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NORTHERN IRELAND
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CHARTER FOR EMPLOYMENT EQUITY: SECRETARY OF STATE LAUNCHES
CONSULTATIVE PAPER ON EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Tom King MP, announced today the publication of a Consultative Paper on equality of opportunity in employment.

Speaking at a press conference in Belfast, Mr King said:

"This Consultative Paper shows the Government believes strongly in equality of opportunity in employment, sees it as a major priority and is determined to strengthen existing policy. It results from over a year's work, originally commissioned in July 1985. Our Paper concludes that Government's existing policy and legislation are soundly based but that there is room for improvement. We set out a range of measures considered necessary to ensure more effective practice. These measures are concerned with fairness to all and represent a new Charter for Employment Equity in the Province.

We consider our current policy to be the soundest foundation for future development. Religious and sex discrimination in employment is illegal; the merit principle is and must be the basis for the promotion of equality of opportunity in employment; and there is firm opposition to "reverse" discrimination. We recognise the valued work done by the Fair Employment Agency, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Disablement

Resettlement Service and by committed employers and trade unionists. We believe that the employment equality practices of the Northern Ireland Civil Service point clearly to the way ahead and should be implemented in the balance of the public sector.

"We accept that there is a need for future progress in both the public and private sectors - particularly, though not exclusively, on the religious dimension. So we set out measures which could make existing policy, and its implementation, more effective; and discuss options for new institutional arrangements."

Stressing that equality of opportunity in employment was a matter of general concern to all and vital to the future prosperity of the Province Mr King said:-

"While obviously the present difficulties over new job opportunities do pose problems this is no reason not to seek to achieve better employment practice in Northern Ireland. Employment equality is at the heart of a fair society and its practice contributes to industrial and commercial efficiency. The fact that we are determined to practise employment equality effectively and comprehensively, and are seen to be taking steps to do so through our new Charter for Employment Equity, is of profound economic significance both within the Province and in the wider international field. It is in the interests of everyone - job holders as much as job seekers - that our policy succeeds".

The Paper deals with the employment position of women, and the disabled, in addition to the major religious dimension. It indicates that there is a continuing wide differential between the employment experience of Protestants and Catholics; that women are disadvantaged in terms of job status and level; and that the disabled still have difficulties in competing with the able-bodied.

It concludes that further action must be taken if existing differentials are not to get worse and advises employers on the key practices required.

These include active commitment by employers, systematic recruitment procedures, selection on the basis of merit, regular monitoring and effective remedial action where necessary. The Paper firmly rejects "quotas" in relation to sex or religion because they conflict with the merit principle. It proposes future action in these areas:-

(a) The promotion of more effective practice by

- revising and updating the Department's Guide to Manpower Policy and Practice; (a revised version is to be published very shortly for consultation)
- placing a statutory duty on the public sector to practise equality of opportunity in employment;
- changing the Fair Employment Agency's Declaration of Principle and Intent to one of Practice; (an equal opportunity certificate will be available to those who sign the new Declaration)
- linking tender acceptance to possession of the equal opportunity certificate - which requires continued satisfactory practice
- introducing the ultimate sanction of grant denial for those not in possession of an equal opportunity certificate and not undertaking appropriate practice
- providing financial assistance and guidance for better practice in the private sector.

(b) Two options for institutional change

- either concentrating on religion only and establishing a new Fair Employment Commission;
- or covering all three dimensions of religion, sex and disability and establishing a new Equal Employment Opportunities Commission.

Any new Commission dealing with employment equality would have

- a Directorate responsible for investigative, educational, promotional and development work;

- a quite separate body of professional Commissioners to exercise the quasi-judicial decision-making role;

The Directorate and Commissioners would be complemented by an Independent Appeals Tribunal.

If an all embracing Commission was to be established it could operate on the basis of existing legislation for religion, sex and disability or on the basis of a single law for all three. However tender acceptance and grant denial would only be applied to the religious dimension.

In advance of any legislative changes that would be required for a new Commission to be established, the Government will be taking a number of steps, including publishing a revised Guide to good practice, to sustain the momentum of pressure against discrimination.

Pending establishment of any new Commission, which will require legislation, Government would propose to establish an advisory unit. In addition to issuing a revised Guide to good practice Government proposes to sustain immediate momentum through a series of interim educational measures.

We shall look forward to receiving the views from all interested parties and would ask for these to be submitted before 31 March 1987. The Government will then consider these representations and take decisions on the best way forward.

NOTE FOR EDITORS:

Copies of the Consultative Paper are available from Her Majesty's Stationery Office (ISBN 0337 09261 3).