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cc: see distribution list

Jane Kennedy (B&L)

SECTARIANISM - UPDATE ON STRATEGY

Summary

Issue: You have been asked to take the lead on developing a strategy to combat sectarianism. This submission provides a summary of the work done to date and looks at the immediate way ahead.

Timing: Routine.

Presentational Issues: None at present.

Recommendation: That you note the following, and agree to meet relevant officials to discuss some possible next steps.

Detail

You are aware that the previous Secretary of State had asked his officials to start drawing together some ideas for tackling sectarianism, and to see what a skeleton strategy for addressing the subject might look like. You have now been asked to take the lead on this issue. This submission summarises the work we have done and looks at how we might proceed from here.

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Our work so far

2. To date, we have examined the historical perspective of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and reviewed some of the literature that explores the subject. We have had presentations on some statistical information and have heard about relevant academic research. Dr Reid hosted a seminar at Hillsborough Castle on 27 May when leading community relations practitioners gathered to pool their experience and analyses; and he also met the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Both Dr Reid and the Prime Minister also issued a challenge to the Church Leaders about their role. (A separate submission will be put forward shortly in relation to the specific role of the churches.)

The history of anti-sectarianism

3. During the last 30 years various attempts have been made to improve community relations. Led by organisations such as the Community Relations Commission and, later, the Community Relations Council (CRC), as well as a host of mediation/reconciliation groups, these initiatives have involved academics, government officials and community leaders. Progress has been patchy. In the late 1980s and 90s attention tended to be focussed on Targeting Social Need, which had the advantage of being a more tangible initiative with which Government could associate itself. Past failures in addressing the issue have, however, taught us that any initiative devised to tackle community relations, and the sectarianism that underpins it, must involve a serious long-term commitment, and be given a clear place within our political analysis and approach. That is the task that lies ahead of us.

Tackling sectarianism today - the underlying reality

4. In considering appropriate ways of tackling sectarianism today, we have looked at some of the available statistical evidence and academic research that has recently been carried out. Edgar Jardine, lately Director of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, and Dr Peter Shirlow, a lecturer at the University of Ulster, presented some of their findings to Dr Reid and officials. The key points to emerge from their work are summarised at Annexes A and B respectively. Much of the evidence points to a society

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more deeply-divided than ever, where hatred and distrust are raw and real and where, in many respects, political leadership is distinguished by its absence.

Key messages for Government

5. Everyone we have spoken to in the field agrees that the time is right for a Government initiative. The direct interest of Government could send an important signal, challenging and engaging a wide range of people including the churches, the business community and, indeed, civic society generally. Whilst all acknowledge that transition periods are difficult and that this is a long-term commitment, there is a consensus that Government is well placed to give encouragement to those who might otherwise see the job as too complex or too difficult. Community activists consider existing initiatives to be piecemeal and lacking in strategy, and claim that too much energy is expended in "fire-fighting". We could provide a long-term vision - a route map that could harness existing expertise to construct different methods of dealing with the problem through short, medium and long-term goals and targets.

The current position

6. There is an increasing awareness abroad that we have been "researching" this issue, and there will be an expectation that you will signal at an early stage what role Government intends to play. Some of the practitioners who participated in the seminar on 27 May met again on 4 September to pull together some further thoughts on the key issues, including some practical steps for Government. A summary of their deliberations is attached at Annex C. One of the key things to emerge from the various meetings with practitioners has been the idea of devising a draft action plan based on practical models that would enable all the relevant agencies to play their part in the short. The previous Secretary of State had thought there might be value in bringing on board Philip Gould to advise us on a possible campaign strategy, if that was thought to be appropriate. Steve Bates has been pursuing this.

7. Recognising that prior to suspension of the Devolved Administration, primary responsibility for community relations lay with devolved Ministers, throughout this process we have kept officials in the OFMDFM informed about what we were doing. We stressed

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that once we had concluded the information-gathering stage, the Secretary of State would want to engage with the First and Deputy First Ministers about how best to co-ordinate our efforts. There is now, of course, an entirely different landscape with greater potential for harmonising the activities of the various departments and agencies who might have a role to play.

The next steps

8. Given this new environment, I recommend that, before attempting to firm up on a possible strategy, the next step should be a meeting between yourself and those officials with appropriate responsibilities in the previously devolved departments. The meeting might consider:

on the way forward
in OFMDFM with responsibilities for community relations and
purpose of the meeting
backing sectarianism
how this work
~~some practical first steps for Government~~

~~a possible route map and draft action plan with some short, medium and long-term goals~~

~~a possible over-arching professional campaign.~~

9. Colleagues in the OFMDFM responsible for community relations would take the lead at such a meeting, but others, including myself and my Political Directorate colleagues, would obviously be involved.

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Distribution list:

Annex A

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- general segregation appears to be rising;
- although the number of children attending integrated schools is rising rapidly the rate is probably inhibited by the limited number of integrated school places;
- there is a relatively high overall level of economic inactivity among the Northern Ireland population;
- there are contrasting demographic profiles in the two communities, with an ageing Protestant population and a notably younger Catholic population;
- Catholics have higher levels of economic inactivity, lower employment rates and higher unemployment;
- the last 3 years has seen a decline in confidence in the police amongst the Catholic community.

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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES STATISTICS

Edgar Jardine gave a presentation to you on 8 May using statistics that attempt to shed some light on the problem of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Generally speaking, a depressing picture emerged, illustrating that confidence about the future is draining away in both communities. Some of the key points were:

- the conflict between the two communities in Northern Ireland is moving into a new phase;
- overall there appears to have been a steady deterioration in the perceptions of community relations throughout the population in Northern Ireland from 1998 onwards;
- no political party in Northern Ireland has a serious community relations policy;
- there has been a decline in those who want to work in a mixed workplace since 1996, with a similar trend regarding those who want to live in a mixed area;
- general segregation appears to be rising;
- although the number of children attending integrated schools is rising rapidly the rate is probably inhibited by the limited number of integrated school places;
- the effects of "middle-class flight" from inner city areas on the two communities;
- there is a relatively high overall level of economic inactivity among the Northern Ireland population;
- there are contrasting demographic profiles in the two communities, with an ageing Protestant population and a notably younger Catholic population;
- Catholics have higher levels of economic inactivity, lower employment rates and higher unemployment;
- the last 3 years has seen a decline in confidence in the police amongst the Catholic community.

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Annex B

RESEARCH ON SECTARIANISM BY DR PETER SHIRLOW

Peter Shirlow has been carrying out extensive research into sectarianism in Northern Ireland, and on 22 May presented some of his findings to you. The main points of interest were as follows:

- the conflict between the two communities in Northern Ireland is moving into a new arena; it is moving away from being a straightforward physical conflict, and becoming a battle over the history of the troubles;
- no political party in Northern Ireland has a serious community relations policy; none of them appears to be really trying to change perceptions about the other community;
- the Protestant community over the last 30 years has blamed most of its ills, including those resulting from social and economic trends observable throughout the United Kingdom, on "everything being given to the Catholic community";
- the effects of "middle-class flight" from inner city areas on the two communities has been different. Middle-class families from the Roman Catholic community tend to retain their sense of community, retain links with the community they have come from, and continue to reside relatively close to Belfast. The Protestant middle-class tends to move much further out;
- community leaders appear to be unable to prevent young people becoming involved in rioting;
- while there are community groups which build links across the divide, such links tend to fall apart once inter-community conflict reaches a certain level;

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- Republicanism in Northern Ireland has needed to be involved in street violence in order to retain its influence within the community. Republicans have a deep fear of losing control of "their" communities;

- there is an inability on either side to acknowledge the other side's "victimhood". If that difficulty can not ultimately be overcome, then the only remaining solution is to construct more impenetrable physical barriers between the two communities. This at least would allow the police and Army to have less involvement in the conflict;

- the main lesson is that paramilitary groups, on both sides of the divide, are seeking to maintain an "us and them" mentality;

- mainstream NI political parties are slow to challenge such messages, as community allegiances are very strong. Under sufficient pressure, even the Alliance Party has in the past appeared to begin to crack along sectarian lines.

as follows:

- How does Government avoid becoming "fascinated with the subject, and, therefore, simply feeding it?"
- Even if the only things that can be done are social and economic, should they not be tackled anyway?
- How do we fund community relations work? The current picture beyond 2006 is stunningly bleak.

It was suggested that the Secretary of State might consider having a standing ad hoc group on community relations and sustainability, within which there might be a smaller group to develop, with him and his advisers, a long-term strategic plan which he might ultimately publish.

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Annex C

TACKLING SECTARIANISM: SUMMARY OF KEY CONCLUSIONS OF PRACTITIONERS' MEETING ON 4 SEPTEMBER AT HILLSBOROUGH CASTLE

On 4 September, a group of community relations practitioners met at Hillsborough Castle to discuss the issue of how the then Secretary of State might approach the subject of tackling sectarianism. The delegation included:

Cecilia Clegg	Irish School of Ecumenics
Brendan McAllister	Mediation NI
Duncan Morrow	Community Relations Council
Libby Keys	Future Ways
Billy Robinson	Counteract
David Porter	ECONI

It was acknowledged that tackling sectarianism was a wide and complex problem and those present cautioned that the Secretary of State should be careful not to say that he was taking on the whole problem by himself. Instead, he needed to give a strong message that "we could only do this together". Some of the key questions identified were as follows:

- How does Government avoid becoming "fascinated with the subject, and, therefore, simply feeding it?"
- Even if the only things that can be done are social and economic, should they not be tackled anyway?
- How do we fund community relations work? The current picture beyond 2006 is stunningly bleak.

It was suggested that the Secretary of State might consider having a standing ad hoc group on community relations and sustainability, within which there might be a smaller group to develop, with him and his advisers, a long-term strategic plan which he might ultimately publish.

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It was felt that there was a need to give urgent attention to tackling the legitimisers of sectarian attitudes and actions as well as the perpetrators, and for government to be prepared to bolster those who took risks to address the problem.

Government now needed to deal with some of the unresolved issues - the rush to devolution had left people stuck with their emotions in a half-finished scenario. There were unresolved issues such as decommissioning, demilitarisation and policing. These had not been dealt with and remained the things that "pushed people's buttons". We now needed to get people ready for a "refinement" of the Good Friday Agreement, but not the unpicking of its core values.

There was a need to change the image of Northern Ireland by persuading people that it was possible. We needed to hand people the possibility of responsibility for making a choice - sectarianism was something that could not be eradicated by technical mechanisms, people had to decide to get rid of it.

4 core dimensions to tackling sectarianism were identified:

Political

The need for people to actually want to govern together and to see that there was no alternative to partnership and a "co-habitation" of ideologies.

Security

The need to manage enmity and detach crime from political ideology.

Social/Communal

The need for people to learn to be citizens together and to decouple "back row" politics from general urban angst. Sometimes things needed to be recognised as local - everything was not always about 2 "communities" in conflict.

Diplomatic

There was a need for a diplomatic consensus that there was only one way forward in Northern Ireland and for a re-vitalising of the American/European/Irish/British views.

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Some suggestions for action

The following ideas arose from a brief brain-storming session:

- A Conference and Exhibition on Civic Formation - in liaison with the Community Relations Council and the Civic Forum "TAPS" Committee. This would provide an opportunity to broaden the debate and to show what was happening throughout the UK and Europe. It could give rise to task groups and the sponsorship of a long-term project in respect of "Our Future Together" that would look at the medium/long term strategy and ultimately help prevent responses being event-driven.
- Work with the Media to encourage responsible reporting. (Possibility of a legacy-type series on TV - people giving 5 minutes of "Who I am".)
- A series of events that would demonstrate that the Secretary of State was at home in a wide range of settings - British, Irish, Northern Irish.
- Generate a pattern of understanding with role models and champions who have clout. Promote the "Feel Good Factor" by binding in the sporting and entertainment worlds etc. Make it "sexy".
- Take a different approach to formulating Government policy. No Government policy should be designed without first of all asking, how does it affect the sectarian agenda and how does it affect community relationships? There is a real need to dust down the term community relations and bring it back into fashion.
- Put the stark cost of doing nothing before people.
- Challenge people. Lift the agenda. Ask, "What is the role of civic leaders?" Ask people what they can do.
- Be Consistent. Keep repeating the message. Be professional about this. (Could use a PR agency to advise on handling.)

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- Establish a British-Irish Peace Foundation for Peace and Social Progress - a tangible symbol of a joint approach.

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