

STATE PAPERS: NORTHERN IRELAND

Tension between anti-bias agency and government

Factory pays £20,000 to widow of executive killed by IRA

FRiction between the fledgling Fair Employment Agency and the direct rule government of Roy Mason was evident in 1978.

The controversy concerned a ground-breaking report issued by the Fair Employment Agency (FEA) on the occupational profile of the two communities. The report was based on an analysis of the 1971 census.

The FEA was set up in 1976 under the chairmanship of former Alliance politician Robert Cooper with the task of promoting equality of opportunity.

The report showed an overall Catholic unemployment rate of 13.5 per cent compared to 5.7 per cent for Protestants.

Taking as a yardstick the overall proportion of Catholics in the economically active population, the report noted they had a low representation in the manufacturing sector.

In particular, the Catholic percentage in shipbuilding was 4.8.

The FEA report noted that pub and catering work, nursing and teaching were "RC occupations" while such areas as the police (10 per cent Catholic), engineering and senior government officials were deemed "Protestant occupations".

Using figures produced by the American academic EA Auger based on the 1971 census, the FEA Report stated that of 1,383 senior government officials, just 13 per cent were from a Catholic background.

"The occupation profile of Protestants and RCs revealed a distribution of RCs towards the unskilled occupations.

The modal Protestant male is a skilled manual worker whereas the modal RC male is unskilled and overall, a RC middle-class exists.

Its size, however, seems to be largely a product of meeting the demands of a segregated society rather than through performing a more general role as does the Protestant middle-class," it said.

The report immediately irked KR Shemeld, a senior Stormont official who questioned the reliability of the 13 per cent figure for Catholics among "senior government officials".

Meanwhile, the minister of state for employment, Don Concannon, made it clear that he was "unhappy" with the FEA Report.

In the words of an official, Linda Wilkinson, on January 17 1978, "he feels it can do no good to raise yet again in the public eye questions of the religious division of workers".



THE widow of an English businessman murdered by the IRA as he left a west Belfast factory was given a payment of £20,000 by the company.

James Nicholson, a Yorkshire business executive, was shot dead on his way back to Belfast airport after a visit to the Strathearn Audio plant on March 14 1977.

At a meeting of Department of Commerce staff with the company's managing director, Gordon Smyth, on April 24 1978, the position of Mr Nicholson's widow was discussed.

Mr Smyth took the view that the company should make an ex-gratia payment to Mrs Nicholson but said he had been unable to get an agreement from the firm's directors.

It was noted that there was concern at the possible public reaction to a payment by Strathearn Audio in all the circumstances.

In the event it was agreed to make a special payment of £20,000 to the widow.

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