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RBS/279/88

cc. Mr McCusker

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

You will have seen the less than enthusiastic responses from Permanent Secretaries to the idea of a letter from the Secretary of State to public bodies about community relations. I share the concern that this is not the best way to proceed. What would be more useful?

The Secretary of State wants to make a major community relations speech in the early autumn to demonstrate what has happened in the year since the CCRU was created and to announce some of the further measures which we have been exploring. We have been asked to identify or set up a suitable occasion.

I wonder, therefore, whether the answer might be to mount for the chief officers of public bodies the sort of half-day seminar which we ran for senior civil servants and for the Secretary of State to use this event to make his community relations speech.

The seminar might be extended to include the chairmen of the public bodies as well as the chief officers. This could, however, make it quite large and probably less productive. An alternative would be for the Secretary of State to write to the chairmen afterwards forwarding a copy of the press release.

I have roughed out a possible press release describing a wide-ranging speech. If you agree with this approach, I will take matters forward.

RM

R B SPENCE

29 July 1988

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SECRETARY OF STATE ANNOUNCES FURTHER COMMUNITY RELATIONS MEASURES

The Rt Hon Tom King MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, announced today further measures to help promote better community relations in Northern Ireland.

Mr King was speaking at a seminar for the chairman and chief officers of major public bodies. His speech set out his approach to NI's community relations problems, described the action already initiated, and outlined some further measures.

The new measures include:-

1. increased funds for the schools' cross-community contact scheme;
2. extending the contact scheme, starting with the churches;
3. financial assistance for a new central resource centre to support community relations bodies;
4. endorsement for a programme of major conferences and associated events on the theme of cultural diversity being organised by a group drawn from the two Universities, the Arts Council, the Museums and the BBC;
5. giving District Councils a new role - with special financial assistance from Government - in promoting the improvement of community relations in their Districts.

Mr King said that the improvement of relations between the different parts of the NI community was one of the most difficult, sensitive and challenging tasks facing everyone in NI, whether in the public or private sectors.

"There are", he said, "people who argue that NI's community relations problems cannot be solved without fundamental political or even constitutional changes. I accept, of course, the basic truth that community relations problems do not exist in a political

vacuum. But I do not today want to get involved in political or constitutional issues except to say this : the need to tackle relationships between the people who live in this part of the island of Ireland will exist whatever political developments do or do not take place. The people who live in the Falls and the Shankill in Belfast or in the Bogside and the Waterside in Derry, will have to live side by side on this part of the world, irrespective of any constitutional or political framework affecting Northern Ireland". The Secretary of State added : "If we are to have genuine and lasting peace, the people on both sides must be given, and must take, the opportunity to live in peace and harmony; not surrendering or diluting their own firmly held views and aspirations, but genuinely recognising and accepting differences, so that fear of those on the other side can become a thing of the past."

The Secretary of State said that some people questioned the view that there were two separate traditions in Northern Ireland. He accepted that there was a danger of oversimplifying centuries of complex history and acknowledged that the people who live in NI share many things in common, including the wish for peace and prosperity. He said "It would, however, be a grave error to underplay the very deep divisions in Northern Ireland between those of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist tradition and those of the Catholic/nationalist/republican tradition. The reality is that the great majority of young people grow up in a segregated education system; in many areas of Northern Ireland, people live in separate housing estates; there are deeply-rooted fears and suspicions, as well as very different values and aspirations; tolerance, mutual respect and understanding are sadly absent in many minds."

The Secretary of State went on to analyse what approaches might be adopted to community relations and outlined two extremes. He said "At one extreme we could accept that little or nothing can be done now or in the immediate future about the divisions in Northern Ireland; we could plan to live with those divisions; indeed greater voluntary separation may have to be accepted. The other extreme approach would be to mount a major assault on the existing divisions, particularly in education and housing; every opportunity could be taken to push forward towards a fully integrated society, using compulsion and the power of Government to enforce integration in certain areas - as happened in US Civil Rights campaign of the 1960s."

Mr King described both approaches as ill-conceived, dangerous and likely only to worsen the situation. "The right approach", he suggested, "was to seek the means for the two traditions to live together with a sense of community, not merely alongside

each other, but amongst each other."

He set out 3 basic requirements which he believed must be met if the people from the two traditions are to live peacefully together.

First, the two traditions must live together in society as equal partners. "There cannot" he said, "be first and second-class citizens. There must be equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and an end to all forms of discrimination." Mr King pointed to the progress made over the last two decades in tackling the legitimate grievances of the minority and generally in ensuring equity of treatment by the whole of the public sector. He accepted that further action was needed in some areas and highlighted the Government's far-reaching proposals to strengthen the law on equality of opportunity in employment.

In stressing the importance of fair treatment, the Secretary of State said "Fairness must not only be put into practice but must be recognised and accepted by all as a basic principle on which society must operate. Action to ensure fairness, equity and equality of opportunity must never be interpreted by political leaders or ordinary people as a victory for one side and defeat for the other." He added "A healthy society abides by these principles and denounces any departures from them, irrespective of where and how they occur."

The second basic requirement for improved community relations, said Mr King was "respect for genuine and deeply-held differences." He argued that "the validity of the aspirations and values of each tradition must be acknowledged. Tolerance and understanding must, therefore, be fostered at all possible levels and violence (or the threat of violence) must not be used to further or to defend the position of one tradition against the other."

Mr King said that this poses very difficult questions about the future of the NI community. Respect for, and acceptance of, differences must be handled in a way which does not diminish or threaten the rights of the other side or which suggests that improving community relations means undermining cultural differences. "We may", he said "have to question how far we wished to go in accepting the existence of two traditions and in allowing greater separateness to develop. We need to acknowledge that greater contact, knowledge and understanding between the two traditions will not necessarily diminish separateness. We will sometimes have to face circumstances in

which the wider interests of the whole community have to take precedence over the wishes of one tradition." He felt that these were awkward questions to which there were no easy answers. "But", he declared "my basic preference is for seeking, wherever possible, to enable the two traditions to enrich each other rather than to encourage them to develop separately or in parallel."

Mr King suggested that the third basic requirement for improved community relations was "action to remove the barriers to closer contact between the two traditions and action to build on the common ground which the two traditions share." He argued that there must be constant vigilance against creation of new barriers, including any action which underlines, cements or emphasises separateness. "But", he added, "we have to be realistic; people cannot be forced to live in the same area if they are genuinely afraid to do so; children cannot be made to attend schools within a system of education which is against the wishes of their parents.

Mr King recalled that he had in September 1987 created a new Central Community Relations Unit to advise him on all aspects of the relationship between the two communities in Northern Ireland. The Unit is advised by an interdepartmental group of senior officials chaired by Dr Brian Mawhinney.

The Secretary of State summarised the action taken or initiated during the first year:-

- all major policy issues being considered within Government are examined from the point of view of their effect on community relations;
- the impact on community relations is one of the tests being applied in determining public expenditure priorities in NI;
- the leaders of the 4 main churches have agreed to appoint representatives to meet regularly with Dr Mawhinney to explore community relations issues;
- a cross-community contact scheme aimed at young people was launched by Dr Mawhinney in September 1987 and has attracted over 200 applications for support;
- Dr Mawhinney has invited all school boards of governors to nominate a

member who would take a particular interest in efforts to promote education for mutual understanding within his or her school and give general support to the establishment of cross-community contacts with other schools;

- the "Spirit of Enniskillen" bursaries were launched by Dr Mawhinney to assist young people from both sides of the community to travel overseas together;
- the Government's proposals for education reform in Northern Ireland would provide new support for integrated education [and for developing greater understanding of the differences in Northern Ireland];
- all senior officials in the NI Departments and NIO have attended a seminar on community relations issues;
- each Department is being encouraged to identify these areas of its activities which have, or could have, significant implications for community relations and to explore the need to improve available information about the impact of existing policy and to review specific policies;
- a review has been initiated into the present arrangements for providing Government funding to statutory and non-statutory bodies which is designed to improve community relations;
- further research was being commissioned into different aspects of NI's community relations problem.

Mr King believed that these steps demonstrated the seriousness and depth of the Government's concern about the issue of community relations. He underlined the detailed work which was going on throughout Government and said that all public bodies in Northern Ireland must, in carrying out their responsibilities take fully into account the divisions which existed in the community.

The Secretary of State suggested that public bodies needed to-

- (1) identify those aspects of their activities which could have a significant impact on community relations;
- (2) examine whether they had adequate information to enable them to assess properly the impact of their activities on the different parts of the community (including identifying any differential effects) or on relationships within the community; and
- (3) establish, in appropriate areas of activity, clear objectives for future action, for example in terms of improving information or of reviewing selected policies, programmes and practices.

Mr King said he recognised, of course, that the work of some public bodies was of such a nature that there was no significant community relations impact. He acknowledged also that many public bodies were already seeking to think and operate along the lines which he was suggesting. He urged, however, the chairman and chief officers present at the seminar to consider carefully what further work they needed to do; he offered the assistance of the Central Community Relations Unit in developing their response.

The Secretary of State announced some further measures which he planned to take:-

1. An extra [£50,000] was being made available in the current financial year to support further activity under the cross-community contact scheme.
2. Dr Mawhinney proposed to extend the contact scheme beyond young people, with the first stage being to facilitate contact between the churches; the details would be discussed shortly with representatives of the main churches.
3. Financial assistance was being offered for the creation of a new central resource centre which would act as a focal point for information, advice and contact for all those working to improve community relations.
4. Financial support was also being made available to a group, drawn up from the two Universities, the Arts Council, the Museums and the media, which would be promoting in 1989 a programme of major conferences and associated events on the theme of cultural diversity.

5. District Councils were to be given a new role to promote the improvement of community relations in their districts and financial assistance would be provided by Government to support their activities.

In conclusion, the Secretary of State said that in moving towards better community relations, Government fully accepted its major responsibilities - in promoting policies and legislation which ensure fairness and equality, in encouraging closer contacts between the two traditions, in fostering tolerance and understanding, and in constantly reviewing its policies and programmes to ensure that the impact on community relations is properly understood and given the fullest consideration.

"But", he added, "the responsibility extends well beyond Government". "It rests heavily", he argued "on NI's elected representatives who must contribute positively to debate and resolution of difficult and complex issues, rather than simply promoting or defending their own tradition." Mr King said that the responsibility extended also to all parts of the public sector, to employers and trade unions, to major professional bodies, to the churches, to the voluntary sector and to local community bodies.

But, he said "above all perhaps the responsibility for improving community relations extends to the individual citizen. Like many people I have been deeply moved by the way in which ordinary people have reacted to terrible personal losses during recent months. I wish that everyone in NI could learn from these noble examples of Christian behaviour. Everyone needs to think twice about their attitudes to "the other side", to avoid the automatic reaction which condemns whole communities for the actual or perceived actions of individuals. Every member of this society has to take care that in thought, word and deed, he or she does not contribute to the total sum of hatred and mistrust which exists in NI."

Mr King said that "if the people of NI want a peaceful and prosperous future, they need to work - at all possible levels - to achieve a more confidence^e and constructive relationship between the different parts of the community. We have to bury the "them and us" mentality and recognise that the only sensible future rests on learning to live together".

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