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25 JUL 1997

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FLG P19

FROM: D J WATKINS
D/Central Secretariat
18 JULY 1997

cc PS/Mr Ingram (DED, B&L)
PS/Mr Murphy (DFP, B&L)
PS/Mr Worthington
(DENI, DHSS&L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Spence
Mr Steele
Mr Thomas
Mr Canavan
Mr Perry
Mr Smyth
Mr Crawford
Mr Gilchrist
Mr Warner

Mr T. Humphreys
For info
EH/10 3042

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L)

✓
M. Hayes
EH/25 25 JUL 1997

COMMUNITY RELATIONS: PORTADOWN

1. Mr Leach's minute of 20 June on Drumcree referred (para 13ii) to work in hand to develop proposals for an initiative in Portadown aimed at reducing tensions which seem to increase risk of major difficulties over marches there. This submission reports on that work.
2. Central Secretariat brought together officials from a range of NIO divisions, NI Departments and the Community Relations Council (CRC). We first considered the aim of any initiative which might be undertaken. We agreed that one with a primary economic focus would be misjudged. There is little evidence that such initiatives in the past have contributed to changes in attitudes in the community

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relations field, which seem at the heart of the issue in Portadown. Second, although unemployment in the immediate area is high, this is not unusual for many localities: the district council area shows a level of deprivation about half-way up the Robson table of deprivation (which compares levels of deprivation across Northern Ireland), while the two wards covering the area come 69 and 320 respectively out of 566 wards in Northern Ireland on the Robson indicators. So any special initiative would make Ministers vulnerable to unmeetable demands for special action from many other equally or more deserving areas.

3. We concluded that an initiative aimed specifically at improving community relations in Portadown over time is needed and can be justified - not merely by reference to Drumcree but in view of historic antagonisms in the area and the particular difficulty experienced in coming to grips with them. Such an initiative would undoubtedly take time to bear fruit (and so should not be seen as any sort of panacea for potential problems over parades in 1998 etc). But it could have a benign effect in lessening tensions in a way helpful to future years.
4. As a result of our discussions the CRC have invited the NI Voluntary Trust to join them in sounding out opinion in Portadown about the feasibility of bringing together a group of those directly involved in local community relations activity, voluntary and community groups (which could include the GRRC) and

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perhaps the churches, business interests etc. The aim would be to set up a group, under CRC/NIVT chairmanship, which could be (or at least become) coherent and command credibility locally as an engine for improving relations in the area. The exact composition of the group would, we hope, emerge from the CRC/NIVT soundings. It would essentially work out its own agenda on an open and comprehensive basis. This could involve, for example, strengthening local cross-community contacts or developing proposals for ways in which public agencies might adjust their actions and plans so as to facilitate efforts to improve community relations.

5. It had originally been our intention to suggest setting up a complementary public sector co-ordinating group, to help respond to suggestions of the CRC/NIVT-chaired forum (eg by facilitating/accelerating its proposals, within existing budgets). But further reflection suggested that this might be premature. The CRC/NIVT group itself could conceivably include public sector representations; it would be best to let local interests determine the way forward in the first instance; and, unfortunately, the leak of Mr Leach's minute means that we need to be very cautious in developing a local initiative lest it be damaged - however wrongly and unfairly - by association with that episode.

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6. The last point also means that the CRC and NIVT now believe that they must make progress slowly in sounding out opinion in Portadown and do not now plan to do so for several weeks.
7. The same point bears on Ministers' public posture on such an initiative. The case for announcing it as a Government initiative rather than letting arm's-length bodies like CRC/NIVT get on with it at ground level was always finely balanced. I suggest that the risk of associating these developments with the events of the last couple of weeks now adds decisively to the case for letting the CRC/NIVT take local soundings without comment by Ministers. If their soundings suggest that a more formal Government initiative would be welcomed or if our support for CRC/NIVT moves (eg by way of setting up a public sector co-ordinating group) begin to attract interest, we will advise on a line to take at that stage.
8. I invite the Secretary of State to:
 - note our considerations to date;
 - agree that a community relations-focused initiative of the sort described be taken forward;
 - agree that Ministers should not announce the development of such an initiative, subject to review as it progresses.

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9. If Dr Mowlam agrees, I would plan to report further once CRC/NIVT have developed proposals based on their forthcoming soundings.

DJW .

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