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Visit to Border Areas affected by Closed Roads
12-13 October 1992

The undersigned with James Farrell visited on 12/13 October a number of areas on both sides of the border affected by closed cross-border roads. The primary purpose of the visit was to make an assessment of the impact of this policy on the communities directly affected, including with a view to the possible initiation of a further round of contacts with the British on this issue.

Background

The issue of closed roads has been given particular attention by the Minister since he came into office. In April this year he visited towns in Monaghan, Cavan and Leitrim especially affected by road closures. At the meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference on 27 April the Minister raised the problem of closed roads and it was agreed that the Conference would continue to review developments in this area. Speaking in an adjournment debate on 5 May, initiated by Deputy Paddy Harte, the Minister recalled the Conference discussion and emphasised "the importance of keeping all closures under continuous review and of ensuring that the economic and social effects, as well as the security implications, are taken fully into account in all cases".

The issue was revisited at a meeting in the Secretariat on 31 July. On that occasion the British officials present showed some interest in establishing, as we have previously suggested, a joint committee of officials and police from both sides to review prospects for re-opening. It was made clear however that this would require political clearance on their side. For our part we stressed the need to focus on the more significant crossings, and the need for flexibility if attitudes towards security cooperation among communities in border areas were not to be adversely affected.

Focus of Visit

The programme for the visit provided an opportunity to take soundings with regard to those areas which have figured most prominently in representations in recent years. These were as follows:

Co. Monaghan

- Clogher (Tyrone/Monaghan)
- Roslea (Fermanagh/Monaghan)
- Clones (Monaghan/Fermanagh)

Co. Cavan

- Aghalane Bridge (Cavan/Fermanagh)

Co. Leitrim

- Rossinver (Dooard) (Leitrim/Fermanagh)
- Kiltyclogher (do)

Sth Donegal

- Pettigo (Donegal/Fermanagh)

Among those we met were the County Managers for Monaghan and Cavan; Gerry Burns, Chief Executive of Fermanagh District Council; officials of Leitrim County Council and County Development Team together with members of the Kiltyclogher Community Council; SDLP Councillors Fergus McQuillan and Tommy Gallagher who are based in Newtownbutler and Belleek respectively, and the Parish Priests of Roslea (Fr. Brian McCluskey) and Clogher (Fr. Lawrence Dawson).

Review by County

Co. Monaghan

- Clogher

The closed crossings at Greagh and Drumfurrer have the effect of cutting off the Clogher valley from its natural hinterland to the South. For those living in towns such as Clogher and Augher the journey to Monaghan involves a detour via Aughnacloy, a distance of over 10 miles. Monaghan remains the focus of social life for the local nationalist community, and young people have to pass through the British Army checkpoint at Aughnacloy when travelling to dances, GAA matches etc. at week-ends. There are regular complaints of harassment and this prompts local campaigns to re-open blocked roads. Fr. Dawson expressed concern that this might lead those involved into deeper involvement with paramilitaries.

The main priority locally would be the crossing at Greagh (BCP 106) which is on the direct road from Clogher to Monaghan. While there were no complaints of direct negative economic consequence of closed roads - Catholic businessmen have done well in recent years in sectors such as haulage, road transport; school enrolment is at a satisfactory level (there was positive mention of the new funding arrangements) - the re-opening of Greagh would enhance the economic and tourism potential of the area.

When last year the prospect of re-opening one of these roads was reviewed through police channels, at the instigation of the former Minister for Justice, the RUC indicated that they perceived a continuing high level of threat and would only consider re-opening subject to a PVCP on our side. They are also likely to have in mind the incident in November 1991 when a possible heavy weapon attack on Clogher RUC station was foiled, as well as an incident on 13 January 1992 when shots were fired at the British Army in the vicinity of the closed roads.

Roslea

The crossing at Derryvollen, outside Roslea, has attracted considerable controversy over the years. Closed in the 1970s, it was unofficially open from 1985 to 1989, until the British Army removed a nearby PVCP at Derryard, in the aftermath of a major IRA attack in which a number of British soldiers were killed. (Locals dispute the British thesis that Derryvollen was used as an escape route by the gang involved). Derryvollen has been open and closed on about twenty occasions since then. Local feeling has been further incensed by the digging of huge craters over several acres in the immediate vicinity of the bridge. Not only are these disproportionate, but they have been ineffective in keeping the bridge closed. [The British have made clear to us their interest in demolishing the bridge which straddles the border.]

The Roslea PP, Fr. Brian McCluskey, whose parish is divided by the closure, emphasised strongly to us the negative social impact of the present policy. His immediate concern is the difficulty of keeping in contact with the 70 families from the parish located on the southern side of the border. He argues that local opposition to the road closures, which he emphatically supports, remains community-based, and contends that his involvement is necessary to prevent a take-over by paramilitary elements. He noted that he had recently been called on by senior British Army and RUC officers both of whom had attributed the road closures policy to Mayhew and Mates.

In Roslea itself the closure of the only chemist shop in the town and a downturn in business at the local patrol pumps following the re-closure of Derryvollen are pointed to as examples of the effects on the local economy. On the positive side, an impressive new primary school (cost £300,000) has been completed in the village to cater for growing numbers, and the heritage centre has also opened with £100,000 assistance from the IFL. There was little sign of the economic blight which marks towns such as Kiltyclogher and Clones.

There are four other roads into Roslea from Co. Monaghan which are open, with traffic filtered through British Army PVCPs at Kilyvilly or at Annaghmartin. To this extent Roslea, as distinct from the mainly farming community in and around Derryvollen, are less disadvantaged than some of their border neighbours. If the Derryvollen crossing was open it would allow traffic into Co. Fermanagh without having to go through a PVCP. It is worth noting in this context that the "automatic" PVCP at Kilyvilly was regarded as a distinct improvement: traffic flowed more freely and there was much less stopping and questioning of local people.

It was noticeable that Fr. McCluskey was not necessarily seeking the formal re-opening of the road (i.e. the lifting of the Closure Order) but rather that the security forces desist from their continuing efforts to re-close the road, as they did between 1985-89. In this regard we were shown the nearby crossing at Clogh, also closed, where the congregation of the near-by Protestant church regularly by-pass the closure by driving through an adjacent

field. It was indicated that the authorities have turned a blind eye to this practice. A similar latitude would appear to offer a basis for compromise at Deryvollen: the risk of closure consequent on further attacks on the security forces would be a powerful incentive to the local community to ensure that this did not occur.

Clones

Clones lies almost totally encircled by the border: due east and west it has access to Northern Ireland, but all the crossings to its hinterland to the north have been severed. Where previously people travelled to Clones for shopping and social purposes from towns such as Newtownbutler, Lisnaskea and Roslea this no longer happens. A number of retail businesses have responded by relocating on the outskirts of the town, across the border. There has at the same time been a tendency for the Northern hinterland to gravitate towards Newtownbutler for services such as solicitors which would traditionally have been provided from Clones. One of the consequences of the depressed state of business in the town is the high level of unpaid rates. There is inevitably concern that the recent currency shifts will serve to undermine further the town's already shaky business base.

Industry in the town comprises Powerscreen, which makes containers, Grove Turkeys and Kerry Co-op (formerly Tunney) meat plant which provides seasonal employment. Of the approx 120 workers at Powerscreen 30 live on the Northern side of the border and face delays at the old-style Kilturk PVCP on the Clones-Newtownbutler road. In the view of the Monaghan Co. Manager the problem was not so much lack of employment in the town as the difficulty of retaining earnings in the local economy.

The major demand from Clones has been the re-opening of Lucky Bridge, on the main road to Lisnaskea. While this would be the optimal solution Fergus McQuillan suggested that there might be better prospects for progress at the near-by Clonatty Bridge on the Clones-Magheravelly road. The British Army have recently upgraded their patrol base at this location (known locally as "Magheravelly Towers"), which would facilitate observation and mobile patrols in the event of the crossing being re-opened. McQuillan was of the view that this would be regarded locally as an acceptable alternative to Lucky Bridge.

Reaction of Protestant Communities

Those in favour of the re-opening of closed roads in the Clones area, as elsewhere along the border with Fermanagh, are acutely aware of the impact of the views of local Protestant communities. While Ken Maginnis is recognised as the principal spokesman for this viewpoint, there was a general recognition among those we met on both sides of the border that he was reasonably accurately reflecting the position of the affected communities. That said however there was also a view that Unionist reactions derived from a political as well as a perceived security concern, with road closures seen as a physical expression of political separateness. Gerry Burns, Chief Executive of Fermanagh DC, thought that Unionist

acquiescence to the re-opening of a small number of border roads could be secured only at the price of the provision of additional PVCs on our side. In this regard he commented that at £2 million a piece the British, in their present economic straits, were unlikely to be willing to build additional patrol bases: thus the onus would fall on us. (Like others in Northern Ireland sympathetic to our concerns he accepts the logic of our position on static check-points, but is inclined to look for an "exception" in hard cases).

PVCs

Problems at PVCs have been a major concern in Clones. Our impression on this occasion was that the new installation at Wattle Bridge, and the suspension of the practice of night-time closures, have produced an improvement in the situation. The Kilturk PVC, while up-dated by the addition of traffic lights, continues to involve direct contact with members of the security forces. While the present regiment - the Staffordshires - appear to have given little cause for complaint (this was also the view at Clogher and Roslea), the possibility of hostile questioning, and associated delays, remains.

Co Cavan

Aghalane Bridge

The rupture of the N3 - the main road from Dublin to Enniskillen - through the closing of Aghalane Bridge is a serious obstacle to the development of Cavan-Fermanagh links and has had major financial and planning implications for Co. Cavan. The diversion of traffic doing the Belturbet-Swanlinbar route, has severely strained the capacity of the secondary road network in the area, leading to a deterioration in the roads and associated delays. [There are indications from D/Environment that they may soon accede to demands made over many years for additional funding; we have reminded Environment that this should not involve any change in the present classification of the road between Belturbet and the bridge.] These roads already bear the heavy traffic originating from the Quinn quarries at Gortmullen: an estimated 80/90 trucks cross the border each day (the refurbished PVC had reportedly eased the delays about which Quinn had previously been critical).

Aghalane Bridge was blown up, allegedly by Loyalists, in the early 1970s. Prior to its destruction it was implicated in a Loyalist bombing attack on Belturbet and in the murders of Protestants living on the Northern side. When the issue has been reviewed in the past the RUC have taken the line that they could only consent to its re-opening if there was a PVC on our side. Quite apart from strategic roads policy considerations, the Cavan County Manager was of the view that Aghalane Bridge was pivotal to the development of the area's tourism and cross-border trade potential and its re-opening would significantly benefit the Cavan-Fermanagh region as a whole. There is already close cooperation between the two local authorities in the management of the Erne system. It seems clear that the exploitation of the tourism potential which the region's waterways represent - including the

Ballinamore-Ballyconnell canal - would be significantly helped by the reopening of Aghalane.

Co. Leitrim

Leitrim's situation is unique in that not one of the five cross-border crossings between it and Fermanagh is open. This necessitates detours of up to 20 miles for people living in Kiltyclogher and Rossinver to visit friends and relatives only a mile away on the Northern side. The five public roads closed are

- Kiltyclogher: Kilcoo Bridge (intact but road cratered)
 : Cashel Bridge (destroyed)
 : Aghavanny, (road cratered)
- Rossinver/Garrison (Dooard Bridge)
- Derrynaser/Kinlough

The latter two are at either end of Lough Melvin. Of these the most important are the Cashel Bridge road at Kiltyclogher and Dooard Bridge which links Rossinver-Garrison, and is about four miles from Kiltyclogher. The roads were closed in the early 70s following a number of terrorist incidents in the Kiltyclogher area, including the murder of a local UDR member which was followed by an exodus of Protestant families from the area.

The harmful consequence of the closed roads policy are no where more obvious than in North Leitrim. With thinly-populated mountainous areas to the south, the economic and social life of the area has traditionally been closely integrated with the adjoining area of south-west Fermanagh. The effects of the isolation caused by the closed roads have therefore been severe and there is ample evidence of economic and social stagnation. Kiltyclogher used to have 7 shops, now there are 2; the number of pubs has fallen from 5 to 3; the primary school roll has fallen from 82 in 1968 to 44 in 1992; the Vocational School, 30% of whose pupils used to come from Northern Ireland, has not reopened following the 1973 bombing, there is no GAA or other sports club in the town. The physical isolation has also discouraged the development of any industry in the area, and instances were given of local entrepreneurs who have instead opted to open businesses in Belcoo and Manorhamilton. The point was made to us that without access to the market on the Northern side of the border it would be simply uneconomic to open small manufacturing plants in the Kiltyclogher area.

The area has enormous potential for the development of tourism, with Lough Melvin and Lough Macnean providing excellent opportunities for fishing, water-sports etc. Kiltyclogher Community Council (with IFI assistance) expect to develop a hostel/activity centre. There would be considerable scope for cooperation with a similar centre already in place in Garrison if the road was open. As matters stand, the practical obstacles to establishing a coordinated approach to the development of tourism are almost insurmountable (e.g. major fishing competitions are organised on the northern shore of Melvin without any involvement

by Rossinver of Kiltyclogher). As a result there is no incentive to remedy the present lack of hotel or tourist-related facilities.

It was striking however that despite the difficulties which they face the Kiltyclogher Community Council have a positive attitude towards their situation. While there was frustration that the problem had endured for so long, there was also appreciation of the Minister's visit and his commitment to deal with the issue as a priority matter. All concerned were at pains to stress the very low level of paramilitary activity in the area and the almost total lack of support from the IRA.

While the residents of Kiltyclogher would no doubt prefer that the Cashel Bridge route be re-opened their concerns would effectively be met by the re-opening of Dooard Bridge. In view of its central position, by Lough Melvin and on a direct route to Manorhamilton, the opening of this route between Garrison and Rossinver would probably be the optimal choice for the North Leitrim area as a whole.

South Donegal

The Pettigo-Beleek road has been closed for many years at Letter Bridge, just outside Pettigo. The town has suffered all the usual effects consequent on loss of its natural hinterland, and on difficulty of access to neighbouring towns such as Ballyshannon and Belleek. Efforts have been made locally to develop angling as a means of exploiting the obvious tourism potential of the area, but as elsewhere the closed roads constitute a serious obstacle. For the moment the main source of tourism remains the Lough Derg pilgrimage traffic which is highly seasonal and generates minimal expenditure in the area.

There are several closures to the north of Pettigo on the roads leading to Castlederg. In early 1990 the British Army removed a PVCF at Boa Island, a move widely welcomed as improving traffic flow in the area. However, this was accompanied by the closure of a mountain road at Tullyvogey. It is suspected that these roads may have been used by the IRA gang which attacked an off-duty UDR soldier at Leggs, Co. Fermanagh earlier this year.

Here too the view was expressed that the new remotely-operated PVCFs had improved the flow of traffic; it was noted that the large volume of traffic going to and from Donegal for the All-Ireland had been dealt with efficiently with no major build-ups.

Security Considerations

British Government reaction to proposals for the re-opening of closed roads can be expected to reflect Unionists preoccupations at the alleged security implications. Ken Maginnis MP wrote to Belturbet Town Commissioners in 1989 informing them that he was opposed to the re-opening of Aghalane Bridge; he was to the fore in protesting at the British Army's decision the same year to remove the PVCF at the closed Lacky Bridge. There is no indication his position has changed in the interim. It is

interesting therefore to note his comment to Deputy Ellis, as reported by the latter to the Department last week, that he would not oppose the re-opening of one of the roads into Leitrim, provided a Garda check-point was established at least initially (emphasis supplied). While the demand for a check-point is distressingly familiar, the notion that its presence could be of limited duration may offer a chink of light. It may at least suggest a willingness on Maginnis' part to differentiate between the various crossings into Fermanagh.

There has in fact been a considerable decline in recent years in the level of violence in border areas (up to 10 miles from the border): the number of fatalities has fallen from 25 in 1986 to 16 in 1991 and 8 this year to date. In Co. Fermanagh, to which all the crossings considered above (except those around Clogher) lead, the figures for border-related fatalities are as follows:

1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
5	4	0	1	1

Such figures are, of course, double-edged, and are likely to be invoked by supporters of the roads policy. However, it can be argued with for greater credibility that the improved situation reflects the enhanced security cooperation consequent on the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Indeed by straining relations between the Garda and local communities the closed roads policy is detrimental to security. Nevertheless, it can be presumed that compensatory measures would be required as the price of any change in the present arrangements. On the British side this could take the form of additional check-points, although here cost considerations are likely to be added to the usual security arguments. For our part we have made clear our view that intensified patrolling including spot checkpoints, offers the most effective assurance of security for local communities. The early establishment of the proposed review committee would provide an opportunity to explore fully these and related matters.

Comment

In relation to all the areas visited it was clear that significant benefits would follow a decision to reopen closed roads. However the extent of the disruption caused to the local community, and the scope and extent of the benefits to be gained from re-opening vary from one location to the next. That said, the case for action in respect of North Leitrim is overwhelming on both social and economic grounds. The fact that no alternative crossings are available within the county sets it apart from the other locations, and contributes to a unique level of disadvantage. A decision to reopen one of the crossings, probably Dooard Bridge, would be a significant contribution to the revitalization of an area seen locally as at risk of terminal decline. There are also compelling economic arguments in the case of Aghalane Bridge and Clones, and

to a lesser degree (in the sense of the smaller population involved) at Pettigo. In the case of Roslea (Derryvullen) and Clogher the main benefits are likely to be the removal of a friction point between the local community and the security forces, one from which only the paramilitaries can benefit.

It is of course likely that any show of flexibility on the British side would be confined to one or two crossings. It has been argued in the past that such a move would merely add to the frustration of those areas overlooked. The compelling view of those we met was otherwise: a decision to open any of the more prominent crossings would be helpful both in defusing the widespread frustration over the issue and as a signal that the political process could deliver results.

P. Hennessy
21 October, 1992

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