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cc: PS/Dr Mawhinney (B & L)
PS/Sir Kenneth Bloomfield
Mr Parkes
Mr Spence
Mr Martin
Mr Innes
Mr Daniell

1. PS/Mr Stanley (B & L)
2. PS/Secretary of State (B & L)

USE OF CONWAY MILL BY THE WORKERS EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION (WEA)

Purpose

1. The purpose of this submission is to seek the Secretary of State's agreement to the withholding of grant to the WEA in respect of its activities in the Conway Mill.

Background

2. Following my submission of 31 July 1987 (copy attached Annex A) it was agreed by Ministers that officials from DENI and Central Secretariat should discuss with the WEA their future use of the Conway Mill for education purposes. A meeting with WEA representatives took place on 15 September 1987 and they were advised that:-
 - (i) Government is not prepared to continue to grant-aid their activities in the Conway Mill;
 - (ii) grant-aid could continue if they re-located their activities outside the Mill;
and
 - (iii) if they decided to re-locate, they would be given every assistance to find suitable alternative premises.

The WEA representatives undertook to have the matter considered at the October meeting of the WEA District Council.

3. The District Secretary has now advised DENI (letter attached Annex B) that the District Council, whilst receptive to the concerns expressed by the Government's

CONFIDENTIAL

officials, has decided that, in the absence of specific evidence linking the Conway Centre to paramilitary interests and in accordance with the concept of the Association as an independent organisation free from political pressure, it will not cease its activities at the Mill.

Discussion

4. Ministers are aware of the background to the Conway Mill case which led to the decision by the Secretary of State that Government support should not be provided for activities at the Mill. For security reasons the nature of the information on which such decisions are based cannot be disclosed.
5. It is evident from the District Secretary's letter that the WEA Council believes that its independent status would be prejudiced if it decided to withdraw from the Mill at the request of the Government and in the absence of specific evidence of paramilitary connections. It would however be inconsistent for the Government to continue to support the WEA activities at the Mill while at the same time withholding grants from other groups.
6. DENI has offered the WEA financial support not exceeding £ [redacted] for the 1987/88 year. It is paid on a monthly basis and comprises [redacted] % of administration costs, [redacted] % of tutor costs, and represents approximately [redacted] % of the total WEA(NI) income. The support provided in respect of the Conway Mill activity amounts to around £1,500-£2,000 - the exact amount will not be known until the year end.

The DFP legal adviser has indicated that the DENI letter of offer [does not constitute a binding agreement and can be reduced as considered appropriate] [constitutes the basis of an agreement which, if broken could leave DENI open to a judicial review].

CONFIDENTIAL

7. To impose a financial penalty on the WEA, over and above the Conway Mill provision would be difficult to justify and could lead to WEA closures elsewhere with a resultant outcry that unrelated projects had been penalised because of the Government's stance on Conway Mill. It is probable however that if the withholding of Government support is limited to the Conway Mill activity the WEA would maintain such provision by switching resources from elsewhere within its total budget. Whilst such an outcome is not entirely satisfactory the Government will however have demonstrated that it has maintained a consistent approach to activities at the Mill.

Conclusion

8. The Secretary of State is asked to agree that:-

- (i) DENI funding in respect of WEA activities should be terminated [immediately] [as soon as practicable]; and
- (ii) DENI should write to the WEA District Secretary advising him of the decision.

NIGEL HAMILTON

CENTRAL SECRETARIAT

November 1987