



## Sectarianism

*View from the Chair. Business Newsletter 11 May 2010  
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission.*

Every so often local tensions in one area or another of Northern Ireland boil up into violent confrontation; and they remind us all that sectarianism remains an underlying force with the potential to undermine the many positive achievements of recent years.

This is an area where we can not afford to be complacent. It has been a source of encouragement that in Equality Commission surveys, although there is an apparent readiness to express negative views about various groups, only a small minority of people express such views about people of a different religion. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that community divisions are no longer an issue when the evidence of events on the streets and of many political exchanges shows that our society remains deeply divided.

Employers have made a huge contribution to the maintenance of good relations in Northern Ireland – most particularly in the workplace where their efforts, working alongside the Equality Commission, have helped develop good working environments free from sectarian symbolism and intimidating behaviour. That has been important over many years of violent conflict. It helped maintain the economic life of Northern Ireland and provide what was, for many people, the only point of personal contact between divided communities. Good and enduring community relations can only be built upon people's experience of good personal relationships; and workplace, professional and business relationships were sometimes the only context within which these could develop.

Of course, solving the problems of a divided society is not a responsibility falling on employers alone. The deep roots of sectarian division must be tackled at all levels and in all sectors of our society. In the last month the Equality Commission, acting with the Community Relations Council in the Good Relations Forum, have challenged all those involved with our schools to ensure that good relations between all our young people are vigorously promoted to counter sectarian attitudes.

One of the lost opportunities for very many in Northern Ireland is that caused by living in a community where lives are lived very separately. We have to avoid the notion of diversity becoming an elaborate system of separateness. We cannot live alone in our own cultures and feel that we live fully in our society. And while schools cannot bear the burden of resolving these problems, we believe that teaching and practising good relations in all our schools can no longer be avoided or seen as optional. We have proposed a number of practical measures involving more collaboration and greater sharing of resources between schools. We need to promote and encourage real, meaningful and sustained contact between children and young people from diverse

backgrounds and cultures. And we have made a number of recommendations for action by the Department of Education, and by all those with an engagement in education, so that good relations are placed at the heart of our education system.

Success in these initiatives will benefit employers and business people as well as society generally. Business needs young people equipped with all the skills and attributes to play a positive and productive role in our community and our economy. It is no longer a viable option to live and work around the fault lines of sectarian division. We all need to focus urgently on what each of us can do to build a more cohesive, shared and integrated society.