

SPEECH by OFMDFM Minister JONATHAN BELL

at the CRC Policy Conference

Reconciling the Books: The Economic Case for Sharing

Stormont Hotel 26 May 2011

I would like to thank you for the kind invitation to come and speak here today at this key event in Community Relations Week. As most of you will be aware, this is my first full week as Junior Minister and it gives me great pleasure to be able to add my voice of support to the important ongoing work in this area.

I can reaffirm that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is absolutely committed to building a shared, better and brighter future for all in Northern Ireland.

This will mean much hard graft, political and financial support and the united determination to tackle head-on the key challenges across our province. This can only be achieved if we work hand-in-hand with you, our partners in the statutory agencies and those from across and within the community.

We want to support and build on the good work done thus far. The expertise and best practice must not be lost but taken

forward and used more widely where appropriate. Those who work on the coal face day in and day out know what the problems are and many have found innovative solutions which are bringing about meaningful changes on the ground. The work you do is vital, and your experience and knowledge will be critical as we move forward in our shared future agenda.

Northern Ireland has suffered much; it has been a hard and difficult journey away from a being a province mired in violence and fear.

I believe we have turned the corner.

I believe that people do not want to and will not go back to those days.

I believe there is a strong determination across every section of our community to stand up to those who wish to drag us back.

There is a real change and improvement in how we live our lives. Our young people have unprecedented opportunities to reach their full potential. We must stand firm and secure the peace, we cannot go back to days filled with suspicion, hatred and violence where neighbours feared each other and so many lives were lost.

Much has been done, yet we have much yet to do. Our journey is by no means over – I know we all acknowledge this. A commitment to a truly shared future must be based on changing attitudes as well as behaviours. Community and individual change is critical to building the type of Northern Ireland we all want to live in.

OFMDFM published a draft anti-sectarianism and anti-racism strategy for consultation. This was an attempt to produce a high-level strategic direction which acknowledged the key challenges facing our community and identified approaches in taking forward this work. I believe this marks a significant milestone in the community relations debate and provides a positive starting point for constructive debate over the shape of our strategic approach in building a shared and better future.

Unfortunately there are no magic answers to the complex problems we face. Those who work daily in community work will know that all too well. Progress is often slow, successes few and bringing about real change in communities and people provides a significant challenge.

Government has an important role to play in providing leadership and support. We have just completed the first full Assembly term for some considerable time. I warmly welcome

this new stability. Furthermore, the Executive is a manifestation of the key concepts in community relations work – respect, working together, sharing. The Executive is leading from the front. It is not always easy, but then no one expected it to be. Likewise we know the work in reconciliation within the community is not always easy.

It is now critical that we move forward with a process to achieve the widest possible consensus on what our anti-sectarianism and anti-racism strategy will look like. Over the next number of months we will be working with the 5 main parties to examine in detail the many consultation responses and further shape the strategy. We will also be speaking widely to the community and statutory sectors. In addition to this, encouraging government departments to take bold actions on issues such as education, housing, service planning and this will be a core component of ensuring a robust strategy which is impact based and solution driven.

The focus of the conference today is the economic cost of division. The report on the “Cost of Division” did not go into costings details and therefore it is difficult to assess the robustness of the figures mentioned. Regardless, it is clear that there is unnecessary duplication and a cost arising from division. However, I see this as an unwanted consequence of our

community cohesion challenges not the motivation for addressing them.

I strongly believe that even if there were no economic consequences there is still an imperative to build a shared future and improve community relations.

We strongly believe that the tackling sectarianism and building better community relations cannot be done by ensuring people are “separate but equal”. OFMDFM has increased financial support to a wide range of community work and initiatives based on promoting sharing and reconciliation since devolution. Our aim, as outlined in the draft strategy is to create a Northern Ireland where everyone, regardless of characteristics or designations, can work, rest and socialise together in safety. This work will include ensuring increased equality of opportunity, but also promoting respect and tolerance of difference and diversity along with the key principle of fairness.

We can do more to tackle waste across government, of which duplication and costs associated with division is a part. However, we must also invest in the work to change minds, hearts and behaviours. I know that moving forward, OFMDFM will continue to be a champion of building a shared and better future and tackling hate and division. We want to build shared

spaces, shared cities, towns and villages, shared facilities and a shared aim of working together as one community.

In conclusion, I want to mention that often used phrase of Gandhi's – "*Be the change you want to see*". Real change away from fear, suspicion, prejudice or hate will be brought about one person at a time, one family at a time - working towards and contributing to community change. That change often has to start within ourselves. I want people to feel empowered and secure enough to stand up and say clearly, that change should start with me!

As I move forward in this new role, I have set myself a challenge - to work closely with my colleagues in OFMDFM with the aim of bringing about positive delivery for the whole community. I will be that change I want to see.

Thank you for your time today.