

## **FAIR EMPLOYMENT - A GENERATION ON**

- 1. Achievements since 1976 significant – acknowledge these – tribute to those who made that progress possible.**
- 2. Here not just to celebrate those achievements – what lessons can be learned for tackling all forms of discrimination - whatever their religious and political backgrounds, their gender, their ethnicity, their physical and intellectual abilities or their sexual orientation.**
- 3. Discrimination has many forms - and depending on circumstances, historical and contemporary, societies are likely to experience a greater weight being given to one form of discrimination or another: here religion both as a badge of religious faith as well as a mark of political allegiance became the most obvious basis for discrimination - but gender ranked alongside it as did exclusion on grounds of physical or intellectual ability if in less explicit forms.**
- 4. So to be a Catholic and a woman who was not deemed physically or intellectually ‘normal’ (whatever that meant) was to be discriminated by a factor of three. Likewise to be a Protestant woman also deemed not physically or intellectually ‘normal’ was to be exposed to similar forms of exclusion and discrimination.**
- 5. Along with these forms of exclusion and discrimination, ethnicity, race and colour have become increasingly evident as motives for physical attacks on persons and their homes, for attempted restrictions on where people can live and socialise etc.**
- 6. When we examine all of the forms of discrimination, our own historical experience of discrimination should teach us that prejudicial attitudes and practices on grounds of religion are basically similar to the attitudes and practices that lead to discrimination on grounds of gender and ethnicity and of physical or intellectual abilities etc.**
- 7. So while today’s discussions are focused on what has been done to tackle religion and political affiliation as bases for exclusion and discrimination, let’s not forget that what we are addressing**

**has at its source similar motivations and similar attitudes, all leading to similar attempts to exclude and discriminate.**

- 8. The establishment of single commission embracing the previous separate agencies dealing with discrimination on grounds of religion, gender, race and disability enables the lessons to which I am pointing, to be more effectively drawn and more concerted, more comprehensive initiatives to be devised to eliminate all forms of discrimination and so vindicate each individual's rights. I trust the long awaited single equality act will reinforce this process.**
- 9. Turning more specifically to developments in the area of what we refer to as 'fair employment' a key lesson from that experience is the need for strong legislation which sets out what is unacceptable, what must be done to rectify situations where discrimination has been practised and how those who have experienced unjust treatment can have their cases processed and their rights vindicated.**
- 10. Compared with the original 1976 legislation the 1989 act brought considerably more clarity with its more stringent set of requirements, a more effective investigative process and an open process for dealing with cases of alleged discrimination.**
- 11. The result has been a greater confidence that discrimination on grounds of religion is being more effectively dealt with. More importantly what has been produced is, at one level, a more balanced representation of Catholics and Protestants in the overall workforce as well as in particular workforces. It is notable that fair treatment as far as opportunities within the workplace is much less an issue of concern for both major communities than in the seventies and eighties.**
- 12. However, there remain problems to be addressed. While a more balanced picture exists at a general level when broken down problems include: a continuing imbalance within the Senior Civil Service caused by Catholic under-representation, a concentration of people of one affiliation or the other in some parts of the public service, and the exclusion of applications from people not deemed British citizens from so-called sensitive positions in the senior ranks of the civil service, a problem of Protestant under-representation in administrative**

**grades; the continuing under-representation of Catholics in security services.**

- 13. While there has also been considerable progress in the private sector, significant problems still exist, some caused by the location of enterprises, producing a chill factor which deters people from one community or the other from going into the area or from seeking employment in particular enterprises.**
- 14. There is also the important fact that Catholic unemployment, especially for males, is still considerably greater than that experienced within the Protestant community.**
- 15. Are there measures that can be taken to deal with these issues? The answer very definitely is yes and the bases for some of those measures were laid during devolution.**
- 16. The Review of the Senior Civil Service initiated by Mark Durkan and concluded during my own period in the Department of Finance and Personnel recommended the overhaul of how appointments were sought and made at that level, and also recommended the abolition of the restriction on non-British citizens from being employed in so-called sensitive posts.**
- 17. The unemployment differential was addressed in two initiatives. The first was contained in the recommendations of the task-forces on employability and long-term unemployment which I established as Minister for Employment and Learning; the second, was the West Belfast Task Force. Both recommended the establishment of special training and employment measures especially for those locked into inter-generational unemployment who make up a disproportionately large percentage of those in long-term or frequent unemployment.**
- 18. Pilot projects in places like West Belfast, Larne and Derry have been established though with variable degrees of success so far. The same task-forces identified the poverty trap created for those in receipt of benefits and the deterring effect to entry/re-entry to the job market which can be caused.**

- 19. A further measure taken to address long-term unemployment is the requirement written into the new procurement policy, also developed during devolution that certain public contracts would undertake to train and employ workers who are registered long-term unemployed. Again this is a measure which is not being pursued as vigorously as it would have been under devolution.**
  
- 20. Having mentioned problems that remain to be tackled I want to conclude my remarks by highlighting one critical effect of the drive for fair employment. It is that more balanced workforces mean that workplaces are now the most important shared space for individuals from our two main communities. At a time when in so many other respects there are tendencies keeping Protestant and Catholic apart - where we choose to live, our choice of recreational activities, the schools in which we are educated, the professionals we choose for particular services, shared workplaces are critical to our future if we want to develop any sense of a shared ownership of Northern Ireland, the North or whatever we choose to call this place.**
  
- 21. The measures necessary to make for fair employment have, therefore, lessons to teach not just for dealing with other forms of discrimination but maybe also in creating the conditions that will enable to remove other barriers that we have created between us.**