

E. R.

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cc. Mr Gowdy

Mr Stutt

OR

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HCS/4/12

cc PS/SUS (B&L)
 PS/Ministers (B&L)
 PS/PUS (B&L)
 Mr Burns
 Mr Stephens
 NI Perm Secs
 Members of West Belfast Study
 Group

14/4
 M. Hain
 M. M. Keenan
 Mr Nelson.



WEST BELFAST

Note of Meeting held on Friday 1 April in Stormont Castle Conference Room

Present:

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield
 Dr Harbison (DFP)
 Mr Crozier (DED)
 Mr Spence (Cent Sec)
 Mr J McConnell (NIO)
 Mr Irvine (DOE)
 Mr Bill (Minutes)

Dr Hendron
 Mr Feeney
 Mr Maginnis
 Ms Cosgrove
 Mr Murphy
 Mr Reardon

Dr Hendron opened by explaining that Mr Hume had recently asked him to set up and chair an SDLP committee on West Belfast. Although this specific development was recent, Dr Hendron had for some time been interested in the regeneration of West Belfast and Sir Kenneth was aware of his correspondence with Mr Viggers and Mr Needham prior to Christmas 1987.

The young people of West Belfast were being led towards radicalism by PIRA. Moderates who could get out of the area which was fast becoming the Soweto of Northern Ireland. Dr Hendron said that many people (including it seemed the Secretary of State) felt there could be no military solution to the Northern Ireland problem. However PIRA influence could be undermined by social, economic and employment regeneration on a massive scale. He suggested that in the past West Belfast had been grossly neglected by Government - but recently he detected a feeling of goodwill towards the area. He referred to the work Government Departments were doing through local young priests, while expressing some concern about a possible by-passing of the only political figures capable of offering an alternative to Sinn Fein. He

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said that it would be useful to be kept generally in touch with what Government was trying to do through such contacts.

Mr Feeney said the most important thing the SDLP wanted from the meeting was a Government commitment to make "a socio-economic study of West Belfast" as a prelude to the implementation of a strategy of regeneration. The area to be studied should be that designated in the 1984 Greater Belfast Housing Strategy. Ghettoism had to be nipped in the bud. Mr Feeney then listed the kind of data that such a study would point up including demographic rates and trends, household income and expenditure, labour skills, management expertise and so on. He noted that only 1% in the area were social grouping ABC 1 illustrating the poverty of domestic leadership. The area lacked human infrastructure; teachers and shopkeepers left each night. There was nothing to stimulate the economy. He claimed that a massive injection of Government funds into such a marginal area would not cause inflation.

Sir Kenneth replied that he agreed with the broader geographical definition of "West Belfast". Sir Kenneth then made four more general points:-

- There was no complacency in Government about West Belfast. The severity of the social and economic problems facing many people in the area was recognised; but some of these problems also existed in other parts of the province.
- Whilst any initiatives should seek to improve the lot of people living in West Belfast, it had to be recognised that they could not (and indeed should not) be confined to that geographical area; it would also be important to see that West Belfast people could take advantage of opportunities in the wider BUA area.
- The core of the West Belfast problem was unemployment.
- Any attempted solution had to engage the goodwill of the community.

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Mr Feeney suggested that direct central government intervention was needed. The situation was unlike Carrickfergus, where there was local government support. Central government would have to establish an organisation to help West Belfast.

Sir Kenneth suggested that in addition to any public sector initiative it would also be important to identify and provide help for all the indigenous potential areas of growth such as enterprise companies and housing associations. There was no wish to impose from the top down. In responding to requests for support from organisations rooted in the community, Government might well have to be somewhat more flexible in the application of standard criteria. He had been impressed by the Belfast Action Team concept where Team leaders were readily accessible to the community.

Mr Reardon warned of the danger of relying overmuch on community initiatives - there were simply not enough ideas in the community.

Sir Kenneth reiterated the need to consider "stiffening" local enterprise corporations with professionals with relevant experience.

Mr Feeney called for a massive IDB/IDA package to attract the likes of IBM to West Belfast. Sir Kenneth said that inward investment might have a contribution to make, but it could be a mistake to place too much reliance upon it in current circumstances. Ms Cosgrove was concerned with the image portrayed in the media about West Belfast - which had a detrimental effect on outside investment.

Mr Maginnis was concerned that the BUA Plan did not envisage proceeding with the link between the Falls and Boucher Roads and the extension of the outer ring road at Monagh Road and Springfield Road. He was also concerned with the relative absence of shopping outlets in West Belfast. The area provided only 9% of the shops in the City despite providing 30% of the population. There were also complaints at the poor condition of the arterial road system in West Belfast. Mr Irvine referred to impending action on arterial routes; he also noted that the BUA Plan was to be subject to a public inquiry and therefore no roads had yet been "dropped". Whilst the recent trend had been towards centrally-based shopping the need for neighbourhood shopping could also be considered.

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Mr Reardon suggested that even if the re-energising of West Belfast was to be through a series of initiatives it was vital that a single body was seen to be pulling these initiatives together and asked Sir Kenneth whether there would be a strategic economic plan for West Belfast. Sir Kenneth said that the central issue was seen as that of employment; the best approach seemed to be an action programme or plan of identifiable and practical steps to bear upon that central issue.

Dr Hendron mentioned a fear that government monies through ACE schemes and so on continued to go to PIRA.

The SDLP delegation had no response to a request from Mr Crozier for specific ideas on how to promote employment quickly into the area, though Mr Feeney did point to the problems caused by lack of available factory space and the possibility of extending the Belfast Enterprise Zone was mentioned. The delegation agreed with a point made by Mr Spence about the disparities of performance amongst the area's schools. Dr Hendron explained that he had been following with interest developments in Great Britain particularly the "compact" scheme.

It was agreed that Sir Kenneth would write to Dr Hendron confirming the main points made at the meeting. Sir Kenneth emphasised that he and other officials would be glad to talk further, either individually or as a group to Dr Hendron and the members of his committee.

J.P. Bill
JP BILL

PS/Sir Kenneth Bloomfield

11 April 1988

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