

AT 504/94

FROM: E F JARDINE
PPRU - SSD

ASST/
SEC
18 JAN 1995
C.C.R.U.

405/1
Minister
16/1

Mr. Donovan

DATE: 12 JANUARY 1995

MR WILLIAMS

cc Mr Watkins
Mr Quinn

1. cc AS/Min. P.H.
Mr. G. G. G.
16.1 Mr. G. G. G.
2. Mr. G. G. G.

SECRETARIAT DINNER 11 JANUARY 1995

1. As discussed, I attended the dinner at Maryfield last night which was held to mark Minister Eithne Fitzgerald's visit to Belfast. Ms Fitzgerald was accompanied by Ms Julie O'Neill (Assistant Secretary in the Office of the Tanaiste) who, with Mr J Kearney DHSS, jointly chairs the IFI Communities in Action Steering Group. Other guests included Brian Feeney, Quintin Oliver, Inez McCormick, John Simpson and Vani Borooah.

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2. While over the course of the evening the discussion was wide-ranging, at the invitation of Mr O'Donovan a number of issues for more focussed discussion emerged. The Minister responded first by asking for views about the proposed university campus at Springvale. This topic generated considerable discussion amongst those present and a number of points emerged. Dr Feeney began by expressing serious reservations about the potential impact of the new campus on BIFE but concluded by supporting the concept while emphasising the importance he attached to actively involving all sections of the West Belfast community in its planning. He was particularly attracted to the proposition because of the potential it offered to the planners in terms of new access routes etc to radically alter the layout of the local area. There was general recognition that a Springvale campus would require to have some recognised centre(s) of excellence while also having the facility to admit students from non-traditional routes to undertake foundation and non-degree courses. Mr O'Donovan queried whether there was local popular support for the initiative; he had found himself curbing the enthusiasm of the former Taoiseach for the project on the basis that it would have been inappropriate to provide unqualified support for the project if local people did not favour it. Inez McCormick, who had chaired a conference on the proposed campus, felt that while there were unresolved questions about the likely impact of the initiative the proposal nevertheless enjoyed widespread local support. Ms O'Neill stressed the importance of providing opportunities for local communities to become actively engaged in the planning process rather than in some token consultation. Vani Borooah was particularly supportive of the proposal to site a UU campus in Springvale which he argued would provide a signal to business of Government's good faith in the potential of the locality as an area for investment.

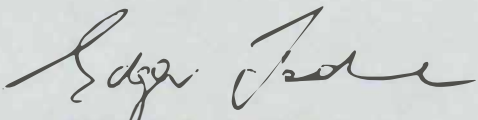
3. Ms O'Neill had a number of observations arising from visits to community groups during the course of the day. She noted a markedly less upbeat mood, particularly in Nationalist communities, from a previous visit in the late

Autumn. There was some evidence of disillusionment with what was perceived as the pedestrian pace of change since the cease-fire and frustration that the fruits of the peace dividend in terms of economic regeneration were slow to emerge. Among the continuing sources of frustration were issues of political vetting and the 'Hurd policy' on the funding of community groups. She also noted, interestingly, that community groups in the Shankill appeared to have made more progress in terms of planning strategically than did those in Catholic West Belfast. While the latter were much longer established they nevertheless tended to lack a coherent framework for their future development.

4. Quintin Oliver took the opportunity to laud the partnership approach to the allocation of Structural Funds in the South which he contrasted with what he perceived as a more central (less enlightened!) approach in Northern Ireland. On further probing I established that the contrast is perhaps not so real as it first appears. First, like other beneficiaries the South had of course to prepare and submit a centrally developed plan which required the approval of the Commission. Furthermore apparently the proportion of the resources which can be accessed by local community groups is a tiny fraction of available EU funding.

5. Finally, I had an interesting dialogue with Brian Feeney about how he saw the implications of the cease-fire, assuming it holds, for the SDLP/SF balance in future elections. He had two interesting observations. First he felt that in local elections the SDLP is likely to lose out on first preference votes as voters who were not prepared to vote for SF because of the violence might now find them a more palatable proposition. Second, for the first preference SDLP voters traditional resistance to transferring to SF was likely to diminish resulting in an aggregate increase in Nationalist representation at local council level. At the next General Election he thought that depending on the outcome of the Boundary Commission West Belfast was likely to revert to SF and that the historical practice of fielding two Nationalist candidates in mid-Ulster and Fermanagh and South Tyrone was unlikely to continue. In the event of continuing peace he thought it almost certain that an agreed Nationalist candidate would be identified in these constituencies although of course boundary changes might alter the picture radically.

6. I hope this is helpful and would be happy to elaborate.



EDGAR F JARDINE
Policy Planning and Research Unit
Statistics and Social Division