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MR BRENNAN

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- 4 JAN 1985
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STORMONT HOUSE ANNEX

- cc PS/S of S (L&B)
- PS/PUS (L&B)
- PS/Mr Scott (L&B)
- PS/Mr Bloomfield
- Mr Parkes
- Mr Barry
- Mr Merifield
- Mr Reeve
- Mr Abbott
- Mr Wood
- Mr Bickham

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WHITEROCK LEISURE CENTRE

- 1 Arising from the Secretary of State's morning meeting, you asked me to check with Belfast colleagues the latest position on the Whiterock Leisure Centre.
- 2 I attach a note from PAB on the background to the dispute in the Belfast City Council. The Centre is owned and operated by the Council, and is well used and properly run. DENI provided substantial grant aid for the capital cost of the Centre (as for all leisure centres).
- 3 DENI have not yet received a formal request for the Minister to meet a (Unionist) deputation from the Council, although such a request is believed to be on its way. Nor has there yet been an official notification of the Council's motion that the Government should be asked to run the Centre directly. DENI has no power to run leisure centres, and would not contemplate doing so.
- 4 The Council has it within its control to close the Centre. Governmental powers or sanctions to compel the Council to re-open are either open to some doubt, or would take time to bite. If Councillors were contemplating closure they might be more influenced by the likelihood that the trade unions would close all Belfast's leisure centres in those circumstances. If Whiterock were closed it is highly likely that Sinn Fein or community groups would take it over. (Some councillors might be happy to see such an escalation in the problem.)

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5 This is clearly a potentially explosive issue, closely connected with sectarian and political rivalries within the Belfast City Council in the run up to the May local elections. Attempts to involve Government or the security forces will need the most careful consideration and handling.

N.R. Cowling

N R COWLING

4 January 1985

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Mr Cowling - ESL - m

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WHITEROCK LEISURE CENTRE

The background to the latest controversy over the Whiterock Leisure Centre is as follows.

2. At the beginning of September 1984, Belfast City Council announced that the Centre would be opened officially on 14 September and that Mr Adams, the MP for the area, would not be invited. In response to the Council's decision, Sinn Fein announced that an alternative opening ceremony would be held on 12 September and duly invited a number of local community associations to attend. The 'people's opening' as it was called attracted considerable media attention. A tricolour was flown from the Leisure Centre roof and a plaque was erected outside the building recording, in Gaelic, Mr Adams involvement in the opening ceremony. By comparison, the official opening two days later was a complete flop with the majority of councillors finding some excuse not to attend. Those who did were barracked by local residents protesting at the decision to ostracise Mr Adams.

3. A few weeks later George Seawright - the former DUP councillor for North Belfast - visited the centre in the early hours of the morning and removed the tricolour. Accompanied by two other DUP members, Mr Seawright was photographed holding the tricolour and brandishing a legally held firearm. As a result of this action, Mr Seawright has been charged with a minor firearms offence and is currently on bail awaiting trial. The single tricolour was replaced later in the day by two flags which continue to fly from the Leisure Centre roof.

4. At the December meeting of Belfast City Council, a motion was passed giving the staff of the Centre one month to remove the flags. The deadline expires on 6 January.

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5. On Wednesday of this week, the Council held its first meeting of the new year. Outraged that action had still not been taken to remove the flags, unionist councillors supported a motion tabled by Mr Frank Miller Sar (Independent) to send a delegation to see Mr Scott to urge the Government to take control of the Leisure Centre and ensure that the flags and the plaque are taken down. The SDLP, Sinn Fein and Alliance abstained and Councillor Miller's motion was passed by 19 votes to nil.

6. We understand that, if the flags are still in place after 6 January, the unionist councillors will press for an urgent meeting with the Minister. They intend to threaten a withdrawal of Council support for the centre unless immediate action is taken.

7. This row is consistent with the steady polarisation of attitudes within the City Council over the past 12 months, as extremists on both sides have sought to exploit a series of sectarian and divisive issues. If the Council does decide to wash its hands of the Centre, a number of legal issues will arise on which DOR (NI) are best placed to advise. Politically, the most likely result is that Sinn Fein will take complete control of the Centre and seek to run its much needed and much used facilities on behalf of the people of West Belfast.

S Hewitt

S G HEWITT

Political Affairs Division

4 January 1985

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