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GI Dept.

Meeting with Carl von Ohsen and Catherine Spence, Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO), 12 October, 2000

Interesting loyalist view of the Rve. Dec.

1. I met with Mr. Von Ohsen, community development officer, at the Falls Road offices of Belfast Regeneration Office (formerly Making Belfast Work) to discuss the work of the BRO in the area, and with Ms. Spence in the BRO's Shankill office.

2. BRO is a Government agency within the Department of Social Development, with offices in the north, south, east and west of the city. BRO has to have two offices in West Belfast, one on the Shankill and one off the Falls road. Each office in West Belfast has a budget of about £1m per annum to spend on community development projects (von Ohsen viewed this as inequitable given that there is a population of 100,000 on the Falls side and 25,000 on the Shankill side). BRO also draws in other funding agencies where appropriate, e.g. the Arts Council, as well as getting funding from the EU's Peace I.

3. Von Ohsen talked about the contrasts between the two communities in West Belfast in terms of education, culture and outlook. While hundreds of school-goers passed the 11+ last year among Nationalists, only two students from the Shankill passed it. There is a strong, vibrant and cohesive community on the Falls road; insularity, suspicion and the "we're loyal, so we don't complain" mentality have characterised the Loyalist community's attitudes. According to Von Ohsen, those who could get out of the Shankill area in the past decade have done so and many people in the Shankill see the massive depopulation in the area (from 75,000 in 1990 to under 25,000 today) as a Government plan to "drive them out". As a community development worker, Von Ohsen said that the irony in West

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Belfast is that those who support the British system have not used it to further their community and are far behind those who do not support the British system, but have greatly improved their community by using it.

4. I accompanied Von Ohsen to the Shankill office of BRO where I met Gusty Spence's daughter, Catherine. She gave a pessimistic assessment of the current situation on the Shankill.

5. Ms. Spence spoke quite openly about the loyalist feud and the direct impact it has had on her family (three of her sisters have been intimidated out of their homes in the past few months). She said that what has happened to the community in the past few months will take a generation to heal and cited such traumatic incidents as parents being thrown out of their homes by sons, a grandmother forced to leave by her grandson. Children as young as five hurl abuse at each other, taunting each other about which side they are on. There is a lot of anger and resentment among ordinary people on the Shankill: anger at those conducting the feud and at the fact that the "other side [Nationalists] are laughing at us", anger at the Government, which is ignoring the problems of the people and allowing the situation to worsen ("no-one is listening to us"), anger at the RUC for their inaction despite the community's pleas for help.

6. Ms. Spence said that there was no sense that the feud is over and strongly criticised the inaction of the RUC who "should have seen it coming" and should have "nipped it in the bud" following "that person's release from jail". The RUC, she said, has "turned its back" on the community; when families were being burned out of their homes, the RUC "stood by and watched". She said that, while her sister was being burned out of her home, an RUC landrover sat at the bottom of the hill

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and the four officers inside did nothing. During an incident at her own home, her daughter called the Tennant Street RUC station several times begging for assistance, but no-one came, despite assurances over the phone that some-one was on their way. She observed, however, that certain people in the community have "panic buttons" linked to "other police" [possibly Special Branch?] in their homes and that these are more likely to respond to calls.

7. Ms. Spence was strongly critical of the RUC's inaction against a drugs den on the Lower Shankill, despite the fact that it operates "under its nose". (She commented wryly that the drugs operation has a cross-community reach, with motor bike couriers even providing a "delivery service" to the other side.) Drug dealers are even sitting out on the steps of a church on the lower Shankill, trading brazenly "in broad daylight". She said that every-one in the community knows who they are and the RUC must also know. The RUC, despite frequent requests, has also failed to provide a land-rover presence outside the doctor's surgery, located on the lower Shankill, to protect people from elsewhere on the Shankill when they go to the doctor. She said that pensioners have been assaulted and one elderly man was forcibly removed from the waiting room for being in the territory of the "other side".

8. I asked why she thought the RUC was not more active and she speculated that fear was a factor. She also thought that the Government believes whatever happens is "containable" within the limits of the Shankill, and that the RUC, like the Government, is ignoring the problem. She commented that, in her view, the feud has spread to "pockets" elsewhere, but this is only where relatives of those on the Shankill are involved. There are many questions concerning the RUC's inaction to which the community have not had answers.

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9. Ms. Spence said that there had not been one counsellor to see families and children who had been traumatised by events in recent months. The community continues to live in an atmosphere of fear and tension. The Government's failure to provide services such as counsellors and social workers in the area has exacerbated the community's feeling of marginalisation and isolation. At the same time, it is being attacked from within, with the UDA demanding protection money from the Housing Executive when two teams came recently to fix some of the damage done to property.

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