



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2017/4/47
Creation Dates:	16 April 1987
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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Meeting with Mr. Jackie Redpath, Editor of the
Shankill Bulletin

I met Mr. Redpath in Belfast on Thursday, 16 April following an approach by him through the American Ireland Fund requesting information on the operation of the International Fund for Ireland. Mr. Redpath produces and edits the Shankill Bulletin almost single-handed. He previously worked as a community worker for some years in West Belfast. The Bulletin is a monthly news-sheet which sells around 5,500 copies and in Redpath's words almost every second house in the Shankill area buys a copy of the paper. The Bulletin's main coverage is of local community affairs but it also covers political issues and has adopted a highly independent editorial line.

Redpath was interested in the mechanisms which apply to the International Fund and asked if local community organisations could apply for assistance. I outlined to him the procedures which govern the operation of the Fund and how applications are assessed by the Board. Redpath is personally in favour of community groups in the Shankill applying for assistance and is highly critical of the boycott of the Fund called for by Unionist politicians. He referred to the old Loyalist slogan that they would always take "money from the Pope" and stated semi-humorously that now such a chance exists and it is time for Loyalists to put words into action. Redpath was of the opinion that the Shankill area is showing signs of revitalisation especially at the small enterprise level. He feels that local enterprise could particularly be harnessed through community enterprise groups with assistance from the Fund. He added that the recent announced lay-offs of over 500 workers from Harland & Wolff will affect the area considerably but that, on the positive side, certain of the highly skilled people who will be laid off could be encouraged into local initiatives given the right direction and guidance.

Redpath was critical of the RUC handling of the Marley funeral and feels that the Provos were handed a propaganda coup. While the strong arm tactics of the RUC were initially greeted with delight in the Shankill, Redpath quipped that it was the perfect backdrop from the RUC to "bash Prods over the head" should trouble arise over Easter at the Apprentice Boys' march in Portadown. Redpath drew a parallel with the RUC use of plastic bullets in the Shankill three days after the accidental killing of Sean Downes in the Falls following the appearance of Noraid's Martin Galvin. The RUC in their "even-handed approach" had turned their frustration on their own and he felt that a similar backlash could happen in the handling of parades over the marching season.

On the political level, Redpath is of the view that never before has the standing of Unionist politicians been so low in Northern Ireland. He is convinced that the Unionist campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement and its wholly negative effects have demoralised the Protestant population across the board at a time when the economic plight of Northern Ireland is worsening. He said that the sterile antics adopted by Paisley and Molyneaux have been counter-productive and the boycott on Westminster has only added to the sense of isolation being felt by the ordinary man in the street. Redpath sees the collapse of the 'day of defiance' as a water-shed because of the failure to attract widespread support. In the Shankill area no protests took place except for some trouble on the Saturday night and this was totally unconnected with the 'day of defiance'. Redpath feels that the only group to have survived unscathed over the last eighteen months are the UDA - their Common Sense document has given them a pragmatic profile in the Protestant community since it at least suggested a way forward out of the current impasse as opposed to the negative positions being pursued by Unionist politicians. He commented that Paisley and Molyneaux must feel insecure and threatened by the ground-swell in favour of the Common Sense document and the slick marketing of the document by John McMichael of the UDA. He said that McMichael has, through the "campaign for

progressive democracy - Ulster says yes to democracy", brought the message of the Common Sense document to many Loyalist groupings throughout Belfast.

Redpath in the latest edition of the Bulletin has written a stinging editorial on the lack of leadership from Unionist politicians and said that politicians should provide "leadership with big minds rather than big mouths, leadership with constructive ideas for our future, not negative sectarian rantings about the past". Redpath feels that this editorial line was well received on the door-step and did not receive criticism other than from active politicians.

The Bulletin has also taken an active interest in the missing Belfast man, Brian Keenan. Keenan was evidently well known in the Shankill as a community worker and was known to be somewhat of a character. The Bulletin reported in the last edition that the Irish Ambassador in Beirut had made a special plea on Keenan's behalf and stated that Keenan's Irish passport was thought to be possibly his best chance of survival.

Redpath throughout our conversation was at pains to stress that while there was little chance of the Agreement being accepted by the "Protestant people of Ulster" there was a real gap between what was being demanded by Unionist politicians and what was acceptable on the ground. He feels however that the recently stepped up Provo campaign is a God-send to the likes of Paisley and that the increased level of violence and the threat of sectarian attacks can only have the effect of papering over cracks in the fragile consensus in Unionist ranks.

Brendan Scannell

Brendan Scannell,
24 April, 1987.

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