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Arts Council of Northern Ireland

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11 December 1989

Gordon McKeown Esq.,
Department of Education,
Rathgael House,
Balloo Road,
BANGOR, Co. Down.

Dear Gordon *McKeown*
13/12.

Mr. Jordan
As discussed, I attach a draft
letter to Central Secretariat for
consideration.

McKeown
14/12/89

November.

At its meeting on 7 December the Board considered your letter of 2 December concerning arts events in Conway Mill. There was a wide-ranging debate as a result of which I have been asked to communicate the following matters to the Department:

1. The Board accepts that if the Government insists on pursuing the ban on activities in or based on Conway Mill, the Council has no option but to comply since it is a condition of grant. However the Board is extremely concerned that the Department's letter of 2 November is a confused and inappropriate instrument, agreeing on the one hand "that the Arts Council itself would have no information upon which to form a view as to paramilitary influence on Conway Mill", yet maintaining its own satisfaction that to assist an activity in the Mill would "give rise to a grave risk of clearly improving the standing and furthering the aims of a paramilitary organisation".
2. The Board noted that no objection has been made to the funding of particular proposed events but only to the location. There is much concern that the public at large and the community in the locality will not easily grasp this distinction, and that other persons may exploit the difficulty of perception. This problem could be compounded by the silence regarding clear and specific reasons for believing the holding of such events in Conway Mill would give rise to the "grave risk" you mention, especially in view of other seemingly harmless events relevant to daily life which do take place in Conway Mill.
3. Fulfilment of the objective of the Cultural Traditions' initiative and several of the Arts Council's continuing programmes, notably Traditional Arts and Community Arts, requires Arts Council officers to be active in communities throughout Northern Ireland and to be accepted in those communities. Grave concern was expressed that a prohibition of the type set out in your letter, applied to arts events which afford no evident or demonstrable improvement to the standing of a

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paramilitary organisation or furtherance of its aims, will politicise the work of the Arts Council, will diminish the standing of the Council and its officers in the eyes of the local community and will tarnish their reputation for impartiality between the different sections and traditions of the Northern Ireland community.

4. In relation to the considerations outlined above it can be argued further, and was urged at the meeting of the Board, that withholding funds on the grounds stated in your letter strengthens the hand of paramilitary groups against moderating influences inside and outside the particular community.
5. There is a serious worry within the Board that, in an attempt to demonstrate evenhandedness, the Government may be led into instituting a similar prohibition on the funding of events in designated locations in loyalist areas. Apart from the risk that this would be widely suspected as primarily a propaganda expedient, the extension of restrictions to new locations would almost certainly damage further the work of the Arts Council, especially in its Community Arts and Cultural Traditions aspects.

In addition to the above observations the Board has instructed me to draw attention to further points concerning the letter of 2 December:

(a) It is clearly important that the Arts Council has a letter which it can use to demonstrate to applicants that it has no option in the matter of events at Conway Mill.

(b) This letter should not contain reference to one particular application (Glor na nGael) but should be couched in general terms. Glor na nGael did not pursue its application, but there is a further application to hand from a group of writers (see attached).

(c) The Department should be aware that these writers may quote from and comment on the Department's letter in literary journals and that several perfectly respectable Trusts are involved in funding events in Conway Mill.

The Board has asked me to stress that it wishes to be in a position to discharge its business without delay. You will see that the application from the writers has been in hand for some time and that the programme was to be completed on 3 December. The applicants are entitled to early consideration and decision (with explanation). The Board would therefore appreciate a quick response to this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Kew

J. Kenneth Jamison
Director

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