

MEMORANDUM TO PCC

CATCHING THE TIDE

PROPOSALS FOR A CORPORATE IMAGE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Background

1. The meeting which Dr Mawhinney had with Mr Fell and Permanent Secretaries on 9 March agreed that a paper should be prepared for PCC, in the first instance. The paper was to develop a possible way forward, taking account of the views of Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, to a point where a new Government could take decisions on implementation.
2. Both at Permanent Secretary and Ministerial level there has been general agreement with the analysis and conclusions in the Study, ie that NI does suffer from a major image problem; that the problem is largely one of reality rather than perception; and that the Province's prospects are seriously constrained by this negative and narrowly-based image. There is also general support for the view that, faced with such a sharply defined problem, it is not an option for Government simply to do nothing.
3. There is no such consensus however in regard to Part II of the Study, which seeks to develop a strategy to change the bleak perception of Northern Ireland.

Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that an important and substantial element of Part II dealt with a possible mechanism for implementing the strategy and proposed as the vehicle what would effectively be a new "Quango".

But this part of the Report was intended to be purely descriptive rather than prescriptive and illustrative of how the mechanism might look in practice. There undoubtedly are other means by which the problem could be addressed.

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4. Notwithstanding reservations about the mechanism, there is much in Part II that finds general agreement, eg
- a. that a strategy for achieving a real and significant improvement in external perceptions should:
 - have its roots in responding to the unmet need in Northern Ireland;
 - seek to improve pertinent aspects of the reality within Northern Ireland;
 - involve and empower people in Northern Ireland;
 - be evolved against and aspire to satisfy the criteria and standards of the outside world;
 - be conceived against and sustainable across an extended timescale.
 - b. that the broad strategic objective might be:
 - to give the outside world reason to perceive Northern Ireland positively;
 - c. and that the internal objectives which would support that external objective might be:
 - to change externally relevant aspects of the reality within Northern Ireland;
 - to increase the external saliency of Northern Ireland;
 - to empower and motivate the people of Northern Ireland to help shape their own future.

5. Equally there is broad acceptance of the type of activity which, it was suggested, might help to achieve these objectives, eg the planned development and/or promotion of those aspects of Northern Ireland which:-

a. are currently seen;

b. could be seen; or

c. could be stimulated within Northern Ireland - and then be seen by the outside world - as valuably unique or differentiating.

There is little argument with the suggested creation/development/encouragement of "pivotal symbolic" actions such as the re-opening of the Opera House, or with the "world standard" concept of efforts to ensure that key aspects of Northern Ireland are brought up to equal or exceed the standards of other first world territories (as opposed to merely improving our previous Northern Ireland standards).

6. The conclusion is therefore that while there are some differences of opinion in various areas, the major shortcoming of the Report is the nature of the machinery proposed for implementation and for ensuring an appropriate level of private sector involvement.

We have therefore looked again at this aspect and at the related problems of private sector involvement and clear Government ownership of the initiative. The following paragraphs suggest a different approach to that of "Beyond 2000" approach and also suggest a way of moving forward which would allow full representation of the major interests involved.

An Alternative Approach

7. The main thrust of the Study's view on the "Beyond 2000" concept was that it should be seen to be independent of Government in its policies and activities - albeit with an influential relationship with Government.

Given the extent to which the bulk of promotional activity is currently, and almost certainly will remain, the responsibility of some area of Government or public bodies, there are strong grounds for questioning this approach, while still allowing for a meaningful private sector role.

A possible alternative to the creation of a "Quango" to implement "Catching The Tide" is the creation of a designated unit within Government, not aligned specifically with any one Department, but answering directly to the Minister, perhaps through the Information Service or Central Secretariat or perhaps both.

An essential feature of this unit would be that it receives independent high level advice, guidance and direction with both public and private sector involvement, from a widely drawn board of directors, or advisory committee. Parallels already exist in:-

"Belfast 1991;"

The Community Relations Unit;

"Making Belfast work."

Giving the mechanism a clear basis within Government, albeit with considerable scope at both working and 'board of directors' level for private sector involvement would have benefits in relation to several major issues:-

- a. the lack of any clear overall responsibility for the image building process, and the question of ownership of the proposed new initiative;
- b. allowing Government to be clearly seen to be addressing a serious problem, and challenging the private sector to make an equal effort;
- c. as part of Government, such a unit would be well placed to effect the improvement in co-operation and co-ordination on existing image promotion efforts which is generally

recognised as necessary, regardless of major new initiatives; and

- d. finally, placing operational control within Government would perhaps be the only course which would allow full consideration of a major aspect of the image problem - the security situation - which was identified as such in the Feasibility Study analysis but not addressed since it was largely outside the remit of the consultants.

A Way Forward

8. It is recognised however that this is but one option for an alternative to "Beyond 2000" as a vehicle for implementing any agreed strategy emerging from acceptance of the consultants analysis contained in Part I. There may be other approaches, either completely new or already paralleled in other areas of Government operation.

So we propose that a small working party be now created with the assigned tasks of identifying and examining structural and organisational options. Its recommendations would cover not only the nature and location of the responsible unit but also such matters as:-

- b. the composition and remit of the "board", including who should head it (private or public sector figure?);

- c. size and level of permanent staff;

- d. scope for seconding private sector staff;

- e. running costs; etc.

While it would be important for the new unit and its "board" to be able to devise their own programme, and indeed to some extent their own terms of reference, the working party would need to articulate a clear remit which would guide the new unit in its creation of strategies and programmes.

To be able to make credible proposals on a way forward, the working party would also need to conduct research in several directions, either directly or using, eg professional researchers or university resources, viz:-

- a. Among all those whose existing work includes image building activities to ascertain, eg:-
 - prospects for co-operation from public and private sectors;
 - what those activities encompass;

could they be expanded/improved/enhanced through wider co-operation/involvement or additional funding;

would they be prepared to co-operate on a broader front;

willingness to co-opt staff to the central unit.

This research would in effect be an audit of existing work and attitudes and would cover Government Departments, statutory bodies, district councils and private sector companies and bodies.

- b. To identify target audiences and relevant projects or areas of operation which would reach those audiences.

- c. To establish the extent to which it is realistic to expect the rest of the world (but especially GB and USA) to take note of "world standard" attainments by Northern Ireland, and to be thereby influenced to visit or do business with the Province, or to report favourably upon it.

Drawing upon the results of these researches and its own deliberations and projections, it would be possible for the working party to put forward detailed proposals for action covering, inter alia:-

mechanism; a small working party drawn from DED, IDB, DOE,
remit; the Secretariat should be tasked with identifying
"board profile"; personnel and organisational systems and
cost and size of Government unit, including staffing levels;
example projects; action. (paras 8 & 9).
projected programme costs;
possible non-Government financial contribution; the Head of
prospects for co-operation from public and private sectors;
targets audiences etc.

9. We suggest that a bright, progressive working group be selected from among the Departments most heavily involved in this area - DED, IDB, DOE, Information Service, Central Secretariat.

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The whole question of "corporate image" and of persuading people at all levels of the need to think in promotional terms is potentially of enormous importance to Northern Ireland; it is also one which has not been seriously addressed in wider terms in the past. In our view it would help greatly to focus attention on the importance and on the pan-Governmental nature of the exercise if the group were to be tasked by and report to the Head of the Service.

SUMMARY

1. Permanent Secretaries are asked to confirm their judgement of PART I of the report - that it is not an option for Government simply to do nothing.
2. PCC's agreement is sought in relation to the creation of a designated unit, within Government, answering directly to a Minister. (para 7).
3. The unit would receive advice, guidance and direction from both the public and private sector, from a widely drawn board of directors or advisory panel. (para 7).

4. As a way forward a small working party drawn from DED, IDB, DOE, NIIS and Central Secretariat should be tasked with identifying and examining structural and organisational systems and establishing a clear remit for the new unit and specifying detailed proposals for action. (paras 8 & 9).

5. The Working Party should be tasked by and report to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (para 9).

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