

NO. 725 P. 2

## LIAISON SUB-COMMITTEE ON CBMs - ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### PAPER BY HMG

1. At the meeting of the Sub-committee on 1 December, participants were invited to submit a paper on economic and social matters. This paper represents the British Government's contribution.

#### Economic and Social Policy

2. The Government wishes to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits as fully from its economic and social policies as the rest of the United Kingdom and that, where appropriate, these policies are tailored to suit local needs and circumstances. The Secretary of State's flexibility to allocate resources within her Public Expenditure Block provides scope to develop local economic and social policies, provided that these do not have unacceptable repercussions for other parts of the UK. Law and Order costs may of course also constrain her flexibility to address economic and social issues.
3. The Northern Ireland economy has been performing well in recent years, but although per capita Gross Domestic Product has been increasing relative to the UK, Northern Ireland still has the lowest level of any UK region. Northern Ireland also has the highest unemployment rate (with a relatively high proportion of long-term unemployment). Against this background, the level of resources directed at industry and employment programmes relative to the UK has been evidence of the importance that has been attached to promoting economic growth and addressing unemployment problems in the Province. In particular, the share of resources allocated to the Welfare to Work initiative reflects Northern Ireland's relative needs and will make a significant contribution to addressing the problems of youth and long-term unemployment.
4. Separately from lower per capita GDP and higher unemployment levels Northern Ireland's demographic structure, with for example a relatively high birth rate and a high

Proportion of young people, places particular demands on key public services such as health and schools. Northern Ireland also has a higher incidence of health problems and a relatively higher number of young people entering higher education, which place further demands on these programmes. The additional resources for school and health announced in the Chancellor's Budget will help to improve services in these key areas.

5. Overall, there is a relatively high level of deprivation measured on a range of indicators, although there is a great deal of variation within Northern Ireland. The Targeting Social Need policy introduced by the previous administration and retained by the present Government remains an underlying theme of resource allocation in Northern Ireland. Departments are required to take needs factors into consideration in the distribution of their resources and many economic and social programmes already make a contribution in this context. TSN is aimed at addressing needs objectively measured, irrespective of community; but because need (for example, the long-term unemployed) is found more in the Catholic community at large than in the Protestant community at large, TSN, while responding objectively to need in both communities, should have the effect over time of reducing differentials between the two communities. The allocations for the Welfare to Work programme will be highly relevant in this context. More generally, public spending per head is about  $\frac{1}{3}$  higher than the UK average largely in recognition of Northern Ireland's higher level of needs.

### **Rights and Safeguards**

6. There is a great deal of cross-community support in Northern Ireland for the protection of human rights. Action in this area will be of great significance for the achievement of a lasting settlement. Indeed, it is already recognised as a critical component of the emerging list of key issues under consideration by the Plenary Sub-Group.
7. An extensive range of measures for the protection of rights already exists in Northern Ireland. Any new arrangements will build on these and on the future plans that the Government has already announced. The most significant of these is the introduction of a Bill to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. A key

feature for discussion in the Talks is the extent to which there is a need to develop specific additional rights protections to deal with the unique problems of the divided community in Northern Ireland.

8. The details of any new human rights arrangements for Northern Ireland will have to be reached through dialogue and negotiations in the Talks process as the Plenary Sub-Group and the substantive agenda have already recognised. Indeed, there may be benefit in opening up the discussion beyond the Talks participants, perhaps by inviting academics and others to contribute their expertise, as the form and powers of any new institutions are beginning to take shape.
9. While there will probably be some deep disagreements over the kind of rights which ought to be protected, and differences about the ways in which protection can be secured and entrenched, the objective should be to achieve agreement on the form and scope of the institutions as well as the procedures or judicial checks needed for the protection of human rights. All parties to any new settlement should have confidence that adequate and effective safeguards against abuses of human rights will operate in a fair and impartial way, meeting Northern Ireland's particular needs, but providing levels of protection at least as effective as those elsewhere in the UK.

### **Cultural Heritage**

10. The Government recognises that there are many strands in Northern Ireland's complex cultural heritage and that no one tradition can claim predominance or unique validity. Its 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 and thus to improved community relations. Against this background, funding agencies will consider soundly based applications for financial assistance with cultural traditions projects on their merits, without favouritism towards any particular tradition.

11. The Government also acknowledges the special importance of the Irish language for many people in Northern Ireland, particularly (but not exclusively) in the nationalist community, and the recent development of interest in the Ulster-Scots tradition. In acknowledging this importance, the Government considers that it is inappropriate for expenditure on one linguistic tradition to be used as a benchmark for others, whether the comparisons are made within Northern Ireland, or with Wales and Scotland. The Government believes that the circumstances and needs of each linguistic tradition are specific and that they should be considered on their own particular merits.
  
12. Against this background, and reflecting on the position elsewhere in the UK, the Government has already announced that it is considering the implications of signing the Council of Europe Charter on Regional and Minority Languages.

**Conclusion**

13. The Government looks forward to discussing all of these issues in the Committee.

12 December 1997