

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

**REVIEW OF BOYCOTTING
OF BUSINESSES**

**MINORITY REPORT BY
THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S
COALITION**

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OF
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition presents this minority report on the review of boycotting of business because it cannot agree with the report presented by Standing Committee A.

1.2 The form and tenor of Standing Committee A's report is contrary to the duty of the Forum to "promote dialogue, understanding and consensus."

1.3 The Women's Coalition believes that the report's conclusions are not based on evidence. Perceptions, assumptions and hearsay are given weight over logic and evidence.

1.4 Far from the findings in Standing Committee A's report being expressed in general terms "to maintain anonymity"(1.10), the reason for the generality is the lack of evidence to support the report's conclusions. The number of times phrases such as the following appear in the report is testimony to its vagueness:

- "many believed" (2.7)
- "some traders also believed" (2.7)
- "some groups felt" (4.1.1)
- "there appeared to be" (4.1.1)
- "targeting seemed to be" (4.1.1)
- "the boycott appeared to be" (4.1.1)
- "some people believed" (4.1.1) + (4.1.3)

1.5. While perceptions are important they are no substitute for investigating the facts of the matter. Standing Committee A was unable to clarify to the satisfaction of its members whether it was investigating the matter of boycotting and presenting reliable evidence or whether it was merely passing on the anecdotes and opinions of others.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Boycotting has to be seen within its proper context. Unfortunately the background section in Standing Committee A's report does not set the context. As expressed by the Community Relations Council (CRC) during discussions with the Committee: "you need to recognise that you are providing a service in a divided society and the divisions in that society may affect your ability to do business."

2.2 Boycotting must be seen first and foremost within the context of the segregated and divided society of Northern Ireland. As the CRC evidence indicated, 7% of people live in mixed areas, only 3% of children go to integrated schools and segregation extends to the workplace as shown in FEC monitoring results. Many people may also be influenced by such segregation when choosing shops and services.

2.3 Communities are driven further apart at times of crisis or because of particular incidents. Such incidents include bombings, shootings, standoffs such as that at Drumcree and illegal actions such as the widescale blocking of roads.

2.4 The expressions of further division must be seen in the context of the events over the summer. These events exacerbated the inherent divisions in Northern Ireland society. Symptoms of that increased division include: boycotting businesses, picketing churches, burning schools and churches, attacking buses going to matches and attacking families of one religion or the other. Many of these actions are illegal as well as morally reprehensible.

3. POINTS OF EVIDENCE

3.1 Standing Committee A received very few presentations. Submissions came from two representative business organisations which include membership from all sections of the community, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federation of Small Businesses. The Business and Professional People for the Union made submissions supported by traders from the Unionist persuasion. No submissions were presented on behalf of the Nationalist community. The RUC and the Community Relations Council also made submissions.

3.2 The information presented to the Standing Committee falls into two categories:

Category 1 - overview of bodies such as representative organisations in the business sector and the police;

Category 2 - the experience and opinions of a small number of traders who believe they are affected.

3.3 Empirical evidence in the form of quantitative and qualitative surveys is presented under Category 1. Category 2 includes testimonies from business people about their experiences of boycotts, and unsubstantiated hearsay and anecdotal evidence. Standing Committee A did not attempt to weigh up the evidence or evaluate its reliability.

3.4 The Federation of Small Businesses undertook a survey of some 120 organisations (around 9% of its membership of 1400). Of these, 93% experienced no boycotting, 2% experienced light boycotting, 5% experienced moderate boycotting, and 0% experienced severe boycotting. All except 1% indicated a return to normal.

3.5 The Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the largest business organisation in Northern Ireland, carried out two telephone surveys of its Chambers. A typical Chamber has a membership of between 150 and 200 members, with the largest Chamber having 1000 members. Its members are active in all sectors and include large, medium and small businesses. In its first telephone survey of its 31 member Chambers, seven made reference to significant boycotting, four indicated a lower level of boycotting and five rumours of boycotting. The Chamber, in its second survey and at a meeting of all its Chambers in November, found that boycotting "was reducing now that it was disappearing from the headlines".

3.6 The Federation of Small Businesses and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry held the following common views:

- boycotts do exist;
- they do not appear to be widespread;
- stories covered in the media had the effect of "multiplying the problem," and it was to be hoped that responsible reporting would improve the situation;
- the extent of boycotting is diminishing over time having escalated around the time of the July disturbances.

3.7 In terms of assessing the issue of boycotts, none of these organisations has a political axe to grind. All of these organisations looked for responsible handling of the issue by politicians and other community leaders, and hoped they would address the issue with a view to defusing the situation.

3.8 The views presented in Category 2 offer a useful insight into the perceptions and experiences of a small number of traders, one each from Castlederg, Pomeroy, Lisnaskea, Bryansford and Portglenone. In following up on evidence presented the Women's Coalition has discovered factual inaccuracies which suggests that actual cases need to be carefully checked. The five traders all believed that:

- they are experiencing a downturn in business;
- the boycotts are orchestrated;
- there is intimidation.

3.9 These views have been supported by the Business and Professional People for the Union, which sketched a number of examples of boycotts. The Business and Professional People for the Union gave no indication of the size of its membership. It has been described as "a pressure group." Contrary to the positions given by the two representative business organisations, the Business and Professional People for the Union believes that the extent and severity of the boycott has not diminished.

3.10 There is evidence in the public domain of attempts to establish boycotting campaigns. This evidence includes leaflets and posters.

3.11 Articles and statements in newspapers have indicated that both Unionists and Nationalists have been involved in boycotts of each other. Some traders have said that they wish to have more media coverage of boycotts. However, the vast majority of businesses have expressed, through their organisations, a wish for a low profile and less media attention.

4. COMMENT

4.1 It is unfortunate that Standing Committee A received so few submissions. This is a matter of concern as it may be indicative of how the Forum is perceived by the wider community in Northern Ireland.

4.2 It is unfortunate that the form and tenor of Standing Committee A's report simply adds to the divisions in our society. Unsubstantiated allegations and political point scoring do nothing to build parity of esteem, counteract myths and misunderstanding across the community, or improve community relations.

4.3 It is unfortunate that more weight was not given to the evidence of the large representative organisations of the business community which made submissions. This may be because some members of Standing Committee A believe the Business and Professional People for the Union to be closer to the ground than the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federation of Small Businesses. It is noted that the Chairman of Standing Committee A is associated prominently and publicly with the Business and Professional People for the Union. While this should not debar him from participation in Standing Committee A, a conflict of interest should be registered.

4.4 It is unfortunate that in Standing Committee A's report hearsay is elevated to the status of evidence and then used to attack the SDLP, Sinn Fein and the Nationalist community in general.

4.5 In its evidence the Federation of Small Businesses recognises and respects, "the right of each individual in our democratic society to purchase goods and services from where and from whom they choose," and acknowledges "that many may wish to exercise their right as a legitimate form of 'peaceful' protest." There are many examples across the world of political and moral expression of opposition through boycott - a peaceful and democratic demonstration of views. Examples include organised boycotts of:

- Nestle for their baby milk sales to the developing world;
- French products for their nuclear testing in South Pacific;
- Shell Oil as a result of the execution of environmentalist Ken Sara Wiwa;
- Hardwoods in a campaign against the destruction of tropical rain forests;
- South African products to bring down the apartheid regime.

4.6 It is therefore untenable in the report of Standing Committee A to claim that such actions "are inconsistent with a wish to be regarded as being committed to exclusively democratic means."

4.7 People have every right to choose on an individual basis to boycott, or to be part of an organised boycott. However, there is no place in a democratic society for a boycott which is enforced by threat and intimidation.

4.8 In the divided society which is Northern Ireland, boycotts in themselves are regrettable and add to division. For those people who felt they had a point to make, it has now been made. After the divisive events of the year we now need to rebuild community relations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 While there have been sporadic incidents of boycotting these are now in decline.

5.2 Conflict and sectarianism over the years have had a considerable impact on the community and on the economy. Over the last year, the breakdown in the IRA ceasefire and the events over the summer have resulted in considerable loss of business. Those experiencing boycotts are also losing business. It will be difficult to establish a general principle and specific conditions for compensating for these business losses.

5.3 Boycotting is an aspect of the separateness and sectarianism in our lives and reflects the worsening of relationships within our community over the summer. Boycotts should be discouraged and every attempt should be made by business and other organisations to rebuild community relations.

5.4 An effective economy requires stable conditions in which to operate. The best gift and compensation which politicians can give traders in Northern Ireland is political stability. They can show their commitment to achieving stability by positively engaging in inclusive political dialogue, in All Party Talks, to negotiate a political accommodation to which we can all sign up.

5.5 The time has come for all elected representatives to act responsibly in the interests of reconciliation. The Forum is obliged by legislation and its rules "to promote dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland." It should now apply this in all aspects of its work whether in debates, hearings or reports.

5.6 The Women's Coalition will be registering its opposition to the report of Standing Committee A in the form it appears. The Women's Coalition will be calling on the Chairman under Rule 13 (1) to indicate that in his opinion Standing Committee A's report may not "reasonably be deemed to command support across the various traditions in Northern Ireland."