

cc: Mr Steele
Mr Watkins
Mr Lavery
Mr Hill
Mr Maccabe
Mr Perry
Mr Stanley
Mr Ritchie

Mr Gerson

PA-670/96

From: J A Canavan
CCRU

24 January 1997

To: K Jagelman

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM - REVIEW OF BOYCOTTING OF BUSINESSES

1. You asked for input to a co-ordinated Ministerial response to Standing Committee A, following its report on boycotting. The rest of this note can serve as an input to the background note, and the attachment as a part-draft response.
2. During the period when the Standing Committee was taking evidence on boycotting, the Minister held a series of meetings with interested parties:
 - ◆ Unionist representatives and Mr Alan Field of Business and Professional People for the Union, 17 September 1996;
 - ◆ Mr Field and a number of boycott victims from Fermanagh and Tyrone, 24 October 1996; and
 - ◆ the Federation of Small Businesses on 27 November, at which a survey of business opinion on boycotts was discussed.

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The BPPU, FSB and affected traders also gave evidence to the Standing Committee, so it is not surprising that its assessment of the boycott largely co-incides with that of Government.

4. The Report does, however, add a slight political spin of its own, with the statement at para 5.2 that:
 - ♦ "Sinn Fein/IRA were instrumental in initiating the boycotting campaign as a further attack against the Protestant community in certain areas and that such actions by any party are inconsistent with a wish to be regarded as being committed to exclusively democratic means."
5. Though there has been undoubted heavy Sinn Fein involvement at local level in boycotts, an earlier assessment suggested that there was no central co-ordination. The Report itself (4.1.1) concedes that in significant areas of strong Sinn Fein support there had been little evidence of boycotting.
6. Otherwise, the Report avoids hyperbole. The assessment of the areas affected (2.5) co-incides with the best information available to Government. The Report does not shirk the fact that there had been some attempts at retaliatory boycotting of Catholics (4.1.2) and the assessment that there had been little Protestant support for such tactics is also fair. It does not, however, refer to the blockade of Catholic churches in North Antrim, where there is some evidence that the protesters were motivated, at least in part, by concern about the boycotts of Protestant traders west of the Bann.
7. The Report seems to have difficulty in coming to a view on media coverage (4.1.3). The News Letter and Belfast Telegraph both reported boycotting at length over a period of weeks. The Report's conclusion that boycotts should be reported in a "sensitive, responsible and objective manner" might be an implicit criticism of some of this coverage.

The conclusions and recommendations bear the hallmarks of Committee drafting. There appears to be a contradiction between the conclusion that boycotting is on the decline (5.4) and the Committee's acceptance of the BPPU's view (5.6) that the campaign is on-going and has widespread Nationalist support. The recommendations are largely unexceptionable. The only controversial point is the suggestion that compensation should be awarded to affected traders, the point on which the Committee would like to meet the Minister again.

[Input from Mr Stanley can be integrated here]

[Signed: JAC]

J A CANAVAN

PART DRAFT REPLY FOR SIGNATURE BY MICHAEL ANCRAM

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At my meeting with a delegation from Standing Committee A on 14 January, you presented me with the report on the Review of the Boycotting of Businesses.

I have read and considered the report. The Standing Committee has carried out a thorough investigation. In the course of last Autumn I arranged to meet several of the business people affected and representative business organisations to discuss the impact of boycotts on community relations. The Government has taken this issue very seriously, as it has the other manifestations of sectarian behaviour which have occurred since last Summer.

The Standing Committee's assessment of the extent of boycotting largely co-incides with my own. I also share the Report's conclusion that the phenomenon appears to be on the decline. I hope that this is, indeed, the case and that there will be no revival of this activity in 1997.

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