

V ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY

5.1 The problem

On almost all indices of social and economic deprivation, West Belfast comes out badly. There is high unemployment, especially among the male population, severe overcrowding in houses, high rates of petty crime and of more serious crime. The private sector is weak, health care is poor, and educational achievement still falls well below the average in Northern Ireland.

Unemployment

5.2 In parts of CWB, unemployment for economically active males is still over 50%. The numbers claiming unemployment benefit in the relevant wards is 7356. That constitutes 7.40% of the total unemployed in Northern Ireland, and of those 62.6% have been unemployed for over a year. The population aged 16-65 in West Belfast constitutes 4.68% of the total population of those ages in Northern Ireland (Source: 1981 census). Those in work are generally in unskilled jobs, or working in service retail industries. Part-time jobs for women and low pay also tend to characterise employment in the area. Employment is one of the factors that can work against terrorism over a period of time by offering a valid alternative and improved life style. It also performs the important function of reducing the grievances that can be felt by individuals within the community.

5.3 The physical environment of large parts of the Belfast Urban Area is below average, and West Belfast is amongst the worst. This is one area in which improvements have

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Source? c/f. 3.2.

undoubtedly occurred over the past two years of the Making Belfast Work project, and will continue to do so in the next few years. Derelict houses for example are now less common, and will, it is hoped be minimal by 1992.

- 5.4 In the past, the Government has always assumed that by investing in Belfast as a whole, so the problems facing West Belfast would also be alleviated through the 'trickle down' effect. However this has not thus far worked. Part of the problem facing the Government is the unwillingness of those living in West Belfast to accept employment outside the area. Even the city centre is considered out of bounds for many people. They have been born and brought up in certain well-defined areas, and do not wish to leave those areas, largely because the community is securely based there and people are reluctant to move beyond those (self-imposed) boundaries. Mobility is also affected by the perception of hostile security policy involving frequent VCPs on the main arterial routes out of CWB. That is a reflection on the security situation but affects all walks of life, reinforcing people's unwillingness to travel out of the area.

Education

- 5.5 Education is recognised to be the most efficient way of increasing the opportunities of people entering the job market. The lower levels of qualifications of those living in West Belfast compared to other areas of Northern Ireland is thus a cause for great concern.
- 5.6 The education of the young will continue to be of great importance, because of the high birth rate in CWB. There are already proportionally more people of school age living there than in the rest of Belfast. In West Belfast 25.4% of the population are under 14, whereas the Belfast Urban

Area (BUA) average is 21.0%. (Source: Greater Belfast Area Household Survey 1985). Half of the school-going population in Northern Ireland is Catholic. DENI are examining the funding arrangements for maintained schools in Northern Ireland which differ from Scotland by only offering 85% grant rather than full grant.

- 5.7 Education of those who have already left school is also important. There is a need to train the unemployed, to equip them to be able to find work. A new education centre at Whiterock performs this function for the CWB area. Vocational training has been vastly increased, and where possible it has been situated within the area of disadvantage - thereby making it more likely that those in greatest need will attend. The aim is that once young people have developed, through training, skills to enable them to do jobs, they will have the confidence to go outside West Belfast to find jobs, for example, in the Castle Court complex. Debenhams, one of the major employers there, have already signified their intention to employ people in large numbers from CWB.
- 5.8 It is also noteworthy that the new plans for integrated education contained in the Education (NI) Order are not likely to affect the working-class areas of East or West Belfast quickly. Those religiously homogenous areas will be provided for by schools of similar composition. It is in the more middle-class mixed areas that the concept of integrated education is likely to be most appealing. Thus the anticipated conciliatory effects of integrated education may be a long time coming to CWB.

Housing

- 5.9 Compared with the situation in 1972, the standard of housing has improved greatly and continues to do so. The

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amounts that need to be spent on repairs compare well with most of the other deprived areas in Belfast. However overcrowding remains a major problem. 17% of households have insufficient bedrooms to meet needs. The number of houses in West Belfast with 5 or more inhabitants is 27.3% compared with the BUA average of 15.4%. There are 16.8% of houses in WB that have between 1 and 3 bedrooms below standard compared to the BUA average of 8.6%. (Source of all figures in this para is Greater Belfast Area Household Survey 1985)

- 5.10 Owner occupation rates are very low in West Belfast. In West Belfast there is 41.8% owner occupation - the Belfast average is 54.6%. (Source: Greater Belfast Household Survey 1985). The proportion of Catholic families in maintained housing has risen in recent years as greater numbers of Protestants have taken up the offers on buying council houses. Increasingly thus, public sector housing is becoming predominantly Catholic housing. Therefore, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is, and is likely to remain, one of the most important arms of government in West Belfast. It is relied upon to maintain the houses of the majority of those who live there, and effect repairs speedily and effectively. This is more immediately the case following house searches in which structural damage may have been done, or the house may have been left potentially vulnerable to burglary. NIHE has special teams on call 24 hours a day who respond promptly to such calls.

Attitudes to Welfare

- 5.11 Local people may not agree with the form of government in Northern Ireland, but they are keen to ensure they gain all that they are entitled from the State. Claiming Social Security benefit whether working or not is one example of this, as is the practice of claiming compensation, whether

from "tripping" over paving stones (a malaise which whole families and streets have been known to suffer from) or claiming as a result of one of the manifestations of terrorism is another. The paramilitaries recognise the importance of this and Sinn Fein actively encourage people to claim their entitlement as well as making people aware of other benefits they could make use of. This is a good example of community politics in operation. Their links to paramilitaries also ensure local people do not suffer direct financial loss from intimidation. At various times local social security offices have been threatened. Once the employees go on strike in retaliation, it is a matter of hours before the threat is lifted. Those who would suffer would be those who support or sympathise with Sinn Fein and/or PIRA.

Making Belfast Work

- 5.12 In addition to the normal services provided by the Northern Ireland Departments, HMG has targeted the specific needs of the disadvantaged areas of Belfast (and that includes areas of North and Central Southern Belfast as well as the West) since 1988 with the launching of the "Making Belfast Work" project. In the five years from its launch, an extra £92.5m will have been invested in those areas. One of the principal objectives has been to try and introduce a business base in areas which currently do not have a substantial one such as West Belfast. The main new development has been the establishment of 8 Belfast Action Teams (BATs) throughout the MBW area, each of which consists of a Civil Servant at Principal grade who has been given £0.5m per annum to spend on projects within their area of responsibility. The BATs will continue until March 1991, and cover other disadvantaged areas as well as Catholic West Belfast.

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5.13 The Making Belfast Work project has concentrated on four distinct activities: creating jobs; increasing access to employment; improving the physical environment; and ensuring better living conditions for those least able to help themselves. There have been successes. Inward investment has been secured from Montupet and this will generate 1000 new jobs on the former DeLorean site in Dunmurry. Local enterprise centres have been set up in 5 areas of West Belfast. Funding for these has primarily come from public funds in conjunction with other voluntary organisations as well the International Fund for Ireland. Job clubs have helped place nearly a 1000 people in employment. LEDU (Local Enterprise Development Unit) has played an important role in helping new and existing businesses (although it is perceived to be over-cautious in its backing of new ventures.) 500 (admittedly temporary) extra ACE jobs have been established, giving the occupants at least work experience.

5.14 Urban development grants have been made available to improve the physical environment. Arterial routes have been improved. Derelict and blocked up houses are being demolished or renovated. In terms of community health, a major immunisation drive has been launched that should see 90% immunisation by the end of 1990. Help from within the community for those elderly people and others who cannot help themselves is also being funded.

5.15 Fair Employment

The Fair Employment Act will not per se increase employment in West Belfast. The current imbalance often quoted is that Catholics are 2½ times as likely to be unemployed as Protestants (taking Northern Ireland as a whole). The Act will increase opportunities for fairer employment practices to become widespread. The rise in opportunity will not

immediately or necessarily reduce the inequalities in employment, however. Catholic West Belfast has considerable social apathy, and a higher high school age population meaning more Catholics than Protestants (proportionally) will be joining the job market. These factors need to be recognised, and opportunities provided to ensure they do not become insurmountable problems in the future. The high proportion of young people entering the job market is especially significant, and their successful location in employment would be an important step.

- 5.16 One of the challenges in the operation of the Act is the encouragement to those of school leaving age to enrol in job training courses which under the Act can be tailored towards one religion even if not exclusively run for that religion. It has been argued that the lack of religion-specific training will weaken the legislation. However under the law an employer with a low Catholic proportion in his workforce could start a training scheme in Catholic West Belfast to attract more applicants from that area. Alternatively the Fair Employment Commission could direct him to do so. The cost, however, would not be met by DED.
- 5.17 The effectiveness of the Act will largely depend on how many teeth the Fair Employment Commission is prepared to show in areas such as these. Job creation is essential if the opportunities for employment are in fact to become better. Opportunities have been offered by the Fair Employment Act but job losses in other fields will only go to ensure that no progress is made. Therefore the Government's strategy might best be to ally the fair employment legislation to a sustained period of investment aimed at providing in areas of high Catholic unemployment new jobs and securing existing ones. Only by doing this

can the employment situation improve both proportionately and in terms of total numbers.

Community Relations

- 5.18 The recently established central community relations unit (CCRU) and the Community Relations Council have a crucial role to play in breaking down the barriers that exist between the different communities at present. Their job will be made easier by an improvement in the conditions of life in West Belfast. The change in attitudes required to make this a reality is something that is likely to take a long time. The focus on reducing community differentials, and the acceptance by Ministers of the importance of securing equality are central to the efforts being made.

Community Grants

- 5.19 There has been some criticism over the Making Belfast Work scheme because of the perception that in CWB it concentrates too heavily on Church-based activities. The reasons for this are obvious - the Church is 'safe' because it is not paramilitary run. However, the refusal to grant funds to other seemingly "worthy" causes because of the co-location with paramilitary-run companies or due to other significant, if not central, personnel links with paramilitary organisations has caused community resentment. Whilst the grants the Government offers must be on its own terms, and it would be indefensible for the Government to give grants to any bodies that might use it for terrorism or any connected purpose, the people of CWB nevertheless see the current policy as further evidence of government interference on a discriminatory and unaccountable basis in their community. There are currently 18 cases of ACE funding having been withdrawn (overall and not just in CWB). The local community does

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not understand how the Government's rhetoric about improving the economic situation in West Belfast can be aligned with the community grants policy. This problem of presentation goes back to Douglas Hurd's statement to the House in 1985, and is a contributory factor in the common view that the Government is not seriously interested in helping the people of CWB. It may now be time for an appraisal of this policy.

Economic terrorism

- 5.20 In recent times, the terrorists have concentrated less on economic targets than in the 1970s, although they have disrupted new developments such as the Castle Court complex, and before Christmas 1989 showed signs of resurrecting the bombings of city centres with the successful bombings of Lisburn and Londonderry and their failed attempt in Belfast. It is always conceivable that PIRA will re-institute widescale attacks in an attempt to disrupt the economy if they perceive that economic regeneration is succeeding and increasingly people are being drawn into employment rather than terrorism and crime.

Continuing difficulties with community perception of Government

- 5.21 Despite the money that the Making Belfast Work project has injected, there remains widespread scepticism about the willingness to address the problems of West Belfast properly. The amounts being spent on MBW are compared to the hundreds of millions used to bail out Harland and Wolff and Shorts to save jobs in East Belfast. Councillor McDonnell (SDLP) recently criticised governmental efforts, arguing not enough money was being spent in West Belfast. Even allowing for his desire to make political capital in advance of the selection of the SDLP parliamentary

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candidate for West Belfast, this accusation is one that strikes a chord with many in the area. Certainly if Mackies were to go under, the whole governmental economic strategy in West Belfast would be severely compromised, and it would be difficult to convince anyone of HMG's good intent. If Mackies move their location as is under consideration it is planned to turn the current site into a large centre for industrial and service activities creating substantial numbers of new jobs.

- 5.22 The Making Belfast Work project is seen and generally acknowledged as a significant step in the right direction, but there is scepticism about the long term benefits that will accrue to the area. ACE, YTP jobs and training programmes are all of some benefit, but what is needed is a process of creating and maintaining full-time employment prospects for people in the area in the long term. There is still a long way to go before that is achieved.
- 5.23 More fundamentally, in the battle for hearts and minds, the Government has to weigh up the need to bring terrorism to an end on the one hand, and the need to remove the poor economic and social conditions that play a part in perpetuating it on the other. The two should be mutually reinforcing but there are undoubtedly areas of tension between the two broad objectives when it comes to considering specific policies and the relative priorities attached to each. Part of the difficulty, but only part, can be attributed to a lack of security force awareness of the surrounding circumstances of the areas in which they operate. Another factor is HMG's stated determination that no grants should be awarded to groups which could enhance the operation of paramilitaries. This is an understandable position to take, but it is not seen by local people as working in the community's best interests. The Republican Movement's economic activities are unlikely to be seriously

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disrupted by any governmental action. The danger is that such action harms other non-paramilitary activity and effectively perpetrates rather than helping to solve the problem.

Looking Ahead

- 5.24 A number of people have suggested that the only way to lessen paramilitary influence is to break down the strong community spirit, by encouraging greater flexibility in working and living patterns. However desirable this may be, it would be extremely difficult for any government to bring it about. Those implementing current policies which provide opportunities and train people in West Belfast still need those being trained to be more willing to seek employment outside the area. This combined with the setting up of legitimate business within West Belfast would help to lessen PIRA's hold over the community.
- 5.25 In five years time, West Belfast is likely to have a better physical infrastructure, more local business and greater number of people fully equipped to take jobs as a result of the MBW initiative. However the basic structural problems including high unemployment are likely to persist. The Government is investing money and introducing structures within the community, but always with the view that it could pull out once the five year programme is completed. The community therefore needs to take control as far as possible of the projects that are being initiated now. Community ownership also increases the likelihood of physical survival of projects as they will be seen as local schemes not government ones.

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