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Dear David

SINN FEIN OFFICES

Paul Coulson's letter and draft of 19 June reminded me that I had not contributed to the build up of a comprehensive picture of activity which you explained in your note of 17 April. I think you will understand the reasons for the delay and I hope I am not too late in attempting to make amends.

When, at the time, I discussed the subject with my colleagues, I found their views suggested that the overall picture reflected concentrated activity in the Sinn Fein camp was being directed at success in the then forthcoming local government elections. It seemed their offices were less concerned about the role of advice centres and, instead, had become the HQs for local candidates and their election staff. We were inclined to wait and see; we felt that the inevitable success of Sinn Fein in some areas might bring a change in the set-up with probably a bolder and more "official" image emerging as the advice centre became both the branch office of the Party and the place where their elected representative would conduct his regular surgery.

So far there has been no noticeable attempt to build up the status of the offices - perhaps this would be unnecessary anyway! But, again, the settling-in period is far from over. However, there has been a considerable change in approach during recent weeks. Colleagues as far apart as Woodbourne and Londonderry have reported that instead of having to contend with the previous bad-mannered demands for information, usually made by junior staff, all is much more friendly. The "old pals" act is being practiced and we now get polite requests rather than angry complaints.

In Londonderry contact is nearly always with the Councillors. Some time prior to 15 May, Ollie McGinn had refused to accept further telephone calls from cheeky females - as he called them - who were operating the advice centres during office hours. The Councillors are now conducting their business with him personally and there has been a marked improvement in relations. McGinn also told me that embarrassment was short lived following the find of a cache

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of explosives, masks etc in premises nextdoor to the Sandeville Terrace centre and it was soon back to business as usual.

McGinn believes the Councillors in Londonderry are very keen to be seen as guardians of the limited public purse. They have put an end to the junkets which allowed Councillors and their wives to enjoy cross-channel trips to visit new civic developments. They wish to impress that they are acting for the good of the whole community and they want to appear much more conscientious about judicious spending than any of their rivals. In particular, they are intent on wooing support away from the SDLP. Our Political Division will know much more about this scene but you will realise how necessary it is for McGinn to be exceedingly careful in dealing with "innocent" questions.

In other Councils where, to date, they have remained reasonably quiet, we reckon that the Sinn Fein members are getting to know the ropes and will eventually make themselves heard. We think they will not be put off by tactics being used against them where they are much the minority group. One Councillor told a Civ Rep "...we are used to having a rough time".

Whether they are in command, holding the balance or simply left with a few crumbs from the Council table, there seems to be little doubt that before long Sinn Fein will use their advice centres to a much greater extent than we have previously experienced. We see the centres as a source of supply for information about local cases which appear on the Council agenda or otherwise come to their attention. The majority of the elected representatives will be urged to become the crusaders for those whose applications have been refused, the aggrieved who are fighting a losing battle against authority. This will encourage the resentful to seek help through the centres' machinery - and success builds success. I am not suggesting that Loyalists will be turning to Sinn Fein for help but I know there are claims that Mr Paisley strenuously fights the cases of people in North Antrim who will never be Unionists!

You will recall from performances at the PLC, how some members persist with proposals because they are just as anxious to enhance their reputations as to see things done. They know that reputations count in the constituencies. There is the classic tale about the woman who was having trouble with a fire-place. She told her neighbours "...the Housing Executive and the Coal Advisory Service wouldn't touch it but I spoke to Seamus Lynch and he fixed it". Sinn Fein representatives will continue to publicly pronounce about the right of Irish people to engage in an armed struggle et... but they will spend more time working from their advice centres to establish a parallel reputation as the persons who can "fix it".

We expect the advice centres to come into more open competition with other groups set up to help. There was a recent case in Andersonstown where the complainant had gone to talk to the Citizens Advice Bureau and, like many others who will try to use all the agencies available, turned to Sinn Fein before CAB had been given enough time to deal with his problem. At Connolly House he was asked why he hadn't called there in the first place. The Citizens Advice Bureaux will need to keep on its toes and may require support.

During a Selection Board last month, we interviewed a number of candidates from the DHSS Fraud Investigation staff and had interesting discussions with officers based in the Dungannon/Omagh areas. We were told about the growing activities of certain Welfare Rights Groups who specialise in advice - even to claiming equipment for gardening. It was thought that the groups were Sinn Fein motivated and controlled. (We will be pursuing this line quietly on the ground).

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Another officer suggested DHSS would have much to gain in setting up its own advice centres well apart from the existing Social Security offices in these and similar towns.

I am sorry to have gone on at such a length particularly about our forecast of a situation which, in the long run, may not materialise. However, we think the omens of an early development are there and we want to be ready for it.

To meet the main request in your letter at last, I enclose schedules of information assembled both before and after the local government elections. Most of this has been discreetly checked with Police and Army specialists. I have nothing to add at present but it is proposed to review the situation at the end of the summer when the advice centres may be expected to become more active.

Yours ever

Jack

J H DUNLOP
Principal Civil Representative

PS: I heard to-day that during the recent spate of compensation claims in the Crossmaglen area, none of the locals took their case to the advice centre. John Patton believes there was a general feeling abroad that claims would fare better without the Sinn Féin tag!

J.

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