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from the Permanent Secretary
G Loughran

PSDED 0622/97

cc PS/Secretary of State
(B&L)
PS/Mr Murphy (DFP,B&L)
PS/Mr Ingram (DED,B&L)
PS/Lord Dubs
(DANI,DOE&L)
PS/Mr Worthington
(DENI,DHSS&L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Mr Semple
NI Permanent Secretaries
PSG
Mr Steele
Mr Thomas
Mr Watkins
Mr Woods
TF

1 - Secretary
J. Mr Holmes

See 12/11
All copy to Mr Jordan + Lord
for discussion with Minister.

To: Mr Spence

2/11

From: G Loughran

"BELFAST UNITED"

Thank you for copying to me your minute of 24 November. If the Secretary of State is to commit her prestige to this proposition, we should surely first address some relevant questions:

- (1) In football terms, Northern Ireland is a separate jurisdiction from England (we are governed by the Irish Football Association). Are we satisfied that the Football Association in England, the Irish FA and the European Football Union will not object to a team from one jurisdiction playing in the domestic competition of another?
- (2) Continuing on the jurisdictional theme, football in Northern Ireland is organised by the IFA and the Irish League. Have we consulted these Northern Ireland football authorities? Is it possible that the properly constituted football authorities in Northern Ireland would have strong views on a proposal of this kind?

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Secretary's Office
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(3) Why is it assumed that both communities would unite behind a Belfast United football team? They do not unite behind the Northern Ireland football team. 7 ✓

(4) It is at least as possible that Belfast United will attract only one side of the community and thus become another focus for sectarianism, even if the stadium is not located, as proposed, in East Belfast.

How will Government sponsorship/support for participation in the English game be seen in the Nationalist community?

(5) How do we know there is a strong demand for this type of initiative? Soccer does not attract large numbers of spectators in Northern Ireland. The international side attracts small crowds of 9 or 10,000. Top Irish League games attract no more than 3 or 4,000.

One of the reasons for this relatively low level of support is the strength of other sports, particularly GAA. Top inter-county GAA games attract 30-40,000. Top inter-club GAA games attract larger crowds than Irish league football.

It may be argued that we could capture people from here who travel to watch Manchester United, Liverpool, Celtic and Rangers. I think they will continue to travel. These bonds are for life and the passion never dulls (for further reading, see Nick Hornby).

(6) You suggest Wimbledon (Belfast United) would perform "at the top level in English and European competitions". This is a brave prediction. Wimbledon is not at the top of the Premiership (it is not called the Premier League) and not at all in Europe.

(7) This is a very shaky business proposal. It appears to depend on many IOU's and a dose of taxpayer's funds.

The economics of top football is now analysed by the markets. There is an emerging consensus among analysts that it is largely a loss-making type of business. In England only a few clubs make money. Some would say that this is as it should be. Football fans, including club

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owners, are in the game because they love it. As Bill Shankley said: "football is not a matter of life and death; it is more important".

- (8) Is there any guarantee that a team in the Premiership will stay there? The consequences of relegation, in business terms as well as levels of support, can be quite interesting. Ask Manchester City, Norwich, Ipswich and in the second division in England, Oldham.

I suggest some if not all of the questions above need to be addressed before the Secretary of State's name is invoked in support of this proposal.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Gerry'.

for GERRY LOUGHRAN

26 November 1997

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