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BRIEFING ON BRITISH PROPOSALS FOR WEST BELFAST

Venue: Maryfield

Date: 23/3/1988

PARTICIPANTS

Irish Side

Mr. T. Corcoran DFA
Mr. B. Lyons DFA
Mr. L. Canniffe DFA
Mr. M. Hoey, DFA

British Side

Mr. R. Spence, Central Secretariat
Mr. J. Crozier, DED
Dr. J. Harbinson, D.F.P.
Mr. J. Irvine, DOE

Secretariat

Mr. S. O'hUiginn	Mr. Oliver Miles
Mr. P. Collins	Mr. R. Masefield
Mr. P. Scullion	Ms. V. Steele

1. Mr. O'hUiginn thanked all those present for attending and said that the large number of officials was obviously indicative of the interest and importance placed by both sides on the need to tackle, in a positive way, the challenging social and economic problems which exist in West Belfast. He said that the Irish side were there to listen to what he hoped would be a presentation of the general approach the British Government proposed to adopt in its effort to remedy the situation in West Belfast. He stressed that it was important to find a workable solution for West Belfast particularly in the context of the perception of the Agreement among the Nationalist community there.

2. Mr. Spence said that he regarded today's meeting as the first of many between officials in an effort to find a suitable formula for tackling the challenging problems of West Belfast. He argued that a great deal of work had already been done in West Belfast over the last twenty years but that their

Access had to be measured against the background of an area with the highest concentration of social and economic problems in Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein and the PIRA had contributed in no small way to the ghettoisation of West Belfast and this factor, coupled with the high rate of unemployment there and the consequential social and economic problems which had emerged, was instrumental in persuading the Secretary of State of the need for an immediate and speedy study of the West Belfast problem. The study, which he described as an inhouse study by officials with very limited outside contact, commenced before Christmas 1987. They hope to be in a position to present the report to the Secretary of State in April. (For the purpose of the study, they defined West Belfast as stretching from the Ardoyne to Poleglass.)

Mr. Spence then proceeded to list some of the main factors which had contributed over the years to the present level of social and economic problems in West Belfast. He said that Catholic West Belfast has a growing population of which a high percentage are under the age of 15 years. There is a high dependence on public housing, although direct action by the Housing Executive since the early 70's has left West Belfast with the lowest level of unfit housing in Northern Ireland. Unemployment is high with a consequential high level of dependancy on State aid. There is a lack of business skills on offer to prospective employers due to the poor attainment levels of pupils in schools. He believes that the problems of West Belfast cannot be solved in West Belfast and that the solution may come from the rest of the city. In the light of all these factors a number of ideas were emerging from their inhouse study. They were sceptical about "grand gestures" such as the setting up of (a) a West Belfast Integrated Development plan, or (b) a West Belfast Development Agency since such an agency would directly cut across the work of existing agencies - LEDU etc and would, they believe, only serve to confuse matters further.

They were, therefore, turning their ideas to a practical programme of action in defined key areas such as training and employment. They accepted the urgent need to create new employment in West Belfast even though it is at present receiving the top rate of Government assistance for new jobs. They are satisfied that the IDB is doing as much as it can to attract investment and industry into the area but understand the reality that the Private Sector is unwilling to invest in West Belfast because, by and large, it is viewed as a commercially problematic location. They see merit therefore in the twin

back approach of using the existing local enterprise agencies to try and create new employment in the area while at the same time equipping the West Belfast youth with the skills necessary to gain employment in the city centre. They also propose to examine existing Government operations in West Belfast, specifically the Belfast Action Teams. Two such teams are in operation in the Belfast area at the moment and it is proposed to set up further teams in Belfast as early as resources will permit. Finally they are examining how best to build on local enterprises with specific reference to the West Belfast Enterprise Board which they view as having potential for development.

Mr. Spence then asked for the Irish side's reaction to the initial proposals outlined so that they could take account of our position before submitting their report to the Secretary of State next month.

3. Mr. O hUiginn responded that while there could be broad agreement between both sides on the scope of the problems in West Belfast the Irish side were aware of specific areas of neglect which needed urgent and immediate action. He asked Mr. Canniffe to outline the problems he had encountered during his direct contact with the community and political leaders in West Belfast.

4. Mr. Canniffe said the main areas of concern to the nationalist community relate to education and training which they see as a first step in the process of reducing the high level of unemployment there. With regard to educational matters Mr. Spence confirmed that work on the provision of a fourth College of Further Education for Northern Ireland, to be located in West Belfast, is well under way. With regard to training Mr. Canniffe said that the Boucher Road centre, which serves West Belfast, is located across the expressway and people using public transport or walking to the centre have to pass through a hardline loyalist area. A further criticism of the centre is that the skills taught there are for sun-set industries (building, sewing etc.) rather than sunrise industries such as computer and other high technology subjects. He asked if there were any plans for extending or improving the centre. He went on to say that the employment record of industry located in West Belfast could be improved. He had in mind the Shorts factory in Dunmurray which should now be increasing its workforce since the industrial dispute which dogged the plant since it opened is over. The Sirocco plant seemed to recruit from the Dundonald Training Centre rather than Boucher Road. He spoke positively of

The Action Teams already operating in the Lower Falls/Shankill area and said that further expansion of the teams would indeed be helpful and most welcome.

5. Mr. O'hUiginn then suggested that perhaps the discussion should address three problems (a) planning (in particular the Belfast area plan; (b) training and education; and (c) employment both as regards existing industry and, most important of all, the provision of new employment. He said that the BUAP condemns West Belfast to a more or less dormitory role without the development of infrastructure.

He also asked the British side to sketch their position on the WBEB, Phoenix Trust and the other voluntary and Government agencies operating in the area, in particular the likelihood of funding for these bodies. In relation to training he asked if their response could take on board the location and curriculum factors outlined by Mr. Canniffe and if they could indicate future budgeting and financing strategies in this area.

6. Mr. Irvine explained that the creation of employment in the retail industry is private sector led and that Government stimulus for development in that area is provided through the Urban Development Grant Scheme the leverage from which, at the moment, is in the ratio 4 : 1 (i.e. a sum invested by the Government by way of a UDG is expected to yield private sector investment of four times that amount). However in reality private sector investment will only take place where there is a better than even chance of maximising profits. For that reason and also because it is seen as neutral territory in planning terms, and is accessible to the public at large, the retail industry is located mostly in the city centre.

He went on to explain that the BUAP is a land use strategy aimed at creating a framework for future development. He accepted that there is a need to provide more land for both public and private housing in West Belfast. He said the demand for private sector housing in West Belfast is on the increase. (This, he said, was evidenced when the Housing Executive decided to sell off some of its stock to private ownership and one Building Society set up a new office in West Belfast to service the demands for mortgages there.)

He then referred to the Poleglass, Kennedy Way, Boucher Road and De Lorean sites which had been zoned for commercial use and explained that it was proposed to set up three enterprise zones (i.e. simplified planning zones which enjoy certain planning freedoms and are intended to stimulate development in certain identified areas) in West Belfast.

Mr. O'hUiginn asked if the British side could indicate the factors underlying the huge demands for private housing in the area. Mr. Irvine put it down to the good quality of the product, the visual attraction of West Belfast, the fact that people born in the area tend to settle there and that historically it was the reverse of a trend where very few residents purchased their own houses. It was also possible that the statistics reflects the very low starting base for private ownership. In reply to a question from Mr. Holohan he said that there is an ever increasing demand for new sites and that this is one factor which has led to a provision in the BUAP to extend the West Belfast stop line. Mr. Lyons said that this shortage of land is at the root of the problem in West Belfast because it has created competition between the various sectors i.e. housing, industry and recreational for any land that comes on stream. He asked if, in the context of the BUAP, they had considered implementing a detailed local district plan for the area. Mr. Irvine responded that they saw inherent danger in going down that particular road because they believe that it is essential that West Belfast be treated as part of Belfast city and not as a separate entity.

7. Mr. Canniffe referred to this competition for land between the housing and industry sectors in West Belfast. Sites there are being zoned for housing development, to the detriment of industrial development and this could only auger badly for levels of employment. Mr. Irvine said that they had recognised the problems in relation to the high concentration of housing in the area and in the need for further housing and had provided for this in the BUAP by extending the stop line. He believed that they had got the balance between the land zoned for housing, recreation and industry right but accepted that the forthcoming public enquiry into the BUAP could prove them wrong. If this happens they will of course amend the plan.

8. Mr. O'hUiginn said there was a danger that the plan, which implied a low level of industrial activity, could be come a self fulfilling prophecy. He

suggested that if space could be allocated for industrial development there could be real inroads made into the problems which exist in locating commercial developments in West Belfast. Dr. Harbison replied that many of the residents of West Belfast work in the city centre, or beyond the Poleglass limit, in Lisburn. For these reasons their strategy is directed at developing industry in the city centre and greater West Belfast areas. Mr. Canniffe said that 33% of the population in West Belfast is unemployed and he asked if statistics could be made available to indicate the percentage of the West Belfast residents working in the city centre. He went on to say that in his experience young people from West Belfast will travel outside their environment in search of work but that a West Belfast address often directly affects their prospects of success.

9. Mr. O'hUiginn then turned to the question of training. He said that training though very important it itself could not be viewed in isolation, but as a stepping stone towards securing employment. . The kernal of the problem in West Belfast was the absence of employment possibilities. Mr. Lyons agreed with Mr. O'hUiginn that one of the major problems with training in West Belfast is the rate of success in placing people in employment when the training is completed. He wondered if the idea of interaction between schools and local industry, which operates in the UK and the US, could be developed in West Belfast. Mr. Crozier said that he would explore the possibility of industry playing a greater role than hitherto. In relation to the live register of unemployed he said the rate of youth unemployment (i.e. under 18) is relatively low because of the Youth Training Programmes available. The figure however rises in relation to the 18-24 age group because these are regarded as adults and are not catered for in the same way as school leavers. He went on to explain that since the centre in the Whitrock area was burned down training for West Belfast has been consolidated in the Boucher Road centre. In addition there are nine Y.T.P. Community workshops, an Attachment Training Scheme and a Development Job Training Programme operating in West Belfast. The objectives in relation to training were to identify the key areas for investment and to determine the skills required for the future. They were always ready to adapt existing programmes to meet these needs but are not convinced that they can be achieved by the provision of more training facilities. (He conceded that they would be willing to consider an objective case for a further training centre for West Belfast if it could be shown that one is warranted.) They tried as far as

ossible to lay the emphasis on training which will provide the skills necessary to develop ongoing businesses in West Belfast and neighbouring areas. In this regard they fully supported the use of outreach training measures for specific projects. In relation to the development of job training programmes they were thinking along the lines of Fowler's White Paper in Great Britain. He went on to say that they have certain misgivings about the quality of training provided by the Y.T.P. Community workshops. These are funded by the Government but are run by the community. They tend to confine themselves to personal development i.e. literacy and job motivation rather than specific skills. Their placement records vary from about 25% in the Lower Falls area to nearly 60%, which is the national average, in other areas of West Belfast. West Belfast also has its share of ACE programmes which, although short term employers, are seen as a positive community aid. The area also has four functioning local enterprise groups.

Mr. Canniffe said that he accepted that the ACE schemes had their usefulness but that in many instances unemployed youths in West Belfast returned to the ACE schemes a number of times because they could not find employment. Mr. Crozier accepted this but said he took the subjective view that the ACE schemes had important long term effects in that they helped to maintain the basic fabric of society in areas of high unemployment. He went on to talk about QUEST, an Information Technology Training Centre, which, he said, was deliberately set up in the city centre to entice a mix from both communities. It has a 50/50 mix and 80% of the Catholics come from West Belfast.

10. Mr. Crozier then referred to the proposals put to the Government recently by the West Belfast Enterprise Board (WBEB) for financial support. (The WBEB has also submitted its proposals to the International Fund for Ireland for consideration of financial support and the Fund's West Belfast Task Group has already discussed the Fund's role in possible economic development initiatives with the WBEB, and other local groups. The report of the Fund's Task Force was due to be discussed at a meeting of the Fund's Advisory Committee shortly.)

The general aims of the WBEB, as set out in their terms of reference, are:
"... to develop proposals for the employment and training of unemployed persons in the West Belfast area, having regard to their economic viability, feasibility and their potential contribution to the economic development of

the area. To assess the costs of the implementation of such proposals and to advise on how they might best be organised, funded and accommodated". Their initial request is for funds to provide a premises in West Belfast (the American Monitor factory in Kennedy Way) and to assist with their ongoing development costs (i.e. staff etc) over a five year period. In addition to providing accommodation and administrative space for WBEB it is proposed to use the vacant factory to:

- (a) establish a 'high tech' (computer software) training centre, eventually to undertake the development of software projects for established software houses and for sale on the open market;
- (b) establish a training centre for the disabled;
- (c) develop a supportive environment within the centre for small businesses;
- (d) set up an Open Learning centre;
- (e) provide a degree of private sector occupancy.

The Board sees the development of an 'economic hub' from which more economic activity will be generated throughout the area as being essential. The economic functional area is sub-divided into (a) Enterprise Development and (b) Training for Jobs. The Board will develop and provide business training in conjunction with NISBI for all LEP schemes in the area.

In conjunction with LEDU, IDB, the Universities and the Private Sector, research will be carried out to find market product and service gaps. Any research already to hand will be made available to WBEB. Use will be made of consultants to assess the commercial viability of producing products and providing services for which there is an unfilled market demand.

Initial research will be carried out on the viability of the following projects for which an unfilled market demand has already been identified.

- (i) Circuit board manufacture
- (ii) Software engineering
- (iii) Pharmaceutical manufacture
- (iv) Food processing for export.

If these or other projects prove to be viable then WBEB will set up its own companies, partnerships or joint ventures to manufacture or provide products and will encourage other companies to set up production facilities within the area. Use will be made of agencies such as LEDU and IDB to ensure that commercial viability is possible within a reasonable time scale.

Mr. Crozier explained that the WBEB is a close community and church orientated group with the object of creating new jobs in the area. Four consultancy exercises were funded by the Government which indicates that they take the WBEB seriously. The Board has submitted ambitious proposals which they intend to evaluate with the assistance of LEDU. Mr. O'hUiginn asked if they could indicate the likelihood of the WBEB's proposals acquiring the necessary Government funding. Mr. Crozier replied that there was an element of risk and projects would have to have a reasonable prospect of success. The specific projects which were eventually approved would determine the overall budgetary allocation and on that aspect they would be guided by LEDU's eventual recommendations. Mr. Lyons referred to the fact that initially the WBEB only provides for a framework and wondered if that would militate against it receiving financial support from the Government. Mr. Crozier assured him that they could agree in principle to support the Board but that he could not give a carte blanche commitment until the proposals had been fleshed out more. Their view of the WBEB is of an agent creating projects which Government agencies such as the IDB could support. Mr. Spence said that they were convinced that the solution lay in existing rather than new structures and that there was no need therefore to alter these. Mr. Canniffe pointed out that they would find it difficult to do anything in West Belfast without the support of the WBEB. Mr. Spence accepted this and explained that it was not their intention to reject the WBEB proposals but to build on them using existing structures. In reply to a question from Mr. Holohan about the desirability of other local enterprise boards joining forces with the WBEB Mr. Spence said that they believed this was already happening between the Phoenix Trust and the WBEB although, as he understood it, they were anxious to avoid any political tags. Mr. Canniffe said that he believed there is broad consensus that all the enterprise boards will work together. Again, in reply to a question from Mr. Holohan, Mr. Crozier said that the Government would be prepared to examine viable projects put forward by the Phoenix Trust even if

It did not come under the WBEB's umbrella. Mr. Canniffe asked that they make that position known to Phoenix Trust.

11. Mr. Irvine then turned to their expansion proposals in relation to the Belfast Action teams which were set up by the Department of Environment to improve co-ordination to areas of special need in Belfast. He explained that the action teams are small high powered teams of officials with a budget of £¹/₂ million each, which is in addition to what is already available by way of Government grants etc. They deal with areas of population in the region of 10,000 and have the overall objective, by working from the bottom up with the statutory agencies and the community, to secure employment, improve training opportunities and enhance the environment. Two Action teams were set up in 1987 and are operating in the Lower Falls/Lower Shankill area and the New Lodge/Duncairn area. Two more are expected to become operational in April 1988 and two more in 1989/90.

They are encouraged by the successes to date of the two Action teams already operating in Belfast. Reports indicate that they are energising the local community groups and in the first six months of their operation have helped to build up the confidence and self-esteem of the communities they deal with. There are a number of options for extending the present programme and in this context they are proposing to expand both the geographical areas and population which the new teams will cover by about 40%. He said the next likely candidate for an Action Team is the Whiterock/Turf Lodge/Springmount area which is predominantly Catholic. They then propose to set up Actions Teams to cover the following areas: Riverside area of East Belfast which would incorporate the Markets, Short Strand area etc; the Woodvale area; the Ardoyne area; and then the Beechmount area, although no time scale was given for the Beechmount area. Mr Irvine said in reply to a question from Mr Holohan that the Action Teams would comprise of units of staff from the various Government Departments and the statutory bodies such as LEDU.

Mr. O hUiginn said that while the BATs were an encouraging development in themselves they had limited resources with which to tackle the major problems in West Belfast. Mr. Spence said that he accepted that many curcial problems remained to be tackled and suggested that further discussion at official level should take place, probably in April, after the matter had been discussed with the Secretary of State.

Mr. O hUigin thanked the British side for their briefing and summarised the main points of the exchange of views as follows:

(1) Environmental matters in the context of the BUAP

There are serious concerns within the community in West Belfast, that there is a lack of emphasis on economic and social development of their area in the Plan. The forthcoming public enquiry would no doubt bring these concerns to the fore and allow them to be aired and examined.

(2) Training

There are problems relating to the location of the Boucher Road Training Centre and to the type of courses, described as 'sun set' courses, which are being taught there. There is a need to examine further the problem of access and of the patterns of courses available at Boucher Road, and the provision of training and technical education in West Belfast in general.

(3) Employment

It is agreed there are enormous unemployment problems in the area. The area therefore needs major special measures, together with the development of local enterprises, to overcome the lack of employment possibilities there.

(4) Belfast Action Teams

The proposed expansion of the Action Teams is welcome.

(5) Comprehensive Action Plan

The Comprehensive Action Plan for West Belfast which the British side would be putting forward to the SOS in April should not only look at the scope of the problems in West Belfast but should also

seek to put forward viable solutions to these intractable economic and social problems. The Irish side would find it helpful to return to the topic when the British side had clarified their thinking on this.

On a parting note, Mr. Spence said that they had been disappointed by the SDLP attitude to date to their proposals and ideas for West Belfast. They had written to Joe Hendron on 26 January but had not yet received an acknowledgement or reply.

P. Scullion

23 March 1988