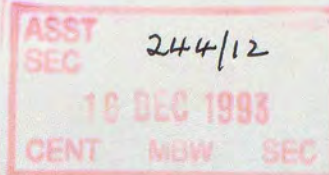


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FROM: J M STEELE
AUS (Security)
15 DECEMBER 1993

cc PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (DENI, B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Legge - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Lyon - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Williams - B
Mr Jardine, PPRU
Mr Leach - B
Mr Marsh - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Kyle - B
Mr Maitland, SPOB 1 - B

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PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B

*See also
file 385/93*

SCOPING STUDY ON IMPACT OF BORDER ROAD CLOSURES - MEETING WITH THE
IRISH

Introduction

This submission reports on the meeting between British and Irish officials held on Thursday, 9 December to discuss the joint PPRU/ESRI scoping study on the socio-economic impact of border road closures.

The Meeting

2. I led a team consisting of members of SPOB 1, PPRU and Secretariat officials. The Irish team was led, as usual, by Declan O'Donovan. He was supported by a mixed Secretariat, DFA and ESRI group.

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Both sides welcomed the joint PPRU/ESRI report, which all believed to have been an excellent and very professional piece of work. We agreed that it should be tabled for discussion at the January IGC. The Irish argued that the next step should be the limited-area pilot study mentioned in the report as a possible way forward, and hoped that Ministers could bless this in January.

Our Response

4. I explained that we had difficulty in contemplating any further research, even of the (initially) limited kind suggested, and that we proposed to report to Ministers that the study had established a broadly agreed database of the extent and type of road closures and had provided useful information on levels of disadvantage, using among other things the criterion of detours. The realities were that:

- * any field research would inevitably raise the fears and expectations of the local population. Some would expect roads to re-open as a result of the research, and would welcome such an outcome; others would fear that their security was likely to be compromised. It would be highly counter-productive thus to promote false hopes and anxieties, not to mention the likely allegations that the Government was opening the door to the "ethnic cleansing" of Border Protestants.
- * security, rather than socio-economic considerations, would inevitably remain paramount in border road closure policy. The Government's first priority was to protect life. In practice, while the position on closures was kept under careful review, the current security force advice was that all current closures remained necessary;
- * the scoping study disclosed very considerable methodological obstacles in the way of any valid follow-up research, not to mention potential danger to field workers and the high

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probability of getting distorted results, both because of the methodological problems and the likelihood of Sinn Fein orchestration;

- * there were already many programmes, both national and cross-border, designed to remedy disadvantage, however caused, and stimulate regeneration in deprived areas including the Border region.

5. The Irish were clearly disappointed, since they had come armed with proposed terms of reference for the pilot study (which they tabled). They argued, inter alia, that socio-economic considerations should be an important factor in road closure policy, and that research of the type envisaged by the report would help inform that policy, and assist in making reasonable decisions in individual cases. There were three main strands to the discussion.

6. First, the Irish argued that the decision to undertake the scoping study had been based on the premise that social and economic factors were valid considerations in road closures and should, therefore, be identified as precisely as possible. We pointed out that while socio-economic considerations were of course germane, there had to be a pragmatic approach to obtaining such information. Given that the need to protect life had to be the first priority, that the scoping study was generally reassuring about the socio-economic impact of closures, that there must be severe doubts whether the outcome of any further research could be relied on, and that the process of undertaking further research would cause enormous turbulence in the local community, Ministers might very reasonably take the view that the game was not worth the candle.

7. The Irish countered by arguing that in other aspects of security policy the views of independent research bodies - eg SACHR - were weighed in the scales, and often had considerable influence. We pointed out that these were not analogous cases: there was a major difference between Province-wide sampling exercises on

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68/193
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relatively abstract questions, and intensive local research on concrete and highly emotive operational measures.

8. Second, the Irish argued that it should be possible to conduct research without raising fears and expectations and in such a way as to eliminate bias, deliberate or otherwise. Our professional advisors disagreed, pointing out that the scoping study documented the real methodological difficulties that existed and the strong possibility that Sinn Fein would try successfully to subvert the research. We also stressed the political turbulence which would be caused by publicly avowed research.

9. Third, the Irish suggested that our proposed response to the scoping study resiled from an earlier commitment to carry out research (the March 1993 IGC): we in turn referred to the July 1993 IGC at which Ministers ratified the terms of reference of the scoping study and the British side made clear that it would be for decision in the light of the report of that study whether or not further research should be pursued.

Conclusion

10. The Irish will brief their Ministers to argue strongly that we should now proceed to further research, on a pilot basis but with the clear intention of subsequently broadening out. They will argue that it is impossible to determine the merits of further research in the absence of a pilot research study to test out the difficult areas. In reply, Ministers will wish robustly to stress the priority they must give to measures aimed at protecting life; the generally reassuring message of the scoping study; and the very negative effects of conducting further research coupled with the difficulty of obtaining reliable results. SPOB 1 will produce briefing on these lines for the January IGC.

SGD

J M STEELE

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