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DRAFT

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PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This submission invites the Secretary of State to consider the approach which should be adopted with respect to community relations matters in Northern Ireland.

BACKGROUND

2. A working group of officials recently reviewed the effectiveness of Government's present arrangements for the promotion of good community relations. The proposals below flow from PCC's consideration of that report. (Annex A summarises the report and indicates the further action proposed on specific recommendations).

3. Arguably relations between the two communities in NI are worse today than for some time and immediate prospects are not good. A great deal of that condition arises from the continuation of violence and political instability, and relationships will be improved by progress on the security front, in Anglo-Irish relations, devolved government and tackling inequality where it exists. But in a divided society change in those areas is itself partly dependent on the basic state of society, where attitudes and perceptions are formed by the individual and collective activities of Government. The improvement of community relations^{must} therefore remain one of the central principles of Northern Ireland policy, whether under Direct Rule or under a devolved administration.

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4. PCC believed that this principle should be given substance by three objectives.

PUBLIC DEBATE

5. Firstly, to open up a public debate about the sort of society which the people of NI want. This will involve challenging questions (do people want to go down the path of "segregation" - separate schools, separate housing areas [and the Irish Government speaking on behalf of the minority community] - or towards "integration"?) as well as a positive portrayal of the NI society of the future. Ideally this would be one in which there is full equality of opportunity in all fields; respect for, and understanding of, the different traditions; freedom to express separate identities and loyalties without threatening the other side; a continuing process whereby the two traditions enrich each other; and the development of a more confident and constructive ^{political and social} relationship between the two communities in response to its many common problems within Northern Ireland.

6. A number of bodies have tried to stimulate such debate, and Professor Rea has already proposed that the Secretary of State should set up a body of local people to develop discussion of these human rights issues. There may be room for using new bodies, but whatever methods are adopted Government needs to take a positive lead in launching such a debate. The issue is at the heart of the current political debate and if there is to be a reciprocal element about the relationship between majority and minority (or North and South), there are advantages in Ministers asking NI political and community leaders to address themselves to the challenge at this time. This might mean that there should now be

a more positive and open bias towards "integrationalist" measures wherever possible, for example, in relation to moves towards integrated education. /A specific programme of areas to be dealt with (housing development and siting of estates; education etc) would be drawn up⁷.

MAJOR POLICY ISSUES

7. Secondly, to build into our decision-making machinery consideration of the impact of major decisions on community relations. Each Department should have the improvement of community relations (and the avoidance of community strife) as one of its key management objectives. Policy submissions to PCC and Ministers should in future include an assessment of the impact on community relations.

STRUCTURES

8. Thirdly, to consider further how the responsibilities of Departments (7 above) could be better monitored and co-ordinated. A small branch in DENI is all that remains of the structure created in the 1970s to promote better community relations through the Community Relations Commission and the Department of Community Relations. A stronger central body concerned with the broad thrust of Government action in community relations matters might help to develop a new momentum, but such a body should not be such as to deflect Departments from regarding improvement of community relations as an integral part of their responsibilities. For the present it is proposed only that the Central Secretariat and PAB should adopt a more positive role in monitoring the effects on community relations of Government/Departmental policies and decisions.

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9. A case for creating a more powerful Human Rights body which would encompass the community relations role was touched on in my earlier submission (of) on the EESG Review. This will be followed up in that context.

CONCLUSION

10. The Secretary of State is invited to agree to action being taken to implement the three objectives described in paras 5-8 above, and to note that the concept of a stronger Human Rights body will be examined further in the EESG context.

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