



Internal Memo



From: R B Spence
Permanent Secretary

Your ref:
Our ref: PSE 512/97

Tel: (5)41175/6

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To: PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

cc: PS/Mr Ingram (DED,B&L)
PS/Mr Murphy (DFP,B&L)
PS/Lord Dubs (DANI,DOE&L)
PS/Mr Worthington (DENI,DHSS&L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Sir D Fell
Mr Thomas
Mr Steele
Mr Semple
Mr Watkins
Mr McCusker
Mrs D Brown
Mrs L Brown
Mr F Woods
Mr Warner

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"REIMAGING" STORMONT

Introduction

1. This paper responds to the Secretary of State's wish to develop a strategy for changing the public image of Parliament Buildings, Stormont, in particular making it more acceptable to both sides of the community and amongst young people generally.
2. The paper describes a number of possibilities which have been discussed with appropriate colleagues and identifies some points on which a steer from the Secretary of State would be helpful.

The problem

3. Parliament Buildings is often identified as a symbol of unionist rule and is not perceived to belong to the whole community.
4. Security considerations have restricted greater use of the buildings in the Stormont Estate by the public and fuller use of the grounds as a public park.
5. There is also sensitivity over the costs of restoring Parliament Buildings after the fire and the risk of criticism about spending priorities.

The name

6. The forthcoming reoccupation of Parliament Buildings provides an opportunity to re-consider its name. The word "Stormont" is frequently used to describe the building but the present, correct address is Parliament Buildings. There is, however, unlikely ever to be a "Parliament" in the building again.
7. Suitable alternative names are not, however, easy to find. There is a risk of continued confusion with Stormont Castle and Stormont House. There is already an "Assembly Buildings" in Belfast. "Government Offices, Stormont" is too bland. Dublin still has buildings named after the Irish Parliament which disappeared at the start of the 19th Century. Any change of name could attract criticism, particularly from Unionists.
8. On balance, it seems best to continue with the present name and to leave any new Northern Ireland Assembly to agree any name change.

Reoccupying the building

9. It had been the intention to handle the reoccupation of Parliament Buildings in a low key way. However, there is a case for a more positive approach. The successful refurbishment of the building is an impressive story with good examples of fine craftsmanship by workers from both sides of the community. Moreover, there is the powerful image of the unfinished Commons Chamber awaiting agreement amongst the local political parties.
10. I would, therefore, recommend that Ministers use the reoccupation of the building to start the process of reimagining Parliament Buildings, through release of stories about the quality of the workmanship and through photo opportunities involving the Secretary of State talking to young people in her new office, and perhaps showing them the Commons Chamber.
11. My minute of 29 July advised against the idea of holding a public event in the Stormont Estate in early September because it would be difficult to organise a successful event at short notice and such an event would be unlikely, at this stage, to attract cross-community support.
12. We were approached subsequently, in a very tentative way, about the possibility of mounting the forthcoming U2 Concert at Stormont. We concluded quickly that it would be impractical to mount a 20-30,000 person concert there. The organisers were also alive to the possibility that they could have encountered strong objections from local residents.

The public and tourists

13. Parliament Buildings used to be a regular venue on organised and casual tourist visits and the Stormont Estate was in the past a popular public park.
14. Subject always to security advice, it is recommended that controlled public access to part of the building should be promoted. This might be restricted initially to:-
 - 14.1 week days - prebooking by organised groups; and
 - 14.2 week ends - public access through guided tours at specified times.
15. Work has been initiated to determine how this proposal can be developed quickly. It is intended to target school groups in particular. There will be additional costs, for example, in terms of employing trained guides and extra security costs - which will have to be quantified. Charging for admission is not felt to be appropriate, at least initially.
16. Work has also started on a permanent exhibition which would, in a politically balanced way, tell the story of Parliament Buildings and the Stormont Estate. From the early discussion, we believe that this can be done in a fair and entertaining way which could incorporate many of the old unionist artefacts without causing offence to nationalists. We would test the proposed exhibition with representatives from both sides of the community before it is finalised.
17. There is also the possibility of using the facilities to mount a permanent art exhibition by local artists and by school children, which would be accessible by the public.

Public hospitality

18. Parliament Buildings is a fine setting for official hospitality by Ministers and Departments and has, in the past, been much appreciated by visitors. There is no reason why this should not be revived.
19. There is also the possibility of reviving the use of the premises by responsible organisations, including charities, for functions. Any function with a party political connection would, as in the past, be declined.

Official functions

20. There is scope for using the facilities for major conferences and seminars. As an example, DOE is considering the use of the Senate Chamber for a debate amongst young people about "Shaping our Future": the regional development strategy for Northern Ireland.
21. Parliament Buildings offers also a splendid location for hosting foreign dignitaries and might be used for events during the UK Presidency of the European Union.

The public park

22. Again, subject to security considerations, greater use of the Stormont grounds as a public park should be encouraged. This might require some additional costs in patrolling the grounds to minimise the risk of vandalism.

23. There is, perhaps, a need to examine how the grounds might be made more interesting for young children. Specialist advice will be sought, including on the possibility of creating a childrens' play area.

The playing fields

24. The Maynard Sinclair Pavilion and the playing fields are under the management of the Civil Service Sports Association and Sports Social Club. These are extensively used by civil servants and, over the years, strenuous efforts are made to attract playing members from adjacent communities.
25. The facilities are used to host interprovincial sporting events. Significantly within the last few weeks, the Irish Cricket Union (an all-Ireland body) has selected Stormont as the venue for international cricket matches, which will mean that visiting touring teams like the West Indies will be playing there.
26. The Sports Association are keen to co-operate in encouraging greater use of their facilities and to host sporting events which would enjoy cross-community support. There is the scope, subject to adequate private sector and other sponsorship being secured, in mounting more sporting events.

"Events in the Park"

27. It should become feasible to mount, over the next year, a series of events in the Stormont Estate which could help to reposition the area in the public perception. The shopping list would include:-

27.1 a fireworks display, though the costs could be substantial - £50-75,000;

- 27.2 classical and other musical events in the main hall of Parliament Buildings or the Commons Chamber;
- 27.3 more popular events for families and young people in the Estate;
- 27.4 a major pop concert in the summer of 1998; a local events promoter is currently examining this option for us; and
- 27.5 relocating the annual Hillsborough Garden Party to the Stormont Estate or holding a special garden party-type event for young people at Stormont on a Saturday in late June 1998.

Symbols

- 28. The task of repositioning Stormont in the minds of the nationalist side of the community is hampered by the presence of Carson's statue and Craigavon's tomb. Unionists would be horrified by any attempt to move these monuments or probably even to match them with nationalist equivalents.
- 29. Another option might be to make Parliament Buildings the place where the community honours Northern Irish people from both sides who have achieved world class standing in the arts, sport, medicine, science, business, etc. This might be done by recording their names permanently on, say, the steps up to Parliament Buildings, along with a simple video presentation in the Main Hall about the people and their achievements. This idea is being developed further in the context of initiatives which might be taken over the next few months. It would assist in wider efforts to build greater self confidence across the whole community and a shared pride in the achievements of local people.

Costs

30. The measures described above will cost money and care will have to be taken to secure clear Parliamentary approval for any expenditure.
31. In very rough terms, we may be considering £200,000+ in the current financial year with up to £500,000 in a full financial year. This would include capital and running expenditure. These are, however, crude figures which will have to be refined. There is no current public expenditure provision for this expenditure and it would have to be found by reductions in other budgets.

Task Force

32. A small task force is being set up under the leadership of Mrs Linda Brown, Director of DOE's Central Management and Policy Unit, to take this work forward. It will include representatives from DFP, other parts of DOE and other relevant interests. The Task Force may need to seek specialist advice in marketing and other matters.

Conclusion

33. The Secretary of State is invited to:-
 - 33.1 agree that no change should be made at present to the name of Parliament Buildings;
 - 33.2 agree to use the reoccupation of the building to start the process of changing its image;

- 33.3 agree that Parliament Buildings should be revived as a tourist venue with controlled public access;
- 33.4 agree to the mounting of a permanent and politically balanced exhibition of the building's history;
- 33.5 agree to use of the building for hospitality by Government, functions by responsible non-political organisations, and hosting suitable conferences;
- 33.6 agree to develop the public park, with particular reference to encouraging greater use by young people;
- 33.7 agree to encourage use of the playing fields for top quality sporting events, including interprovincial and international matches;
- 33.8 agree to develop a programme of "events in the park", including a young peoples' garden party;
- 33.9 agree to explore ways to honour at Parliament Buildings, Northern Irish people with world class achievements;
- 33.10 to note that these measures will require additional expenditure with further work needed to refine the figures;
- 33.11 to note that a Task Force led by DOE will take forward detailed consideration of the measures which the Secretary of State endorses; and
- 33.12 to recognise that security considerations may, at any time, require alteration or postponement of some or all of these measures.

34. I would be happy to discuss this paper and to involve appropriate colleagues in that discussion.

RBS

R B SPENCE