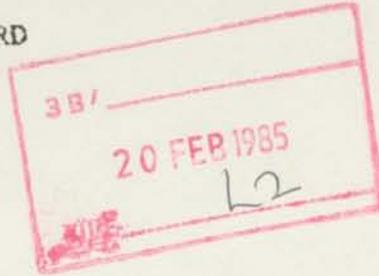


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NOTE FOR THE RECORD



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cc PS/SofS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Patten (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield - M
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens - M
Mr Barry - M
Mr Parkes - M
Mr Buxton - M
Mr Carvill - M
Mr Gilliland - M
Mr Merifield - M
Mr Abbott
Mr Cowling
Mr Johnston, DENI,
Londonderry House - M
Mr Nigel Hamilton,
DOE - M
Mr Reeve - M
Mr Bickham
DENI PO - M

WHITEROCK LEISURE CENTRE

Mr Scott's Meeting with Belfast City Council: 18 February 1985

Present: Mr Scott Mr Millar Senior
Mr Johnston Mr Patton
Mr Reeve Mr McCrea
Mr Burnett Mr Eric Smith
Mr Whysall Mr Gault
Mr Ashby
Mr Billy Bell
Mrs Whitley

Mr Ward (Town Clerk)
Mr Brian Morrison

1. A delegation from Belfast City Council met Mr Scott at Stormont Castle on 18 February to discuss the Council's resolution of 6 December, which envisaged the takeover by HMG of the White Rock Leisure Centre if (as is the case) the tricolours on its roof and the plaque commemorating its unofficial opening by Sinn Fein were not removed. Mr Millar opened by referring to the deep unhappiness of unionist members of the Belfast City Council at the continued flying of the tricolour above the Centre, and their greater unhappiness still about the situation before the official opening, when it had appeared publicly that Sinn Fein had taken the Centre over.

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So the Council had decided to present the Minister with the case for the White Rock Leisure Centre being transferred to the control of the Department of Education. The unionist members of the Council - and Mr Millar emphasised that other Councillors had different views - believed this to be the right course with all Centres in republican areas not under, or seen to be under, Council control. They did not see why they should be insulted by Sinn Fein. [There was an incoherent, disparaging aside at this point about "someone who wanted to try and publicise himself" - I took this to be a reference to Mr Seawright.] Republicans had indicated that they would fly more tricolours still: as representatives of Belfast ratepayers, the Councillors would not put their money into the Centre while any semblance of Sinn Fein association attached to it. Even though the Centre appeared to be running normally, they would not accept that it was while the flag and plaque remained. There were similarities with the ^{Centre} position in 1982 when flags were flown above Andersonstown: which to Mr Millar's disappointment, the RUC had not taken down. The difference in this case, however, was that there was now a deliberate campaign by Sinn Fein to take over the Centre. They wanted to show they controlled everything in republican areas. White Rock had become a standard bearer for republicanism, and a symbol of hatred, murder and destruction. Hence the Council were quite genuinely asking for a transfer of control to DENI.

2. Mr Gault, seconder of the original resolution, spoke of people in White Rock who were under the impression that they constituted the White Rock District Council; and of the way in which the tricolour symbolised a claim of jurisdiction over Northern Ireland offensive to unionists. Mr Scott asked what efforts the Council had made to have the flag removed in the month after their original motion; Mr Millar said that no effort had been made by Council employees, because there was nothing they could, in safety, do. Mr Ward expanded on this: the Leisure Centre Manager had been asked to have the flag removed, but he had replied that he could not. The Council accepted that they could not direct one of their employees to remove the flag. To Mr Bell this was an indication of the Council's loss of control over the Centre.

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3. Mr Scott emphasised that there were no powers for his Department to take over the Leisure Centre: they could not, for example, make bye-laws for the conduct of the Centre, or charge for entry. If the Council gave up the Centre, then the Government would have to consider the position. But the act of giving it up would hand Sinn Fein the greatest propaganda coup they could hope for. His recommendation was that the Council should treat the tricolour on the Centre with the contempt it deserved: the appropriate attitude was one of lofty disdain. At Andersonstown, the flag had been left in place; finally it had disappeared and not been replaced. As he understood it, the White Rock Leisure Centre was running very well, in all respects, save the presence of the tricolour and the plaque. He repeated that there could be no question of DENI taking over; the only way the Council could provoke action would be to go into total default. He stressed again too that withdrawal by the Council would be a absolute gift to Sinn Fein in the run up to the elections.

4. Mr McCrea said that lots of Councillors knew that was the hook they were on. Had Sinn Fein been outlawed, this would never have happened. But the problem was one which would have to be faced many times in the future. Now, he asked, was Sinn Fein to be treated in cases where a local MP or Councillor would probably be invited to an event?

5. Mr Scott conceded this to be an interesting point, which would arise particularly after May, and which all should think about. The Government had never ruled out proscribing Sinn Fein; but that would not solve the problem - they would just reappear under a different name. We should look for ways of frustrating them, not play into their hands.

6. Mr Patton then made a long and animated contribution. He referred to the Belgrano debate, and the Falklands campaign generally. By analogy with that case, the security forces ought here to ensure that the Council's control of the Leisure Centre was complete. It was illegal to fly the tricolour on British

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territory (Mr Patton refused to accept correction on this point). A war had been fought for that. Those ^{he represented} wanted to run the country in peace, but wanted some respect for this attitude. Two Councillors at the meeting on Friday had said they believed in the gun. [I believe this is a reference to words or gestures by two Sinn Fein Councillors.] The attitude of the Government to the miners in Great Britain - who had been denied welfare benefits because they were deemed to be receiving payments from their union - contrasted strongly with that in Northern Ireland, where people who shot the security forces received supplementary benefit. Having lacked power since 1972, those who Mr Patton stood for were frustrated: though they had always stood by HMG, they could not take it much longer. People were being killed because they favoured the British way of life. He could not see why the flag could not be taken down by the security forces. Mr McCrea agreed with the last sentiment: the Council was asking for the flag to be taken down by the forces of law and order. Mr Millar disagreed. The Council was asking DENI to take control. Mr Patton seemed to accept this proposition too.

7. Mr Scott said that what the Council proposed would need legislation at Westminster. During the hiatus, Sinn Fein would take over. He defended the RUC and Army against the picture of the security situation painted by Mr Patton. Mr Millar emphasised that all the delegation were completely dedicated in their support for the security forces. He too blamed the present position on the de-proscription of Sinn Fein. Mr Scott stressed the impracticality of proscription: it would be quickly evaded.

8. Mr Gault said the Government was always surrendering. The Bunscoil Ghaelighe was a case in point. It was sheer provocation to unionists. He denied that such provision would have been made if, for example, Jews wished to learn through the medium of Hebrew: Mr Scott denied that that was necessarily so.

9. Mr Ashby spoke rather enigmatically. He did not think the Council should turn back on this. On television it had been publicly stated that White Rock was part of a campaign of resistance. It had been necessary for the Council to go

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through the motions of the meeting: but now the issue had been passed back to them they had a freer hand. He did not believe in gun-boat politics, but on the other hand found the Falklands analogy apt. The issue did not end at this table. Mr Scott urged that the delegation should certainly go back to the Council, and pass the message that DENI had no powers to take over the Centre. He urged against doing anything outside the law and playing into Sinn Fein's hands.

10. Mr Bell reiterated his point that the Leisure Centre management's inability to have the flag removed indicated that the Council lacks control. Mr Scott again urged that the flying of the flag should be treated with contempt, and that the staff, who ran the Centre very well, should be allowed to get on with doing that. He then turned to the legislation that would be needed for a takeover of the Centre: he was in doubt as to whether the House of Commons would be willing to pass it. Nor could he predict what view the Government would take about the grant that was made to the Council to build the Centre: there had been a number of cases where the grant had been reclaimed from Councils. One of the delegation objected that the Leisure Centre had only ever been put in White Rock at the insistence of the Government: Mr Scott denied that was so, particularly since there was no power to direct that centres should be built in particular areas.

11. Mr Patton spoke of appeasement. The Prime Minister would not have appeased, as was being done here.

12. Mr McCrea turned again to Sinn Fein elected representatives. The Minister was asking the Council to do what he would not do, that is to sit down with them. He predicted that Sinn Fein would find Belfast City Council the biggest and best publicity forum they could get. It would be very effective. Most Council members - even, for example, the lawyers - could not match Sinn Fein representatives. Mr Scott agreed that this was a worrying phenomenon, but considered that action along the lines of the resolution was guaranteed to increase the Sinn Fein vote at the elections. Mr Millar disputed that Sinn Fein would find taking over the Leisure Centre a great victory: they would have for the

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first time to find money to pay wages and lighting and heating bills. The Minister suggested that to let Sinn Fein take over would amount to letting down the Council's staff: Mr Millar said that they would have to take that into account, and would find jobs for some, but not all. Mr Ashby obscurely said that Father McPaul had a committee of 16 staff ready to take over the Centre.

13. Mr Smith now made his only contribution of the afternoon. After so many years of suffering, the law abiding people of Northern Ireland had been kicked in the teeth. He did not regard the Council's proposed action as falling into a Sinn Fein trap: people of that sort had to be met and taken on. Civil war was coming. He alluded to Comanches. The Minister could, so far as he was concerned, have his money back and Andersonstown Town Centre too. It was time loyalists called others' bluff. The Minister might put him in jail if he wished.

14. Mr Scott, concluding, said the delegation now had a clear understanding of the legal position; there was no power at present, nor one in prospect, that would enable DENI to take over White Rock Leisure Centre. He suggested they now went back and talked to the Council. Mr Millar said that he should not dismiss the possibility that another meeting would be sought; this was a decision by the majority. Mr Scott said that he would certainly meet the Council, ^{but} not to discuss the methods by which the Government might take over the Centre, though he thought that a discussion of the long term appreciation might be fruitful.

15. Mr Bell reminded the Minister that the delegation officially represented the Council: others who came to see him would come as individual parties [I take this to be a reference to the delegation lead by Mr Will Glendinning, who Mr Scott had agreed to meet, and who he will meet in the next week or two.] Mr Ashby ventured his interpretation of the meeting's message: the General had said to his NCOs "Take your men and go and get it".

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16. Mrs Whitley did not say anything at all throughout the meeting.

17. I am sorry to record the meeting at such length, but the subject matter seemed to demand a comprehensive note, and each member of the delegation seemed to be saying something different.

Thank you

A J WHYSALL

PS/MR SCOTT

19 February 1985

PBD