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FRC P N BELL
SECURITY POLICY AND OPERATIONS DIVISION
DATE: 20 MAY 1991

UNDER/ 657/5
SEC

21 MAY 1991

CENT-SEC

Mr McCartney

cc Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Wilson o/r
Mr Hamilton - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr McNeill - B
Mr Petch - B
Mrs Collins
Mr McKervill
Mr Watson, Prin CIVREP

1. MR M^c G²¹ S. 9.
2. MR Walker 23/5 to see
3. MR ~~Wilson~~ 21/5 return M

21/5

INTO THE ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE - WEST BELFAST

On 9 May, I did for West Belfast what I did a little earlier for North Belfast - and which you will rightly tax me for not having done much more often: have a conducted tour with a Civil Representative. My aim was, once again, to acquire at least more visual impressions of places with which I am more familiar on paper, but without receiving these through a police or Army filter.

2. I will not weary you with details. My abiding impression, however, was one of being a character in a science fiction novel who had slipped into an alternative universe. I like to think of myself as having a reasonable knowledge of Belfast, having lived here on and off for many years now, and socialising in the city to a greater degree than many of my HCS colleagues. Yet I found myself in areas whose names I know very well indeed and which visually quite closely resemble parts of the city I do know well; from which, too I could often see familiar land marks in the distance; but which were nevertheless, the main artery of the Falls excepted, almost as strange to me as the Forbidden City would have been to a Chinese before 1911. I think I am not alone in Belfast in having this view of the West of the City.

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3. That pervasive almost dream-like sense of unfamiliar familiarity was, in fact, stronger than the more obvious differences in the folk murals, graffiti or flags (which helped, of course, to reinforce it). Only once, however, in the heart of Ballymurphy, did I find myself in an area which I thought as frightening as it was depressing; it could serve without alteration as a Derek Jarman film set. (I was only slightly reassured to find later the 'Rough Guide to Ireland' also regards this as the most depressing part of the entire City.)

4. Apart from such occasional mysteries - that it should have been a mystery is itself revealing - as why no children appeared to be at school (it turned out to be Ascension Day), my main other impressions, in no particular order were: how oppressive it must be, most notably in the Clonard area, to live in a small street right up against a peace line. (Given my guide, I saw - and heard - a lot about peace lines and gates.) This, and the anecdotes of sectarian attacks over that line Mr Stewart gave me, intensified my sensation of having passed into another world. (And also convinced me of why many, at least, need to remain.) Then the variety of the area. It has long been an Office common-place that West Belfast is a collection of villages about which generalisations are dangerous. But I was not prepared to be made so quickly aware just how different areas were: from the suburbia in the further West and the shopping centre at Andersonstown which could be anywhere, to the different varieties of prosperity or dereliction in different housing estates. Most striking of all the beautiful - there is no other word - redevelopment being carried out by the NIHE right at the foot of the rotting cliff of Divis. Although this is one of the most attractive developments I have seen anywhere, I was struck not for the first time just what the Housing Executive has done to improve the basic fabric of Belfast and Northern Ireland generally.

5. One could not avoid the security force presence: from the 'futuristic/medieval' security force bases round the area to the high level of patrolling that day (not confined, however, to the West of the city). Nobody seemed to be taking any notice of the

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police and soldiers, however. This I would regard as a good sign: the sooner the police and Army are regarded by most people, most of the time, as irrelevant to their concerns (albeit supportive, when they have difficulties), the better. On one occasion, however, my guide pointed out to me an example of 'insensitive' police behaviour. When booking a motorist outside Fort Whiterock, the policeman on duty contrived to generate quite a long tail-back. It seemed he could have booked the offender by pulling him to the side, and letting the other traffic go by. This kind of behaviour, I was told, was no means unusual and suggestions that it might be changed are not, on the whole, well received in 'B' Division. Nevertheless these are the kind of small improvements that can, and ought to be made.

6. In short, a very profitable and long morning spent curbing crawling (with commentary) chiefly, though not exclusively to the Catholic West of the city - followed by a visit to what I was told was a Belfast institution, hitherto undiscovered, Longs Fish and Chip shop off the Grovenor Road, frequented by all sorts and conditions of men and women. 'Mérite le detour'.

7. Most important of all perhaps, I am more aware of how much I do not know.

(signed)

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