

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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To: HQ **From: Belfast**
For: Second Secretary **From: Joint Secretary**

Subj: The Connswater incident

1. Some of the background to the incident last Monday in which the Prime Minister was exposed to jostling and heckling at the Connswater shopping centre in East Belfast emerged in a conversation which I had today with David Watkins, the NIO official responsible for that part of the Blair visit.

2. Watkins described the Prime Minister's encounter with a hostile Loyalist crowd as "very unpleasant". It was a well-orchestrated ambush by elements close to the DUP and the UKUP. The appearance of a heavy RUC presence at the shopping centre from mid-morning onwards gave several hours' advance notice of the Prime Minister's visit. While not excluding DUP involvement (given that Peter Robinson was aware of the planned visit from the early morning), Watkins has reason to suspect that the protest was instigated by Cedric Wilson and Pauline Gilmore.

3. The choice of Connswater for the Prime Minister's final engagement came about as follows. He had made clear that he wished to meet the leaders of Northern Ireland's five largest parties. Hume and Trimble were met at Limavady and Craigavon respectively and the Alliance and Sinn Féin leaders were met at Castle Buildings. A detour to Ballymena to meet Ian Paisley would not have been feasible logistically, so the idea arose of a quick visit to East Belfast to see Paisley's deputy, Robinson.

4. The Prime Minister also wished to be seen to have direct contact with the public at some point during the day. As the Limavady and Craigavon visits did not permit this in any real sense, it was decided that he should "press the flesh" in East Belfast, where the large Connswater shopping centre was the most obvious location.

5. The initial intention was that he would meet Robinson publicly within the centre.

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However, Robinson pulled out of this, telling the NIO that he would not be part of any "welcoming committee" (given the Prime Minister's earlier meeting with Sinn Féin) and offering instead a private meeting in a management office in the centre.

6. NIO staff who were present before the Prime Minister arrived noticed nothing out of the ordinary; the crowd waiting for him seemed relaxed and happy. When he arrived at an inner square, however, the protest by a small group suddenly started - obviously on a pre-arranged signal (which, to one NIO official, seemed to come from one of the journalists present). After a couple of minutes, the Prime Minister was forced to take refuge in a nearby bank. The staff of the bank, incidentally, were not very comfortable with his unexpected arrival. A number of them claim to have been exposed to hostile comment and intimidation since Monday from those involved in the protest (because of the appearance that the bank was taking sides in this dispute).

7. Watkins recognises that it was a mistake to schedule a visit to East Belfast within an hour of the encounter with Sinn Féin. Had they had more time in which to prepare the visit, they would have found a safer alternative for the meeting with Robinson (which went ahead once the Prime Minister had managed to make his way through the crowd). He mentioned that, although John Taylor has been demanding the dismissal of the official responsible for the Connswater visit, other senior Unionists whom the NIO contacted for advice on the DUP aspect of the programme supported the proposal to arrange the Robinson meeting there and to factor in a walkabout.

8. The NIO echo Alban Maginnis' comment that the Prime Minister was "the coolest man in town" during the incident. He was offered two exit routes from the bank which would have enabled him to leave the shopping centre directly but chose to brave the crowd instead.

9. Finally, while the NIO will be working to ensure that there is no repetition of Connswater on future visits, the No.10 press people were privately quite happy with the visual demonstration it provided of the problems facing the Prime Minister in his efforts to make political progress in Northern Ireland.

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