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*29.11.95*

# Political Vetting and Community Work Working Group

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Date as Postmark

Dear Colleague

Enclosed please find a copy of a recent update on the issue of the Political Vetting of Community Work in Northern Ireland, produced by the above working group.

Yours sincerely

*Féilim Ó hAdhmaill*

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ON BEHALF OF THE WORKING GROUP

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**THE POLITICAL VETTING OF COMMUNITY WORK IN N. IRELAND:**  
**INFORMATION UPDATE**

**INTRODUCTION**

On 15 June 1991 a re-call seminar was held in the Linenhall library, Belfast to discuss the ongoing campaign against the Government's political vetting of community groups in N. Ireland and ways of revamping it. As a result, a new expanded working group was set up.

The role of this group was to:

- a establish an international lobby campaign to oppose political vetting and
- b to establish a Charter of Rights for voluntary groups in their dealings with statutory authorities here.

**POLITICAL VETTING**

The issue of political vetting has been well known in the voluntary sector for many years. Statutory bodies have traditionally used a variety of criteria to decide which community groups should get funding or not. On some occasions in the past the perceived political views or objectives of particular groups ensured that they were denied funding. However, it was not until the mid 1980s that political vetting or discrimination as a policy tool of Government really came into its own in N. Ireland. In June 1985 a children's creche in the community education centre at Conway Mill in West Belfast became the first victim of what has come to be known as the 'Hurd statement on political vetting'. This refers to a statement made in the House of Commons the previous day (27 June 1985) by Douglas Hurd MP, the then Secretary of State for N. Ireland. In this he stated that there were some community groups which had 'sufficiently close links with paramilitary organisations to give rise to a grave risk that to give support to those groups would have the effect of improving the standing or furthering the aims of a paramilitary organisation...'

As a result, in future, such groups would be denied any Government funding.

**THE POLICY IN ACTION**

The net result of this policy for the Conway Mill Children's creche was that it lost the funding it received through the Action for Community Employment (ACE) Scheme. This is a scheme set up to help the long term unemployed gain temporary work experience in useful community work. It is administered by the Government's Department of Economic Development through the Training and Employment Agency and partially funded by the European Community's Social Fund.

After Conway Mill other community groups lost their ACE funding in a similar vein - the Government admits that some 26 groups had been affected in this way up until the end of 1990. On each occasion no allegations were made against the group concerned or evidence presented other than a copy of Hurd's statement being sent to the group. There was no appeal against the decision.

Few people involved nowadays in the community work/voluntary sector in N. Ireland believe that the Hurd policy had/has anything to do with paramilitaries as such. It is largely believed that the policy was initially brought in to try to stem the growing tide of support for the Sinn Fein political party in nationalist working class areas in the early to mid 1980s. At the time, it was suggested that part of this support was due to Sinn Fein work in the community at grassroots level. The policy seems to be aimed at trying to marginalise Sinn Fein involvement in such areas. In this respect, therefore, it is believed that the policy is aimed more at preventing people with particular political views from playing an active role in their local communities rather than at preventing 'paramilitary' abuse of Government funds, etc.

The policy has not, however, been limited to groups with Sinn Fein members' involvement. A number of groups in nationalist areas, for example, claim that they have lost funds because they campaigned against Government policies rather than any other reason. There have also been some groups in loyalist areas who have been affected in this way. In fact, the group which lost the most Government money was Glencairn Community Association in late 1989. Nowadays most people in community work believe that the policy of political vetting can and has been used against a wide variety of groups whose views the Government does not like and is not limited to attacking Sinn Fein. Nowadays it is also fairly well established that political vetting is not just limited to the removal of ACE funding.

All Government Departments and funding agencies are expected to adhere to the Government's directives on which groups should or should not be funded. Thus, although the Government admits that up to the end of 1990 some 26 community groups lost ACE funding due to the Hurd statement this hides the many who did not receive any funding in the first place due to political reasons. It also hides the indirect effect on the funding of community work which this policy has had. One result has been that statutory bodies are now much more inclined not to take a chance with funding independent community groups in certain areas, and instead will limit themselves to funding safe options - like church groups. In fact, many community groups denied funding in such a way do not even realise that they have been politically vetted. The Government does not issue any statement to that effect. Political vetting also leads to local community groups having to be continually aware of the Government's perception of their views/activities leading to self-vetting of members, which may exclude whole sections of their local community and also self-vetting of activities they may wish to engage in. The result of all this is that independent community development suffers.

Most of the groups who have been politically vetted by use of the Hurd statement have rejected the insinuations made about them; some have actively campaigned to have their funding returned, while others still have either accepted their plight reluctantly or have unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate behind the scenes with Government to get their funding back.

One politically vetted group, Dove House in Derry, actually did succeed, after a highly vocal campaign, in getting their funding restored; but for the rest, there has only despair.

A few continued the fight against political vetting and the Hurd statement in particular, and in May 1988 an unofficial independent tribunal was organised in Conway Mill into the issue; a published report of this followed the tribunal.

In April 1990, a separate initiative was launched with the establishment of the Political Vetting of Community Work working group after a conference at Queen's University, Belfast, sponsored jointly by NICVA and the Community Workers' Co-op. This group proceeded to research the issues and in November 1990, published a report "The Political Vetting of Community Work in NI".

Meanwhile, however, the West Belfast Irish language group, Glor na nGael, had lost its ACE funding due to political vetting in August 1990.

Glor na nGael was to become a cause celebre and was to breath new life into the campaign against political vetting. The group was able to mobilise widespread broad-based support and embarked on a highly professional worldwide campaign to pressurise the Government to change its mind. On at least three different occasions this pressure forced the Northern Ireland Office to attempt to work out a deal with Glor na nGael, based on it stopping its campaign and changing its Committee - terms the group felt were wrong and unjust.

Currently, Glor na nGael is pursuing a judicial review of the Government's policy, through the Courts. Its workers are also pursuing a Fair Employment case on the grounds that their dismissal amounted to political discrimination. Both cases are ongoing at the time of writing, and Glor has promised to continue the case through the Courts, and into the European Court if the judicial review fails.

Meanwhile the Trade Union movement, traditionally slow in N. Ireland to react to human rights issues, has come out strongly against political vetting. Largely due to the campaigning of the National Union of Public Employees - the Trade Union to which most Glor na nGael workers were affiliated - a number of resolutions were passed at Trade Union Conferences during 1991, including both the NUPE and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance Conferences. The following resolution proposed by NUPE was also passed at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Conference.

"Conference condemns the practice of political vetting which is being used by Government to withdraw funds from community groups in Northern Ireland, without spelling out the nature of allegations against them, without evidence and without the right to appeal. This discriminatory action has had a major detrimental effect on community work and community group activity. Conference applauds the stand taken by many vetted groups who have tirelessly campaigned for the restoration of their funding.

In particular, Conference calls for the Executive Council to support the campaign for the restoration of funds to the Irish language group, Glór na nGael where NUPE members lost their jobs as a direct result of political vetting without allegations, without evidence and without the right of appeal. This campaign has received support from politicians, front bench spokespersons, churches, labour organisations and community groups in Ireland, North and South, in Great Britain, in Europe and in the USA. Conference also calls upon the Executive Council to ensure that representations are made through the appropriate manner to governments North and South on the basis of this resolution."

#### NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES

#### **BROADER VETTING**

Many human rights and civil liberties organisations throughout the world have offered their support to the campaign including the Committee for the Administration of Justice (CAJ, in N. Ireland) and LIBERTY (formerly the National Council for Civil Liberties in Britain). In September 1991, the Helsinki Watch Report 'Human Rights in N. Ireland', devoted six pages to the issue of political vetting of community work. Political vetting of course takes other forms than the implementation of the Hurd statement. As such sometimes communities can recognise that political vetting has occurred while at other times they cannot.

Political vetting is, of course, not confined to community groups operating in N. Ireland. In January 1991, for example, 'BETWEEN', the Cork-based group which among other things has been providing holidays on a cross community basis for children in troubled areas of N. Ireland, was politically vetted by the European Commission, losing much needed EC funding.



Then in May, the developing world charity, OXFAM, although not politically vetted as such, received a stern warning from the Charity Commission in England about its involvement in campaigning issues. In what appeared to be a new change in direction the Commission argued that in order to keep the tax and fundraising benefits of charitable status, charities had to be very careful about becoming involved in any type of campaign which might be construed as conflicting with Government political policy. By threatening the charitable status and thus fundraising capabilities of campaigning organisations like OXFAM, a message is being sent out to other smaller voluntary organisations not to rock the boat, or criticise the status quo too much. That message could lead to an increasingly subdued voluntary sector unwilling to criticise or seek to change society - a sector which increasingly self-censors its actions and words.

The Charity Commissioners' Report is just one in a long line of trends which could have a long term cumulative effect on the independence of voluntary groups both in Britain and N. Ireland. Campaigners against political vetting in N. Ireland argue that the OXFAM affair shows that political vetting here should not be viewed in isolation from other trends in Government policy towards the voluntary sector, including that in Britain. The cruder types of political discrimination found in N. Ireland are simply operated under more sophisticated guises elsewhere. Ultimately it is only one of a number of different social control mechanisms which are increasingly threatening the independence of voluntary and community groups both in N Ireland and Britain, and these trends will continue as long as groups let them go unchallenged.

#### **EFFECTS ON FUNDING IN GENERAL**

Government policies on funding the voluntary sector are obviously very important in this respect. For example, the Government's policy statement in response to the Efficiency Scrutiny of Government funding of the Voluntary Sector (April 1990) made it clear that one of the main principles governing future Government funding policy for voluntary bodies would be that such funding "should help to achieve the overall policies of (Government) Departments". The suggestion is that groups not in line with Government policies, no matter how worthwhile their work, are less likely to receive funding in future. Many, of course, would argue that that situation already exists. Departments or Government agencies already have to make decisions about how scarce resources are divided up among voluntary groups - about who should get funded and who should not, about who should get their funding increased and who should not. Increasingly, what used to be state services are being contracted out to the voluntary and private sectors. It is quite possible that the State will increasingly view the funding of the voluntary sector as a cheap way of providing services which once were the prerogative of the state rather than as a way of adding to such services and to the democratic process generally. The trend, therefore, could well be away from funding groups with innovative ideas and critical and challenging comments about the way society works towards a quiet compliant voluntary sector which provides the services the state wants provided and keeps its head down when the situation demands challenges and debate.

The consequences of some of these trends have probably been seen sooner in N. Ireland than in Britain, partly because of the implementation of cruder more direct forms of political vetting directed against the voluntary sector.

Despite this a campaign against political vetting and attempts to undermine the independence of voluntary and community groups continues unabated and undiminished.

#### **FUTURE ACTION**

The Political Vetting of Community Work Working Group has embarked on a two pronged strategy. Firstly it is attempting to raise the issue of political vetting at an international level in the hope that international pressure can be brought to bear on the British Government to alter its policy. A petition has been forwarded to the EC Parliament in an effort to get the issue debated there.

Attempts are also being made to get the matter raised at United Nations level. The group has also agreed to contribute to the Human Rights Assembly due to take place in April 1992 in London.

Secondly, the group is currently working on a draft Charter of Rights for the voluntary sector in its relations with statutory bodies. Initially the group will be concentrating on the political vetting/discrimination issue and the rights and responsibilities of both voluntary/community groups and statutory funders in this regard. However, it is hoped that the draft Charter, which it is hoped to launch at a Conference early in 1992, will eventually be fed into debates around wider voluntary sector/statutory sector co-operation, the Scrutiny Report, contracting, etc.

For further information about the work of the Political Vetting of Community Work Working Group contact the group c/o NICVA, 127 Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT7 1SH. Tel: 0232-321224

Feilim O'hAdhmaill, November 1991

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