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Reference Code:	2018/28/2200
Creation Dates:	26 May 1988
Extent and medium:	2 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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West Belfast

Meeting with Fr. James Donaghy, Ballymurphy, Belfast, 26 May 1988

Fr. Donaghy has been based in Ballymurphy for the past three years and appears to be particularly active in the local community. During our meeting, he was particularly forceful regarding two issues - viz - the socio economic make-up of the area and the behaviour of the security forces.

He described Ballymurphy as probably the most deprived area of West Belfast with unemployment running at a figure of at least 90%. The construction of the estate began around the mid-1950s and, at the time, Ballymurphy was located well outside the city with no infrastructure and no transport and was used by the City council as something of a "dumping ground" for undesirable tenants. There is no tradition of employment in the area and anyone with any spark gets out as soon as possible. He showed me the Springhill Avenue area which is scheduled, at some stage, for demolition. At least 30% of the houses are derelict and the entire area is in a deplorable condition.

He was very critical of gestures made by the Government towards employment creation in the area. He was totally dismissive of the YTP scheme as, in effect, "providing training for nothing". Even though the parish run a sizeable ACE scheme, he was critical of the temporary nature of the employment provided (one year) and of the unreal nature of much of the work undertaken. As far as Fr. Donaghy could see, no attempt was being made to provide real industrial training in the area with the result that no inroads are being made into the traditional cycle of unemployment and deprivation.

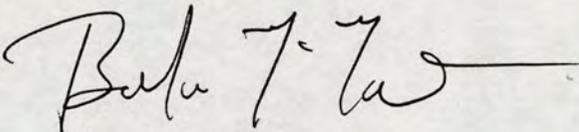
The Government propose to turn the local Secondary School, St. Theresa's, into a College of Further Education beginning next September. He thought this decision was based on an absence of ideas or willingness to do anything more relevant and saw little future for a College of Further Education located in a place like Ballymurphy - the area is often closed for security reasons and he speculated as to who in their right mind would depend on public transport or leave a car in a place like Ballymurphy. Any College of Further Education should have been located in a place like the Falls Road - a more central and accessible part of West Belfast.

He was particularly critical regarding the Belfast area team (B. A. T.) for Ballymurphy which is run by Kate Kelly whom he described as being "anti-Church" and hostile to any projects put forward for funding by the Church.

He was particularly forceful on the whole area of the behaviour of the security forces in the area. As far as he could see, the Anglo-Irish Agreement had made absolutely no difference on the ground in a place like Ballymurphy which continued to suffer from serious harassment by the security forces, constant house-searches etc. He is under no illusion but that the Army have the primary policing role in West Belfast and denials of this by the RUC are, as far as he is concerned, total rubbish. The behaviour of soldiers varies with regiments and he described the recent tour of the Royal Scots as being particularly disastrous with constant allegations of very serious harassment tactics being employed. The new regiment (Queen's Regiment) would appear to mark a distinct improvement. Overall, he felt that the Army tended to behave better when accompanied by the RUC. He pointed out that you could identify an RUC man by his number but you can never identify a soldier as he does not wear a number or any identification tag. He feels that identity numbers are an important check on security force behaviour.

His own experience with complaining, whether formally or informally to the police is an unhappy one. As far as he can see no action whatsoever is ever taken on foot of complaints made and he instanced a significant number of incidents in support of this.

He was dismayed that no politicians North or South took the trouble to look at areas like Ballymurphy at first hand or to speak with people like himself and others who have been working on the ground in such areas for quite a number of years. In this, he very much reflected the sensation often expressed by clergy and others, that chronic problem areas like Ballymurphy are effectively ignored by everyone.



Brendan McMahon,
31 May 1988.

c. c. Mr. Gallagher
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