extend beyond politics. They are evidenced in residential segregation (particularly in urban, working-class districts), in parallel education systems (a State system catering largely for Protestant pupils, and a Church-run system for Catholics) and in the persistence of socio-economic differentials (with the Catholic population, on the whole, being more disadvantaged).

Sectarianism is the extreme manifestation of local inter-communal divisions. The events at Drumcree in July 1996 polarised opinion and marching disputes have led directly to two particular forms of sectarian behaviour, which persisted over several months.

A pattern of boycotting by Nationalists of Unionist traders in small towns in the South and West of the Province emerged. Those involved in the boycott claimed that the traders had been participants in the Orange disruption of July 1996. Many of those boycotted denied this and alleged that they were boycotted on the basis of their religion and political opinion. It proved difficult to judge the extent of this activity. At least two traders claim to have been put out of business.

The Government is opposed in principle to organised boycotts on a religious basis. However no law is broken by a boycott. Only if direct intimidation or violence is used in support of a boycott can the Police take action. There is no statutory provision for Government compensation for the economic impact of boycotts, which has been demanded by some Unionists.

In apparent response to Nationalist obstruction of Orange parades at Dunloy, pickets appeared at a number of Roman Catholic Churches in Unionist parts of North Antrim in Autumn 1996. The blockade of Our Lady of Mercy Roman Catholic Church, Harryville, Ballymena, during Saturday evening Mass has persisted on a regular basis and attracted considerable media attention.

A broad spectrum across both communities, together with the Government condemned the protest at Harryville. Prominent Unionists, including the Mayor of Ballymena and Mr Robert Saulters of the Orange Order, have stood in support of the rights of the congregation. This did not, however, deter the hard core of demonstrators, who have guarded their anonymity closely.

In view of the risk that the situation would be inflamed again during this year's marching season the Church authorities at Harryville decided to suspend Saturday night Mass over the summer months. It remains to be seen whether the protest will resume again when the Saturday night Mass recommences. The recent re-routing (14 September) of an Orange march to a Church at Dunloy has been interpreted as a likely excuse for the renewal of the Harryville protest.