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Reference Code:	2018/28/2268
Creation Dates:	7 December 1988
Extent and medium:	9 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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WEST BELFAST

When I was in West Belfast recently I spent some time meeting with a variety of people who are trying to improve the socio-economic conditions of the area. The following is a very broad outline of the issues that arose and of the impression which I formed on that occasion.

General

West Belfast has the single greatest concentration of nationalists in Northern Ireland. Because of its social and economic deprivation, it has been characterised as a ghetto. Because of its position at the vanguard of nationalist unrest and civil disruption, it has earned itself the sobriquet the "cockpit of the North". Many there suspect that its continued neglect, most recently evident in the Belfast Urban Area Plan, is the product of deliberate prejudice against nationalists. It is seen as the most graphic exhibit of the failure of Stormont, and to a lesser extent Westminster, to accommodate nationalist socio-economic concerns. The thinking within the NIO, quite often expressed by John McConnell, that the numbers supporting Sinn Fein/PIRA there are irreducible, may partly account for the neglect shown to the area by the Northern authorities.

There are two fundamental reasons why a concerted initiative to rectify the socio-economic problems of West Belfast should be undertaken:

- even as a problem within a normal society, the scale of its social and economic problems makes it deserving of the highest priority;
- because of its special relevance as a symbol of the treatment meted out to nationalists in the North, its continued neglect would tend to diminish over time the

credibility of the role assumed by the Irish Government in the Anglo-Irish process as guarantor of nationalist interests. Conversely, some success towards remedying the problems would provide the most tangible evidence of the beneficial influence wielded by the Irish Government. It would, furthermore, stand as proof that constitutional nationalism, rather than "the ballot box and the bomb", produces positive results.

Political

West Belfast returns Sinn Fein's only MP, Gerry Adams. His margin, given the bleak economic environment of the constituency, is slim enough. The SDLP's Joe Hendron came within 2,200 votes of Adams' 16,832 with 14,641 in the 1987 Westminster election, which represented an improvement of 3,707 on 1983. Hendron's failure to take even half of Gerry Fitt's 1983 vote was a disappointment, though given the absence of an effective SDLP presence in the constituency for any significant length of time (other than before an impending election) this was hardly surprising. The SDLP, it is reckoned, need to bring out about 3,000 of those who did not vote in 1987 if they are to have a chance of winning in the next Westminster elections. This highlights two important points; that the SDLP have to apply themselves vigorously to the local needs of West Belfast, and that the seat is winnable. It is hard to over-state the significance of an SDLP seat in West Belfast. As an electoral objective for constitutional nationalists, there is little to equal it .

At council level, the SDLP hold 3 West Belfast seats (2 Upper Falls, 1 Lower) on Belfast City Council. Sinn Fein have 7 (3 Upper Falls, 4 Lower). The SDLP believe they can win 2 more seats (i.e., those formerly held by Will and Pip Glendenning) in the 1989 General Council election. They may be able to take Upper Falls but would be unlikely to gain ground in Lower Falls, which remains a Sinn Fein stronghold.

Consideration of the political features of West Belfast necessarily involves the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Because of the economically depressed nature of the area, coupled with the particular atmosphere engendered by security operations there, the Agreement has had less effect here than elsewhere. For the Agreement to acquire greater credibility, it would have to be seen

- to reduce the level of harassment from the security forces;
- to result in more employment.

Security: The level of harassment serves to breed the very hostility which sours relations between the community and the security forces. The British Army, who patrol the area, are the subject of particularly strong criticism from time to time, especially the Royal Marines during last summer. (However, the Army's behaviour has been much better of late.) The RUC are also considered actively hostile, especially towards local youths. While the UDR do not patrol within West Belfast, complaints are often received from local residents and the SDLP about UDR unaccompanied patrols who stop and harass nationalists on the access roads to and from West Belfast, especially when people are going to or coming from work. The situation is not helped by the persistent failure of the RUC to pursue "normal" policing. Their failure to respond to ordinary calls from the public, while one can understand the reluctance because of the security risk to the policemen, leads not only to antipathy but allows the PIRA to assume the role of enforcer of local law and order, thereby adding to Sinn Fein's credibility at street level. The onus clearly lies with the security forces to remedy actively this situation, if this "catch 22" is to be broken. The most obvious and readily undertaken move in this regard would be a greater receptiveness to representations from the SDLP, both directly and via the Conference.

Economy: This raises the question of the limited impact of the International Fund thus far. The Fund, the SDLP point out, is directly linked in the public mind to the Agreement and thus its

effect, or otherwise, is seen as a reflection of constitutional nationalism's ability to deliver. A high profile operation by the Fund would greatly aid constitutional nationalism's credibility. Less stringent requirements in allocating grants have been urged by the SDLP. Indeed, there had been an initial assumption that a primary objective for the Fund was the weaning of nationalists from support for Sinn Fein through the financial sponsoring of economic regeneration in areas like West Belfast. There was an assumption, as Dr. Joe Hendron pointed out, that because unemployment was one-eighth of the Northern Ireland total, at least one-eighth of the Fund's resources would be allocated there. There are currently only a small number of projects being considered favourably by the Fund - Townsend Enterprise, Westlink, West Belfast Development Trust and Farset. The latter is a Unionist project already in operation. The other projects are not expected to produce more than 100 immediate jobs.

Sinn Fein

The bedrock of Sinn Fein support is socio-economic deprivation. The worst unemployment blackspots of Turf Lodge, Ballymurphy, New Barnsley and Springhill are also the areas of staunchest support for Sinn Fein. The Sinn Fein influence extends to many areas of normal life. Their drinking clubs provide the only bars in the area. Their advice centres help people claim social welfare benefit; even the SDLP admit they have learned a trick or two from them. They are effective in getting the Housing Executive to allocate houses to applicants coming to them. The public are aware that in many areas few if any developments (housing etc.) can go ahead without their prior approval. And, as already mentioned, they represent a source of rough justice against local "hoods" - joy-riders; petty criminals and others displaying anti-social behaviour.

The PIKA are also heavily involved in protection rackets. The following is an account I received from a site engineer for

Laings who managed building projects on the Falls and Shankill Roads:

The PIRA collects "protection" money from every building firm working in their area in West Belfast. The UDA collect in Shankill. All contracts are costed by builders with the "protection fees" included and the clients, usually the Housing Executive, are aware of them. The PIRA also collect "donations" from each individual worker on pay day in some sites, especially in the Ardoyne. In "neutral" territory the PIRA or UDA gives the other side a share of "the take". Builders who refuse are either threatened until they pay, have their equipment destroyed or their workers shot at. Nobody will come forward to give evidence in court and the police on the beat advise builders to pay up. The RUC have yet to indicate that they intend to commit the necessary resources to end protection rackets.

Industry: The "economy" of West Belfast is largely determined by its lack of industry. When Stormont was locating people (nationalists) to West Belfast, no provision was made for the siting of any industry there. (Indeed, the unionist establishment prevented Rothman Carreras from setting up their factory there at that time and were quite open in demanding that the firm should locate in a loyalist area.)

At present there is no industrial estate within easy reach of Lower Falls. Boucher Road is across the expressway and people using public transport or walking to work in this area have to pass through a hardline loyalist area ("the Village"), where in the past a number of Catholics have been murdered. Moreover, most of the businesses at present located there are not manufacturing industries but wholesale distributors or warehousing.

The Kennedy Industrial Estate is the only industrial area in Upper Falls. In the proposed Belfast Urban Area Plan more space is allocated adjacent to the estate. However, at present most

of this land is an undeveloped marsh and has not been laid out for industrial use. The old estate is small (the main factory is General Motors Fisher Body) and there is only one open space there at present.

There is a proposal to locate industrial space in Poleglass or Twinbrook which is the new westward extension of West Belfast. The present Kilwee industrial estate is not only small but full. Space is available in Glen Wood industrial estate in Poleglass. This is the only area in West Belfast where sites are now developed and waiting for factories. Fr. McWilliams is successfully running incubator units in the only building at present located on the Glen Wood site.

Belfast Urban Area Plan

The Belfast Urban Area Plan provides very little real hope for West Belfast. When officers from the Secretariat and H.Q. spoke to officials of the Northern Ireland Department of the Environment who were preparing the plan, we were told that there was little open space in West Belfast to provide for the much needed industry and housing. The plan, the Department of the Environment argue, offers West Belfast residents job opportunities in the proposed revitalisation of the city centre. There are no statistics on what percentage of the work force in the city centre come from West Belfast. It is, however, believed that these numbers are small; there is, therefore, no reason to assume the proportion will increase after the envisaged influx of new businesses. In other words, there can be little validity in the Department of the Environment's claim.

The Department of the Environment do not pretend that the Lagan development will provide any opportunities for West Belfast. This tilt eastwards in the Belfast Urban Area Plan's proposed amenities is most glaring when one considers the need for adequate shopping in Upper Falls where people would not only

have ready access but which would also provide many badly needed jobs in the area. At present people are compelled to go outside the area to shop.

In short, the Belfast Urban Area Plan confirms the official neglect of West Belfast. If the Plan is implemented as is, this neglect will become official policy and West Belfast's position as the nationalist ghetto of the North will be ensured until the year 2001, the outer limit of the Belfast Urban Area Plan's horizon.

Education

Although as much as 40% of Belfast youth live in West Belfast there is at present no college of further education located there. Of the three colleges in Belfast 2 are located in loyalist areas; the other in the city centre. The N.I. Department of Education admit that another college is needed and after some years of hesitation they have now apparently agreed to locate the 4th college in West Belfast. St. Thomas' Catholic secondary school, off the Whiterock Road, which is to be amalgamated into another local secondary school is expected to serve as the building for the new college. It is not yet known what will be taught at this college but it is hoped that they will include high-tech subjects.

There is also a great need for a Government Training Centre somewhere in West Belfast. At present the training centre in Boucher Road is designated to accept trainees from West Belfast. However, as mentioned elsewhere in this report this is outside West Belfast in loyalist territory and many nationalists will not go there. In addition, the skills taught there are for sun-set industries (building, sewing, etc.) rather than sun-rise industries like computers and other high-tech subjects.

Suggestions:

- Security:
- that there be a major review of security operations with a view to minimising the incidents of harassment;
 - that there be an effort made by the RUC to answer requests for help from the area;
 - that the SDLP be given direct access to named and high-ranking officers to whom representations can be made.

- The Fund:
- that a special allocation to West Belfast be made, with a search out and support policy being pursued vis à vis projects and a less rigorous application of the commercial criteria.

- BUAP:
- that the plan should contain the inclusion of a properly developed site for industry, of a shopping complex, and of a training and cultural centre in West Belfast.

Industrial

- Development:
- that West Belfast be designated as a special area for immediate industrial development.

Education:

- that the proposed fourth college for further education should go ahead quickly and that it should teach high-tech, modern science and technology subjects.
- that a Job Training Centre be established in West Belfast which would teach skills required for sun-rise industries.

A Special
Package:

the announcement of a special package could set the appropriate atmosphere politically and officially for the proper fulfillment of the

objective to raise West Belfast from its social and economic malaise. It could take the form of a special project for the area with announced support from the Fund and a readjustment of the BUAP.



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7 December 1987

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