



Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1 2HQ

16 October 2014

Dear Secretary of State

Proposed economic sanctions over welfare 'reform' policy

The Equality Coalition is a broad alliance of non-governmental organisations and trade unions whose members cover all the categories listed in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as well as other equality strands. We were founded in 1996 and were instrumental in putting equality at the forefront of the agenda, specifically in relation to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and ultimately the public sector duty in section 75. The Equality Coalition now has over 80 members, many of which are umbrella organisations. It is co-convened by the Committee on the Administration of Justice and UNISON.

On the eve of UN anti-poverty day we write to express our grave concern at the UK government's proposed sanctions on the Northern Ireland Executive for not having implemented your government's welfare reform policy. Parliament was recently told (WQ 201864 30 June 2014) that what are commonly referred to as 'fines' or 'penalties' of £13m, £87m and £114m, would be imposed in relation to the 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 years respectively. We understand this has not yet happened and we urge reconsideration of this position given the impact on a divided and post-conflict society either the sanctions or implementing welfare cuts will have.

We are conscious of the impact of welfare reforms on inequality in Great Britain yet we wish to draw attention to obvious yet underplayed additional impacts such measures would have in Northern Ireland. It is evident from history that within the context of a post-conflict divided society real or perceived inequalities and disadvantage risk fueling conflict in a manner which would not occur in Great Britain. In addition to Northern Ireland suffering a much higher DLA claimant rate among adults of working age (10.1% compared to 4.9% in GB), an 'elephant in the room' issue is the much greater impact welfare reform will have on persons in the Catholic/nationalist community.

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The Community Relations Council Peace Monitoring Report 2, citing official statistics from the 2013 DSD Family Resources Survey, highlights that on every single measure on the deprivation indices Catholic families still experience more deprivation than their Protestant counterparts. The NICVA commissioned research *The Impact of Welfare Reform on Northern Ireland* highlights that, for example, the new Derry-Strabane local government district will be the hardest hit by welfare reform and generally the most deprived areas across Northern Ireland will face the largest losses. It is therefore no exaggeration to raise concerns that 16 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which envisaged frameworks to break from the historic patterns of discrimination and disadvantage particular to Northern Ireland, the welfare reform will in fact entrench and exacerbate these very patterns of inequality.

As you will be aware the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement contained provisions for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland which was to provide protections to address the particular circumstances of the jurisdiction. The UK government has however failed to discharge the treaty-based commitment to legislate for the Bill of Rights citing a precondition, not included in the Agreement, of political consensus between Northern Ireland political parties. We respectfully submit this stands in stark contrast to your position on welfare reform (which is neither required by and runs counter to UK treaty-based commitments), whereby in the context of a similar lack of political consensus your government is now seeking to impose economic sanctions. We would therefore seek clarification for the legal basis for imposing 'penalties' on the Northern Ireland Executive and how the figures have been calculated.

In addition we would like to draw your attention to our concerns that the formal equality safeguards put in place under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and enacted through the public sector equality duty, have been sidelined throughout the welfare reform process. The equality impact assessment of the proposed bill by the Department for Social Development left out four of our nine section 75 equality categories, including religious belief and political opinion and hence ultimately disguised how the reforms will impact on the two main communities. Despite repeated requests to do so the Equality Commission decided not to exercise its powers of investigation into DSD on this matter and hence we appreciate your powers to direct remedial action by DSD under (subsection 3b of paragraph 11 of schedule 9) the 1998 Act cannot be exercised. Given, however, your Department represents the UK government in Northern Ireland we would however seek clarification as to whether you will screen and equality impact assess the proposed policy of penalties on the NI Executive?

Finally despite our understanding that the 'penalties' have not yet been imposed and current cuts to budgets are derived from general 'austerity' cuts, you will be aware there is presently considerable political and media discourse attributing the current local budgetary crisis to welfare reform. One of the disturbing outworkings of this is that some of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, who are recipients of benefits, are being in effect held responsible for the cuts.

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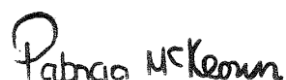
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In the context of statutory duties on your department to tackle prejudice, for example the duty to promote positive attitudes to persons with disabilities under s49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended), we would seek clarification of what steps you are taking to challenge such rhetoric?

Yours sincerely



Daniel Holder
CAJ



Patricia McKeown
UNISON

Co-Conveners of the Equality Coalition