

269/98

FROM: DPS/Mr Ingram
8 December 1998

Paula 11/12
For the Projex 2000 file
11/12

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - O
PS/Mr Ingram (B&L) - O
PS/Mr Murphy (B&L) - O
PS/PUS (B&L) - O
Mr Watkins - O
Mr Daniell - O
Mr White - O
Mr McGuckin - O
Mrs Collins - O
Ms Scholefield - O
Mr Maccabe - O
Mr Speirs - O
Mr Hunter, DFP
Mr Hanna, DFP
Mr Arbuthnot, T&EA
Mr Godfrey, CCRU ✓ 12/12
Mr Martin, DOE
Mr Sayers, LEDU
Mr Kearney, DHSS

Peter May - O
CJPD

MEETING WITH PROJEX 2000

The Minister was grateful for the briefing you provided for his meeting with Projex 2000 on Tuesday 1 December 1998. I am also grateful to Mr Speirs for checking the accuracy of this minute regarding the policy issues discussed.

Summary: This was a businesslike meeting where, as expected, the Projex 2000 team accompanied by representatives of various prisoners groups lobbied the Minister on prisoner reintegration policy. The Minister pointed out that the group's concerns would be taken on board by the officials present, however, he emphasised that he was not the lead Minister on this and indeed much of what they raised will probably fall to the new NI Assembly. For that reason he advised them to start lobbying the local parties in the Assembly.

Action: I should be grateful if officials would advise Projex 2000 which issues will become the responsibility of the new Assembly. The Minister also wishes to

write to all the political parties in the Assembly and ask each of them to nominate someone to deal with the issue of reintegration (I have minuted separately on this last point).

In attendance:

Mr Ken Cleland	Minister
Mr Brendan Mackin (ICTU)	Mr Brian White
Mr Tommy Gorman	Mr Peter May
Mr John White (UDP)	Mr Tom Haire
Mr Paul Mageean (CAJ)	Mr Adrian Arbuthnot
Mr Paddy Mackle	Mr Seth Speirs
Mr Tom Roberts (PUP)	Mr Noel Marsden

Detail

2. Mr Cleland opened the meeting by thanking the Minister for agreeing to see the group. He explained that Projex 2000 was a private sector initiative formed by people in Northern Ireland who feel that ex-prisoners need help to build their lives again. He explained that Projex 2000 has the support of the various prisoner representative groups and he added that the bottom line for the meeting today was to point out the current blockages to employability of ex-prisoners and to ascertain what the Minister and the Government will do about this. He emphasised that the Government had committed itself to providing assistance for politically motivated prisoners in the Belfast Agreement.

3. The Minister pointed out that it was difficult to avoid comparisons with politically motivated prisoners and 'ordinary decent criminals'. There was already a huge reaction in society to the prisoner release programme. Mr Brendan Mackin intervened to emphasise that Projex 2000 do not want to see ex-prisoners in opposition to victims. The group believes that both of these issues should be dealt with equally, but there were at present obstacles in place to stop ex-prisoners reintegrating themselves back into society. He felt that the Government had made a clear commitment to putting resources into prisoner issues, but there have been no tangible signs of this apart from the prisoner releases. He pointed out that the families of ex-prisoners were also being discriminated against when applying for jobs. He also

pointed out that the current compensation legislation discriminated against ex-prisoners, even those who have long served their sentences, in that they could not receive compensation if their homes, cars, businesses etc were damaged as a result of terrorist activity. He then asked the Minister what he was going to do to fulfil the Government's obligations. Mr John White interjected to say that the prisoner groups were also concerned about media reporting that prisoners were getting huge sums of money on leaving prison.

4. The Minister explained that unfortunately we live in an environment where the media will not deal with the reality of the issue. He then went on to say that we have been looking at prisoners' training needs and mechanisms have been put in place via T&EA, LEDU etc. If, however, Projex 2000 felt that the existing agencies were not delivering they should point out where the failings are and we could put the appropriate nuts and bolts into place. He acknowledged that every prisoner has their own individual needs. The Minister noted that the current political situation precluded the appointment of a lead Minister on reintegration issues, as many of the areas of concern would soon become the responsibility of the new devolved administration. For that reason he believed that Projex 2000 should engage with the local political parties to ascertain how they intend to deal with this.

5. Mr Cleland indicated that Projex 2000 want to work in partnership with the Government. The Minister asked him if he had any examples of where training needs were not working on the ground. Mr Paul Mageean repeated the issue of specific exclusion with regard to the criminal damage/compensation schemes. He pointed out that ex-prisoners starting their own businesses were very much hostages to fortune in that they could get a grant from LEDU but if their business was damaged as a result of a bomb attack the Government would not compensate them. He also mentioned the issue of national security certificates and came back to Mr Mackin's point that prisoners relatives were also being made to suffer and the fact that currently the legislation was based on the UK-wide legislation which did not take into account the specific problems and sentencing patterns in Northern Ireland. Finally he touched on the Rehabilitation of the Offenders Order. The Minister replied that Sir Kenneth Bloomfield has been asked to look at the criminal damage/compensation schemes, so

the group might want to make representations to him. With regard to national security certificates, the Minister mentioned the recent ECHR ruling which the Government have now responded to. On the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order, the Minister pointed out that primary legislation would be needed to change this as opposed to the Order in Council procedure. He emphasised that anything relating to prisons has to be done by primary legislation for transparency purposes.

6. Mr Cleland stated that some decisions can be made quickly. He believed that there was discretion on the part of the Government to move particular events forward; if the Government set the tone of what is to take place it will come to pass. He emphasised that Projex 2000 and the various prisoner representative groups need someone from the NIO who understands and are conversant with the various issues surrounding employment of ex-prisoners. He mentioned that officials from T&EA and LEDU are particularly helpful. Again, the Minister was reminded of Projex 2000's view that this is very much an equality issue. The Minister retorted that in reality Projex 2000 were looking for more than equality. What about the other categories in society? The Minister said that he remains to be convinced that specific provision was necessary for ex-paramilitary prisoners. Mr Cleland replied that special courts had been set up during internment. In those cases people were imprisoned without trial and they still carry that baggage even though they were not convicted by the courts. This seems to be grossly unfair. Mr Ingram acknowledged that this argument was not lost on the Government but he pointed out that we are not yet in a normal society.

7. Mr Mackin reminded the Minister that it was the responsibility of the Government to lead on this. At present the New Deal is not tailored specifically to the needs of ex-paramilitary prisoners, but he was of the view that the Minister had the discretion to allow that to happen. In reply, the Minister reminded all those present that the problems in the Northern Ireland society have been around for over 30 years now and it was not a simple step to change procedures and mindsets overnight. He pointed out that there were still dissident groups out there doing their own thing.

8. Mr Mackin stated that all those around the table were trying to make a normal society, but Projex 2000 did not want there to be a gap in communication. The

reality at present is that prisoners groups do not see anything tangible coming from the Good Friday Agreement. It seemed to him to be a complete waste of resources for prisoners to come out of prison highly educated but unable to get jobs. Mr John White intervened to agree with this analysis. The Agreement had been signed 8 months ago and there was a definite lack of pace with regard to prisoners. He pointed out that the UDP had put forward proposals in terms of vocational training in prison. He emphasised that a lot of people he represents are prepared to retrain and he added that T&EA are prepared to go in and talk to these prisoners. The Minister pointed out to him that workshops in the Maze prison had been abused in the past but he stated that the Northern Ireland Prison Service and T&EA should take steps to put whatever training was possible in place as soon as possible.

9. Moving onto the wider picture, the Minister pointed out that we need the co-operation of senior management in the various companies out there. He added that if we extend the prisoner release programme to working out arrangements the perception in the wider community will be that prisoners are getting even earlier releases without movement elsewhere. He emphasised that to date the Government have taken a lot of gambles with no payback.

10. Mr Cleland acknowledged that the Minister had a judgement call to make. He pointed out that Projex 2000 have all the component parts in place for what they hope to achieve. He believed that they have an opportunity to move the process forward. For that reason he would like to put in place a partnership between Projex 2000, the Private Sector and the Government. As an after-thought he added that it was ironic that someone like David Ervine may end up as a Minister in the New Assembly yet would be unable to employ civil service staff who were politically motivated ex-prisoners. Again the Minister emphasised that we are not yet at the stage where all of the shutters could go up. There were legitimate concerns that ex-prisoners could end up for instance teaching the children of their victims. In addition, national security concerns would continue to be an issue even in a normalised society.

11. The Minister re-emphasised that a lot of the issues being raised will be devolved to Assembly Ministers. He personally would like to devolution working in

practise. He added that in terms of delivery we have to make people as employable as possible, but there have to be certain structures in place for the good of society as a whole. If we move the goal posts we need a good reason. He emphasised that every ex-prisoner does not become a good guy so we have to move cautiously. Mr Mageean intervened to say that the Minister's last statement seemed to work on the assumption that every ex-prisoner was not a good guy. He opined it was ironic that the Government had signed up to the release of several hundred prisoners but yet would not allow them to get a job in somewhere like a passport office. He believed that the discretion of Ministers should be used in employing staff. The Minister reminded him that a sizeable part of the Northern Ireland community are not signed up to the Agreement we have to move very carefully; there is a much wider issue here.

12. Mr Cleland stated that the rate of re-offending politically motivated prisoners was significantly lower than ordinary decent criminals. He asked the Minister if the group could meet again with him in a few weeks time. He believed that this would make officials move more quickly in the meantime. The Minister retorted that he does not want to become the lead Minister in this but he is not adverse to coming back and meeting with the group towards the end of January. Mr Cleland agreed that in the meantime he would take forward various issues with civil servants. In closing the Minister asked officials to ascertain what issues raised by Projex 2000 will become devolved and to let the group know accordingly so that they can lobby the respective political parties in the longer term.

SIGNED

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