**A Balmoral Councillor’s week**

**23-28 November 2015**

Last Monday morning, I attended the opening of the new pre-school at Cranmore Primary School on Finaghy Road North with Michael McGimpsey MLA. The US Consul General Daniel J Lawton and Trevor Ringland spoke, alongside the head teacher William Doherty and Mary Hamilton, chair of the Board of Governors. There was great singing from the school choir and some remarkably good poetry read out by pupils. Very advanced. The money for the new rooms came entirely from fundraising efforts along with matching assistance from American philanthropist Kevin Curley.

On Tuesday afternoon, I attended The Community Volunteer (TCV) awards at Malone House. They were presented by Dr William Bird, founder of the Green Gym project. Northern Ireland groups did exceptionally well in the UK recently, Musgrave Community Garden project being a runner up in London, and winner in Belfast of the ‘Spirit of the Community Award’. Enthusiastic crowd of volunteers present.

Later I was present at the opening of the Mornington Community Project at 117 Ormeau Road. This rebuild was grant aided by Belfast City Council Local Investment Fund. Alderman Stalford cut the ribbon most efficiently. Director of Property and Projects, Gerry Millar in attendance with the key manager Frankie Smith. The extensive building has a café and rooms for enterprises and groups. Good crowd of local users there.

Then it was down to City Hall for the unveiling of the Spanish Civil War commemoration window by the Lord Mayor, Arder Carson. It remembers the 12 men from the city in the XV International Brigade who died in Spain fighting against Franco. (Eoin O’Duffy’s Blueshirt volunteers from Belfast are not mentioned.)

I was on the Diversity Working Group (am now chairman) that chose the design which was by Alpha Stained Glass. It includes a poem by Sam Burnside MBE who was present with Stella. Good to see some old NILP types including Brian Garrett, Anne and Peter Devlin and Graham (and Elda) Walker, author of the Harry Midgley biography. He gets a mention on the plaque having lost his seat because of his support for the Spanish Republicans. Members of the Communist Party of Northern Ireland, as was, predominated at the reception. Former SDLP councillor Pat McCarthy, Ciaran Crossey the key organiser, Connal Parr who wrote the Belfast Telegraph piece below and his father Chris were also present alongside James Dingley, Sean Kelly and Richard James, and John and Mary Gray (and the Spanish consul Trevor McBurney and his wife). Cllr John Scott (UUP Antrim and Newtownabbey) was also present. He told me his uncle was killed in Spain. When the sun streams through the window from the south, the Spanish aspects will brighten up the corridor. The map of Belfast hinges the window to our city.

http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/honouring-belfast-men-who-died-for-democracy-of-spain-34183759.html

Wednesday night saw a civic dinner at City Hall to welcome the Boston Sister City guests, part of the Friendship Four Hockey Festival. I was with Richard Kennedy. Cllr Craig (who ate a large number of meals) was accompanied by Gordon Lucy. The food was excellent and plentiful. On Friday night I was at the Odyssey to see the ice hockey game between two university teams North Eastern and UMass Lowell. A spectacular sport enthusiastically received by the large crowd. Dylan Zink got the unexpected winning goal in extra time for North Eastern. Spotted Cllrs. Declan Boyle and Aileen Graham with their families and Mary Huston our City Hall members’ keeper.

Thursday saw lengthy back-to-back District Policing and Community Partnership (DPCSP) meetings at Malone House with independent member Richard Kennedy also present. The committee chose not to spend a large sum of money on more research into community issues. The South Belfast public event chaired by Cllr Declan Boyle was well attended by vocal locals who did not see eye to eye with some of the police and council staff. Issues were raised about bail bandits, fewer visible police, ethnic aspects as well as Neighbourhood Watch changes. I raised the increasing number of burglaries and police inaction over pavement cyclists. I couldn’t make the Greater Belvoir Consortium AGM because of this event.

Friday morning was a special planning meeting of the South Belfast Area Based Working Group with the ubiquitous Cllr. Declan Boyle and Alderperson Stalford (no Alliance Party councillors present). After the committee business when I successfully proposed, as an emerging project, the completion of the refurbishment of the Belvoir Sure Start building in Drumart Square with a £100,000 Local Investment Fund option, we had a very useful presentation by officials and a discussion. First, I raised the question of the just-announced refusal by DSD to give the council its promised urban regeneration powers. I then brought up issues about the city’s under-population, our diminishing rates base and the over-emphasis on easy river projects. With our limited budget we can best do improvement projects like ‘Renewing the Routes’ which transform the look of neighbourhoods, and purge the city of graffiti.

Happy to detect the Art Gallery project in the city centre is gaining traction. The collapse of the Royal Exchange concept suggests this is a great location and a necessary anchor. The Assembly Rooms at the Waring St/North St junction are the best candidate.

Saturday was the UUP councillors meeting in Cookstown where the abrupt announcement by the DUP minister Mervyn Storey that regeneration powers were not coming to Belfast City Council next April was discussed. Indeed they will probably never come now. We need to bill the DSD Minister for ratepayers’ money pointlessly spent preparing for this changeover.

On the issues of the past, thankfully left out of the new DUP/SF deal because the government would not hand over all the army and MI5 files, I argued for a review of legacy aspects. Is there anything useful that can come out of endless enquiries and ever more reopened inquests? The past has taken over too much of our future in terms of both money and political effort. Victims and their families will never get to know the details of the paramilitary murder campaigns (no files there). Accumulating mental health issues need addressed instead. The Leader spoke well about the omissions in the deal and how it has been cobbled together to protect the two governing parties.

**Jeffrey Dudgeon (Cllr. Balmoral)**