

LIAISON SUB-COMMITTEE ON CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES: MEETING ON 13 JANUARY 1998

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: FURTHER PAPER BY THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

1. This paper represents a further British Government contribution on the topic of economic and social development. It takes account of papers already lodged by the SDLP and the UUP and reflects a response both to those papers and to comments made by participants at the Sub-Committee's meeting on 15 December.

2. The Government fully acknowledges participants' concerns about economic and social issues and does not wish to preclude discussion of any matter which participants wish to raise. It believes, however, that if there is to be productive debate on such a wide-ranging area of activity it is important to focus on those matters which are directly relevant to confidence building in support of the Talks process and to underpinning and reinforcing any settlement that emerges. With this in mind, the paper concentrates on 5 main areas - targeting social need, rural development, employment equality, cultural issues and rights and safeguards.

Targeting Social Need

3. The Government recognises that Northern Ireland experiences particularly high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and high levels of unemployment. Socio-economic deprivation affects significant sectors of both the Protestant and Catholic communities, but the Catholic community has traditionally experienced worse levels of disadvantage. Though the differentials between the communities have been eroded in some respects in recent decades (notably educational performance and housing), community differentials persist in other significant fields, including long term unemployment.

4. The Targeting Social Need (TSN) initiative was launched in 1991 by the previous administration. The current Government has restated its commitment to the initiative's principles. The initiative seeks to direct resources to people and areas on the basis of objectively-identified social need, without regard to their community background. Because of the

disparities in differentials referred to above, however, it is expected that over time TSN should have the effect of reducing differentials between the two communities.

5. Many economic and social programmes already make a contribution to TSN - for example, differential grants for inward investment; area-based regeneration projects; and the new Welfare to Work programme. SACHR's report on employment equality (see below) has made a number of recommendations on the future development of the TSN initiative. These are currently under consideration, along with SACHR's other proposals.

Rural Development

6. The Rural Development Programme has been in place since 1991. DANI has primary responsibility and has rural co-ordination offices in Enniskillen, Ballymena and Newry.

7. The main aim of the Programme is to advance social and economic regeneration in the most disadvantage rural areas. These have been identified as peripheral Fermanagh, the Sperrins, western shores of Lough Neagh, the Glens of Antrim/Rathlin and South Armagh/South Down. Action can be taken in other areas where pockets of disadvantage arise.

8. Phase I of the programme (1991-97) has majored on developing rural communities and their ability to work in partnership with others on regeneration projects. It has three main strands - capacity building among rural communities (primarily taken forward by the Rural Development Council and the Rural Community Network - both based in Cookstown); community project support; and area based strategies which focus on localities with particular needs and allow for local decision making on project funding. These strands are complemented by partnership programmes which DANI has with the EU, LEADER, PESCA and INTERREG initiatives and with the International Fund.

9. To date this work has created over 300 jobs - more than 1,000 people are involved in regeneration activities, over 200 community groups have taken up training programmes and 50 projects and 8 area based strategies are under way. In financial terms it is expected that Government action will have channelled around £50m into rural areas

through the Programme by the end of the current structural funds spending period (2000/2001).

10. The Rural Development Programme has promoted and will continue to promote and action cross community regeneration and there will be an increasing emphasis on sustainable projects, the creation of employment, environmental management and quality in delivery. The importance of a broadly based rural development programme will be enhanced in the 2000/2006 period as pressures on both the agricultural industry and individual farmers increase as a consequence of Agenda 2000 and further CAP reform.

Employment Equality

11. The Government is committed to ensuring equality of opportunity in employment, based on recruitment and promotion on merit. To eliminate unfair discrimination on religious and political grounds, it has enacted fair employment legislation which imposes obligations on employers well beyond those in comparable gender and race discrimination law.

12. Providing opportunities for employment based on merit requires more than fair employment legislation. The Government's programmes for economic growth and the attraction of inward investment, training and education all contribute to employment opportunities, matched with a skilled workforce. In particular in Northern Ireland, as with the rest of the United Kingdom, the Government is devoting special attention to tackling the problem of long-term unemployment through the New Deal initiative, with some £140m being made available over the next 5 years.

13. In this context, it is acknowledged that Catholic males are disproportionately represented among the long-term unemployed in Northern Ireland. The reasons for this differential are complex and involve a range of contributory factors. But while it remains an indicator of Catholic socio-economic disadvantage, it is not an appropriate indicator of the fairness of the current labour market, nor of the success of the fair employment legislation.

14. More generally in the field of employment equality, the previous administration invited the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights to take forward a comprehensive review in 1994. SACHR

reported in June 1996, making over 160 specific recommendations on current fair employment law and Government policies on education, training, tackling social deprivation and equality of opportunity. These recommendations are currently the subject of detailed consideration, with a view to publication of a paper on employment equality in the next few months. Meanwhile, the Government has already indicated certain recommendations on which it proposes to take action, notably clarification of the law on direct recruitment of the long-term unemployed and firmer powers against persistent discriminators.

Cultural issues

15. There are many strands in Northern Ireland's complex cultural heritage and no one tradition can claim predominance or unique validity. The Government's policy is to encourage confidence and self-esteem among those who espouse particular cultural traditions, leading to greater mutual understanding and respect for the traditions of others. The acceptance of cultural diversity should thus lead to improved community relations.

16. The following is a response to comments already made by participants and does not purport to be a full account of our support for the various strands of cultural activity. Funding agencies will consider well-founded applications for financial assistance with cultural traditions projects on their merits, without favouritism towards any particular tradition. In recent years, in line with this general policy on cultural traditions, the Government has shown itself increasingly responsive to funding projects with an Irish language dimension. In the last financial year, £3.2m was spent on such projects, including culture, economic development, training and Irish medium education.

17. Separately in the field of education, some 95% of pupils in the Irish-medium sector attend schools eligible for full Government grant. The policy on grant assistance for Irish medium schools is in line with the principle of parental choice, subject to appropriate criteria, including the sustainability of the school. Seven primary schools and one secondary school are currently receiving full grant aid; there is provision for public examinations to be taken in Irish by pupils at Irish medium schools; and in addition Irish is taught as a second language in many English-medium schools. In overall financial terms it has been estimated

that in excess of £3m of Government resources are applied annually to the teaching of Irish as a second language.

18. The Government thus acknowledges the special importance of the Irish language for many people in Northern Ireland, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Nationalist community. However, it also recognises that the vast majority of the population are English users and that most Irish users will still have English as their primary means of communication. The position of Irish users is thus different from that of linguistic minorities in most other countries. It also means that Irish users are not placed at a practical disadvantage by the use of English in official communications, forms and so on.

19. The Government also does not accept that expenditure on one linguistic tradition should be used as a benchmark for others. Comparisons with expenditure on Celtic languages in Wales and Scotland are not necessarily valid. Unlike Scotland and Wales, there are no identifiable geographic areas where an unbroken tradition of use of Irish has been maintained in Northern Ireland, and this may make it more difficult to demonstrate demand for particular facilities.

20. Finally on this topic, in terms of international conventions, the Government has indicated to Parliament that it is considering the implications of signing the Council of Europe Charter on Regional or Minority Languages.

Rights and Safeguards

21. The Government recognises that rights in Northern Ireland have traditionally taken a higher profile than in the rest of the United Kingdom and it acknowledges that, in this context, there have been calls for a Bill of Rights in addition to incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights. It considers that a key feature for discussion in the Talks, both in the context of confidence building and more broadly as a key element of any settlement, is the extent to which there is a need to develop specific additional rights protection to deal with the unique problems of a divided community in Northern Ireland.

22. Furthermore, the Government recognises that it would be desirable to have rights protection in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which mirror each other. It also considers that a

definition of 'cultural rights' needs to be agreed but not imposed by the Government.

23. The Government also supports the view that Northern Ireland has unique problems and that analogies with other countries can only ever be partial ones. Some may share similarities but all are different and offer different solutions. It would certainly be possible to look to other countries for answers but no template exists which could be particularly useful in our special context. The Government believes that the responsibility for finding a solution lies with both it and the parties to the talks.

24. The Government has decided to ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities with a view to it becoming effective from 1 February 1998, although it has decided not to try and offer a definition of a minority.

25. The Government believes that the issue of rights, although very important in the context of the Talks, is a matter which will have a considerable impact outside the process. It therefore reserves the right to discuss the issue in its wider pursuit of good Government.

Conclusion

26. The British Government welcomes the opportunity of a further discussion of these issues in the Sub-Committee.

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