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From: Allen McVeigh
Political Affairs Division
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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

- cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L)
- PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)
- PS/Mr Ingram (B&L)
- PS/Mr Worthington (DHSS, DENI&L)
- PS/PUS (B&L)
- PS/Mr Semple
- Mr Thomas
- Mr Steele
- Mr Watkins
- Mr Bell
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Hill
- Mr Brooker 9.10
- Mr ~~Canavan~~, CCRU
- Mr Fergusson
- Ms Campbell, DED
- Mr Burgess
- Mr Dickinson
- Mr Tansley, HME Dublin
- Ms Heaney
- Mr Warner
- Ms Healey
- Ms Jackson

Mr Maccabe

PA-Conf. file
Mr Dickson
Mr Caplan 10/10

NI WOMEN'S POLITICAL FORUM: CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SECTARIANISM ON SATURDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 1997

This note records, in summary, the NI Women's Political Forum (NIWPF) Conference on anti-sectarianism held at Hillsborough Castle on Saturday 27 September. (The organisers are hoping to publish a full report of the Conference themselves in due course).

Background

2. It is perhaps first worth recording that the NIWPF only came into being on International Women's Day 1996 in Castle Buildings, formed by women from the

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parties involved in the then preliminary talks discussions; with members of the Workers Party, the UDP, PUP and Alliance as core founders. This subsequently expanded to include the SDLP, Women's Coalition and, more recently, the UUP. There are, in addition, some key women from a number of community organisations. It is anticipated that there will be no opposition if Sinn Fein opt to join later this month, despite their minor furore (see below) at not being invited to this Conference (invitations were in hand prior to Sinn Fein signing up to Mitchell and entering the negotiations). The DUP and UKUP (taking their cue from the DUP) have refused to take part due to their antipathy to the Loyalists: if Sinn Fein do join they will be even less likely to have a change of mind.

3. The organisers told me that there was a very high level of interest expressed in attending this Conference, however, due to the CRC (Community Relations Council) not providing the level of funding expected (£750 against £1000 sought) this had necessitated a cut-back in the invitations issued. Out of around 90 affirmative responses, some 75 women attended. This included Community and peace groups from the Shankill and Lower Falls and from the South, including, a sister organisation based in Dublin, the Women's Political Association.

4. There was a hiccup when a community group, the Women's Network, pulled out because Sinn Fein hadn't been invited (Comment: the composition of that group might be worth re-examination to ascertain if there are direct links with Sinn Fein), which in turn sparked some (typical) negative media reporting of the Conference. The organisers assured me that it has not disheartened them or took away from what they judged (and with which I agree) was a successful day.

Conference

5. Chairwoman Lily Kerr (Workers Party) opened proceedings by first offering Conference's best wishes to the Secretary of State (earning a loud ovation), followed by an overview of the day's agenda; designed to build on their previous discussion on sectarianism in September 1996, but not to go over old ground; to set

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standards and go forward. Sectarianism, she said, had to and must be tackled in parallel with the talks. Margaret Marshall (Alliance) then gave a brief history of the NIWPF for the benefit of those attending for the first time. This was followed by Mr Worthington who first passed on the Secretary of State's apologies for not being present, before he welcomed the participants to Hillsborough Castle and formally declared the Conference open (the Minister readily agreeing to undertake this at short notice was appreciated by the organisers; even more so was his expression of willingness to listen to any concerns the NIWPF might have that relate to his portfolio responsibilities!) The Minister's departure left me (not for the first time) as the only male present: the price of duty!

6. Papers setting out mainly party positions came from Norma Coulter (UDP), Patsy Lavery (PUP), Eileen Bell (Alliance - unscripted), Patricia Lewsley (SDLP), Monica McWilliams (Women's Coalition) and Frances McCarthy (Workers Party). For me, the significance of this session was not the actual content but that each spoke (and that they could do so) from the heart, with emotion, of personal experiences that I doubt any male speaker would have chosen (or dared) to do. The outcome was impressive: an almost immediate bonding and affinity among the participants which spilled over into the buffet lunch that followed, giving an informal opportunity to make new contacts and renew old acquaintances. At the same time, I would not want to give the impression that all was sweetness and light because inter-party tensions did surface occasionally. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a genuine desire to try to understand (and respect) differing viewpoints and to look for common threads to overcome the inherent sectarianism that whether we cared to admit it or not pervades everyone, albeit to varying degrees and manifestations.

7. After lunch the participants were mixed and split into ten workshops to consider how to combat sectarianism in areas such as the workplace, education, leisure activities, sport, housing areas, communities, the churches and government; this was followed into the afternoon by a report back and open discussion before the Conference close by Patricia Lewsley (SDLP). Although there were no ready

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answers or solutions (nor were these expected) to overcoming sectarianism, the value, again, of this inter-action was a better understanding of what sectarianism meant and how it affected individuals attending the Conference. They also took away a challenge to change their own views and approach on this subject and, I dare say, to hector their male colleagues out of any complacency that might arise from their failure to date to address this important issue. I expect the NIWPF to continue to seek over the months ahead to keep the issue of tackling sectarianism to the forefront of political dialogue.

Comment

8. I should record that Cathy Heaney and **all** the staff involved at Hillsborough done their usual good job of well looking after the Conference participants (earning lots of plaudits), so much so that I anticipate another NIWPF request for the use of Hillsborough to be a formality! I also consider the CRC's £750 to have been well spent on this occasion.

9. Some members of the NIWPF steering Committee will be, and are looking forward to, a meeting soon with Baroness Farrington (on 9 October?). Also, by way of forewarning, they are looking forward to a promised cup of coffee with the Secretary of State in Castle Buildings before too long (the Secretary of State has Eileen Bell to thank for that one!)

(Signed)

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