

E.R.

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PAB/500/BN

PS/Mr Scott (L&B)

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Mr Merifield
Mr Chesterton
Mr Carvill
Mr Abbott
Mr Reeve *o file*

L2

WHITEROCK

Introduction

I attended last night's March meeting of the Belfast City Council. The question of Whiterock arose during consideration of the Report of the Leisure Services Committee. After a debate lasting well over two hours, a motion proposing the closure of the Whiterock centre was defeated by 20 votes to 13. Whilst the DUP will continue to protest about the flying of the tricolour at Whiterock, it looks now as if their campaign to close the centre has failed.

Councillor Redpath's amendment

2. The original minutes of last night's meeting proposed only that the Report of the Leisure Services Committee should be noted. At the start of business, Councillor Alfie Redpath (UUP) sponsored an amendment to require the Town Clerk to write to the Chief Constable expressing the Council's condemnation of the flag-flying by Sinn Fein and calling upon the RUC to take appropriate action. He said that the Council should not seek to close the Centre since that would be playing into Sinn Fein's hands. Nor did he see any point in asking for a further meeting with Mr Scott since the Minister's views were clear. A letter to the Chief Constable was the only sensible course. This genuine attempt to defuse the issue was bitterly opposed by Councillor Sammy Wilson (DUP) who accused the Official Unionists of a 'sell-out'. When it came to a vote, Councillor Redpath's amendment was defeated by the combined votes of the DUP, Sinn Fein and the SDLP.

CONFIDENTIAL

Councillor Millar's amendment

3. At this point, a second amendment was proposed by Councillor Frank Millar Snr (Ind Unionist). Mr Millar's amendment called on the Council to seek another meeting with Mr Scott and to declare that, if no action was taken to remove the flag within a month, the Council should close the Centre down. Mr Millar's frequent references to the Falklands conflict and Mrs Thatcher's determination to remove the Argentinian flag from British soil drew strong support from the DUP benches and cries of derision from Sinn Fein. Several Official Unionists spoke against the motion as too did the SDLP, Sinn Fein and People's Democracy. The crucial contribution however came from Councillor Will Glendinning (Alliance). He made it clear that, after months of wrangling, the crunch had been reached. Councillors who supported Mr Millar's amendment would be voting to close the Centre - because Mr Scott had no intention of taking Whiterock over - and would have to take the consequences for their decision if action were taken in the courts. Drawing on his recent meeting with Mr Scott and legal advice from Councillors Napier and Cook, Mr Glendinning warned the DUP that they faced the prospect of a massive surcharge if they voted to shut the Centre. When the vote was eventually taken, Mr Millar's amendment received the support of the DUP and one or two independent unionists but was easily defeated. Sinn Fein and the SDLP were joined by Alliance and a number of Official Unionist Councillors in voting against the amendment.

Conclusion

4. It is hard to see how the DUP can continue their campaign for closure since it is clear that they no longer have the support of the other Unionist councillors. Common sense has at last prevailed and it seems unlikely that the issue will come before the Council again. Nevertheless, the DUP can be expected to exploit the 'weakness' of the Official Unionists over the closure issue during the forthcoming elections. Cries of 'Lundy' could be heard as the vote was taken.

5. During the debate, Councillor Alex Maskey (Sinn Fein) admitted that the decision to fly the flag had been taken only because Mr Adams was not invited to attend the Whiterock opening ceremony. That decision

E.R.

CONFIDENTIAL

-3-

has provoked a series of bitterly sectarian debates inside the Council chamber; has split the DUP and Official Unionists; has forced the SDLP to support and vote alongside Sinn Fein; and has handed Sinn Fein an unexpected propaganda victory. If two councillors out of 51 can achieve so much it suggests that Sinn Fein's impact after the May elections could be quite considerable.

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Political Affairs Division

12 March 1985

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