

cc PS/Mr Fell
Mr Loughran
Mr Spence
Mr Briant
Mr Jordan, DENI
Mr Bell
Mr Taggart

LINFIELD FOOTBALL CLUB: NOTE OF MEETING AT WINDSOR PARK ON 31 MARCH 1992

1. I met with Peter Lunn and Derek Brooks, Vice Chairman and Secretary respectively, of Linfield Football Club on 31 March for discussion of the controversy that has arisen between Fr Sean McManus of the Irish National Caucus in the US and the Club over the absence of Roman Catholics amongst the Club's playing staff. I had previously suggested that an exchange of view on the issue could be mutually helpful and the two officials clearly had Board approval for the meeting.
2. The officials reiterated the Club's policy as publicly stated on 19 March, ie that the Club does not have a policy to exclude from its staff anyone by reason of colour, race or religion and this is borne out in its rule book. It therefore remains willing, as it has done in the past, to sign players who it feels will bring further success on the playing pitch. Until the present "troubles" Catholics have regularly featured in Linfield teams - in many cases with great distinction - and Catholics have also held key positions in team support roles, but efforts in recent years to sign Catholic players have invariably been unproductive. The problem in effect has been that Catholics who had otherwise have been attracted by the Club's record of success and excellent facilities have been unprepared to expose themselves to the dangers inherent either in travelling to and from Windsor Park or in appearing for the Club on the playing field.
3. I gave the officials a brief account of the MacBride campaign and Fr McManus' role therein. Although of cold comfort, they were interested to learn of the pressures and difficulties that MacBride has exerted on US Corporations and were appreciative of my warning that McManus has a strong disposition to resort to defamation proceedings against those who would in any way associate him with the IRA or violence generally. I then suggested that the approach now commonly adopted by US corporations in contending with MacBride

pressures should also be of relevance in the Linfield context. This would in effect see the Club making a public declaration of its commitment to the principles and practices of fair employment enshrined in Northern Ireland legislation and, more particularly, of their plans to step up efforts to overcome the problems they have been encountering in attracting Catholics to the club. Issues to be addressed in the latter context would be:

- (i) the problem of attempting, within IFA rules, of adopting the more aggressive posture in the transfer field that would give Linfield a greater opportunity to sign Catholics as well as Protestants;
- (ii) the measures needing to be taken to establish an atmosphere and conditions conducive to easing the apprehensions of potential recruits from the Catholic side of the community - for example, by enlisting the assistance of supporters clubs in eliminating the sectarian excesses of a small minority of their membership that constitute a problem for Catholics;
- (iii) the development and implementation of a youth policy aimed at giving talented young people from both sections of the community opportunities, under a specially designed programme, to develop their skills and understanding of the sport [Mr Brooks mentioned in this respect that a Club proposal some 4 years ago to initiate a YTP scheme with talent development objectives had been turned down by DED in favour of a scheme run by the IFA at a Further Education College in Belfast];
- (iv) recruitment to the Club's Board of one or two Catholic businessmen (something which, it appears, could be achieved through appointment as trustees, from that by co-option to the Board); and
- (v) on the non-playing side the Club, having 11 or 12 full-time staff, has now to meet the registration, monitoring and other requirements of the FE Act; these staff are all locally recruited and Protestant and, if, as seems likely, this also becomes public knowledge, the Club will be under further pressure to take remedial (affirmative) action.

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4. I sounded Messrs Lunn and Brooks on the prospects of gaining support at Board and supporters club level for affirmative action of the kind we had discussed. While to an extent uncertain, their gut feeling was that the Board (or at least a majority of them) might eventually be prepared to sign-up for affirmative action in some or most of the areas we had considered. There should also be a reasonable level of tolerance amongst supporters clubs, the basic inclination in both instances being to accept the unpalatable in the interests of the Club's position as the most prosperous and successful soccer outfit in NI. The prospect of continuing adverse publicity resulting in loss of existing or potential sponsorships clearly weighs heavily on the minds of all concerned. A major sponsor of playing gear as replacement for Thorne Electric (whose relationship with Linfield was at an end long before the present controversy arose) is prospectively in view. Negotiations with Lotto, the Italian Sportswear firm concerned, are well advanced but all of this could of course be aborted if the Linfield position shows no sign of improving. There is, nonetheless, a strong possibility that the Board may for the moment prefer to lie low in the hope that the INC pressure will peter out.

5. The two officials thanked me for my interest and advice and indicated that their next step would be to report to the Board on our discussion.

6. Since my discussion with Messrs Lunn and Brooks I have had a phone call from the latter seeking advice on a request that Patrick Doherty of the New York City Treasurers Office has made through Central Secretariat for a meeting with Club officials. In making it clear to Mr Brooks that the matter was essentially one for the Club to decide, I sounded him on how the Board had reacted to the report of the discussion with me last week. He said that they had taken due note of the ideas that had been floated but, as expected, had elected for the moment to sit tight. I suggested that in these circumstances the Club had to weigh the pros and cons of agreeing to meet Doherty. If, for example, the Board remained of a mind to postpone adoption of a new affirmative posture there would seem to be nothing to be gained, but indeed additional damage to be inflicted, in sticking to a position of fatalistic pessimism. The position could however be quite different if on the other hand officer holders

were authorised by the Board to announce that the Club, in light of its continued difficulty in attempting to recruit Catholics, was now developing proposals for affirmative action that would include a new youth policy designed to give talented young people from both sections of the community opportunities to find their way into the Club's playing squads. Mr Brooks was uncertain about the prospect of being so authorised but will as a matter of urgency pursue the matter at Board level. He agreed to keep me in touch with further developments.

POSTSCRIPT

7. Meanwhile, with action on the core issue now in play, I am engaging with DENI and T&EA (and other interests as necessary - IFA etc) in the development of the defensive strategy commissioned following Mr Fell's visit to the US. More immediately, I will be providing a background brief on the situation as a whole for use in connection with Mr Fell's meeting on Tuesday with Patrick Doherty.

Bob Minnis

R J MINNIS

10 April 1992