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West Belfast

Meeting with Fr. Sean Connolly, Divis Flats, Belfast,
20 April 1988

On the recent succession of events of Gibraltar, he reflected the generally depressed and dispondent mood of many of the people in West Belfast and spoke at length of "a sense of shame" among the older people in the area.

He had been one of the group of West Belfast clergy invited to meet with NIO Minister Brian Mawhinney on 22 March. At the meeting he echoed the usual sentiments regarding the policing (or rather the non-policing) of West Belfast. He is particularly vehement on this point that the vulnerable members of the community - particularly local pensioners etc. have no protection against local hooliganism which is at a very high level indeed. The RUC's only interest is in paramilitary crime. Ordinary crime they either ignore or use as a lever for getting information on the paramilitaries. He also feels that the RUC rarely if ever listen to the advice of local clergy. He pointed as an example to the welcome development whereby the RUC and Army no longer patrol ostentatiously through the Divis Flats area. While they had been urging the cessation of such pointless patrols, he felt the real factor in their mind in doing so was the likelihood that the patrols were proving far too vulnerable to IRA grenade attacks from the balconies of the flats and not the advice of local clergy.

Army activity in West Belfast had deteriorated with the arrival of the Royal Scots Regiment. Even before Gibraltar, there had been an alarming rise in complaints from local women of being stopped and hassled on their way to and from the shops or bringing their children to and from schools. He commented that there had been no increase in complaints from male parishioners. He put this down to the fact that they are always subject to such harassment.

Interestingly enough, he mentioned that a further dinner in Stormont has been scheduled by Mawhinney for next Tuesday. He understands that a number of additional civil servants will be attending the next dinner - including the key civil servants involved with West Belfast. He suspects that the occasion may be used to inform them of some ideas which they may have for increased British investment in the area. On this point, he thought that there was some sympathy at political level for the plight of West Belfast but that the civil

service (particularly at middle level) continued to be hostile. He thought that the political level could only be as good as its information and his own impression is that they appear to have been fed erroneous and distorted information. He was particularly taken aback by Mawhinney's belief (which appeared to be strongly held) that local clergy and Sinn Fein held regular consultations. Fr. Connolly is particularly hostile to Sinn Fein and makes a point of having little or nothing to do with them in public though he will of course deal with them from day to day as parishioners - but only on that basis. For that reason, he was particularly taken aback that Mawhinney should have this entirely erroneous impression of the role being played by Catholic clergy in West Belfast. For this reason, he welcomes further meetings and he feels it is important to get the real message across at the top.

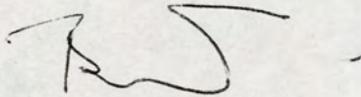
On greater aid to West Belfast, he felt that such increased aid appeared to be on the cards and thought that Joe Hendron of the SDLP had positioned himself well to draw some of the credit. While Hendron is popular on a personal level locally, Fr. Connolly feels he has not been the most effective of politicians. He thought however that in recent times Hendron was adopting a higher profile, particularly on this issue, which he thought could yield long term benefits for the SDLP in West Belfast.

He expressed some concern at rumours which he had heard of a possible further slowing down of the redevelopment of the Divis Flats area. Already, the programme appeared to be about 1 year behind and he had heard rumours from sources in the Housing Executive, that recent cutbacks would have a negative effect on the Divis redevelopment programme.

On education, he had not yet studied the new proposals. However, on first glance he was very concerned at the provision whereby $\frac{1}{5}$ of parents can call for a referendum of parents to take a school out of Education and Library board control and that this could be achieved by a simple majority vote. While he did not appear to see any immediate threat in this, he did perceive a long term threat to Church control of some schools in West Belfast. Linked with this, was the favouritism which appeared to be shown to non-denominational integrated schools. He sees a linkage in these two elements which could provide a long term threat to the Church's role in education. In West Belfast, the all-Irish Bunscoil movement was, with one exception, not under the control of the Churches and he felt that while the

committees at the moment were on balance "pro-Church" there was a significant element within the movement which were positively anti-Church.

Locally, they were at the moment involved in the amalgamation of 4 secondary schools (St. Peter's, St. Paul's, St. Theresa's and Gort NaMona) into one new Corpus Christi secondary school which would be located on the site presently occupied by both St. Peter's and St. Paul's. This new school, which will open in September, will have about 1,000 pupils and will be vocationally oriented. They have recruited the core staff for the school and the Ministry of Education have appointed a full-time inspector to assist in curriculum development.



Brendan McMahon,

22 April 1988.

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Section
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