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A private conversation with Martin Smyth MP

In the course of a private conversation over dinner following his Glenree address, Smyth developed a number of themes.

Attitude towards new Irish Government

He has not met the new Taoiseach before (having been away from Belfast when Mr Bruton called on some colleagues of his as Fine Gael leader).

He had deliberately avoided giving a public endorsement of the new Taoiseach and Government, when invited to do so earlier, as he felt that "that would do me no favours and do him no favours".

It became increasingly clear (from a further series of anecdotes) that his view of Fine Gael is heavily influenced by what he described as his "disappointment" with Dr FitzGerald.

I emphasized that there is now an entirely new situation and that Unionists should exploit to the full the opportunity afforded by the emergence of the new Government, led by the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste, for a transformation of relations between Unionism and nationalism. Smyth reacted politely but cautiously.

Political talks

I asked him whether the UUP are preparing as the two Governments are for a resumption of political talks in the near future.

He replied with the standard UUP line that they have been engaged in talks since the end of 1992 (the Ancram bilaterals). They are anxious to see "accountable democracy" introduced in Northern Ireland and believe that

many in the SDLP (he instanced Messrs McGrady Hendron and Mallon but pointedly omitted Hume) also wish to see this. They have had a surfeit of "quangoism" and want to see powers restored to elected representatives. They accept that a talks process involving the two Governments and the NI parties is required to take matters forward and Smyth could imagine the participation of "even Sinn Fein" in this process.

On structure and format for talks, I asked him to clarify his earlier reference to the three strands being handled "consecutively".

In discussion, it emerged that he means that the concepts handled in each are as he sees it logically consecutive (an Assembly has "first" to be established and "then" it will consider its relations with the Republic). This does not, however, mean that discussion of the various relationships could not commence simultaneously. What Smyth seemed to envisage (though he was far from clear on this) was that the UUP would not commit themselves finally to Strand Two structures before final agreement had been reached on Strand One structures.

He envisages a lengthy period of bilaterals among the various participants before round-table sessions would be convened ("when we are close to agreement"). In support of an assertion about the impracticality of the round-table format, he recalled sarcastically the former Secretary of State Peter Brooke "constantly calling tea-breaks" as a means of defusing awkward round-table discussions.

I asked him why the UUP were now apparently rescinding a commitment (to the "nothing is agreed..." approach) which they had given in the 26 March 1991 statement. Smyth claimed that Hume had abused that formula by withholding SDLP consent to a "four-party agreement" reached in Strand One on 10 June 1992. He had done so because he feared that the Unionist parties would not go into Strand Two. In fact, the UUP were always willing to do so and "we brought Paisley with us". (He claimed that the participant who had been most negative at the time about the transition to Strand Two had been the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, who had insisted on his own entitlement to decide on timing, even though "we were all telling him that we were ready to go").

The former Taoiseach had also, in Smyth's view, reneged on a commitment by "calling" a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference in mid-November 1992 which had brought the talks process to a halt. I strongly challenged this representation.

In a discussion of cross-border bodies, Smyth made clear that he shares the position taken by his party colleagues (Ken Maginnis Reg Empey and the two McGimpseys) in the bilaterals with the Irish Government in October 1992. He is open to "a

wide range of bodies including executive powers" if these are clearly accountable to a NI Assembly. He mentioned health roads and tourism as areas which would benefit from such an approach. He claimed that in the October 1992 bilaterals the then Tanaiste returned at one point from a phone-call with the then Taoiseach and "withdrew consent" to arrangements of the kind which were being discussed. I also took issue with this account of matters.

Local government

Asked about his party leader's interest in enhancing local government powers, Smyth said that "what we want is planning powers - nothing more". He held that local politicians know far more about local issues than "remote civil servants in Stormont" and, to illustrate this, he related an anecdote involving Jim Molyneux advising a young couple in his constituency not to seek planning permission for a particular piece of land which, he assured them, was subject to flooding every winter. It was entirely consistent with "accountable democracy", Smyth suggested, that local Councils should be given a role in relation to local planning.

DUP

Smyth expects that the DUP will not take part at any stage in a future talks process but will wait until the elections on a new Assembly and then stand against the UUP, accusing them of a sell-out.

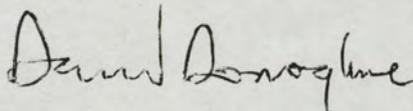
He was, predictably, critical of Paisley on various grounds. The DUP leader's handling of his Unionist Forum proposal for example has had an entirely counter-productive effect on the Orange Order. Having sent this proposal in writing to a senior Orange Order official who promised to place it on the agenda for the next meeting of the appropriate Orange Council, Paisley went straight to the media with the news that the Orange Order were backing his proposal.

Smyth noted wryly, however, that Paisley is being taken more seriously in Washington these days - "no doubt because of his long friendship with Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond" (both fellow holders of honorary doctorates from Bob Jones University).

UUP involvement with the Forum

Finally, I raised the question of possible UUP involvement with the Forum in some form. Smyth replied that "at this stage" he saw no possibility - not so much because of Sinn Fein's presence at the Forum as for the reason which he had cited earlier (the jurisdictional point). In subsequent discussion however, he did not rule out the possibility of the UUP reviewing its position on the Forum at a later stage.

In response to my emphasis on the importance attached by the Government to the "reconciliation" aspect of the Forum's work, he said that Unionists would feel happier if the word used in this respect were "conciliation" (which for him implies an alignment of two equal entities rather than the restoration of a whole).



David Donoghue
Anglo-Irish Section
16 January 1995

TAOISEACH

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Address by Martin Smyth MP

Introduction

Rev. Martin Smyth MP, Grand Master of the Orange Order and a senior member of the UUP, addressed a meeting at the Glencree Centre last Saturday (14 January) on the subject of "Understanding Unionism, its hopes and fears".

This event, which drew an attendance of between thirty and forty, continued a series of presentations which Unionist representatives have made on this theme over the past year or so. Earlier speakers have included Ken Maginnis, Chris McGimpsey and Gregory Campbell.

The following is a report on the key points of interest made by Smyth. A separate report covers remarks made by Smyth in the course of a private meeting over a meal afterwards.

Key points

- Smyth said that the reaction of the Unionist community to the two ceasefires is one of relief mixed with deep unease about their longer-term political and constitutional implications;
- While he did not deny that Unionists generally have a siege mentality, the UUP has since 1973 "come out of the trenches to some extent" in an effort to find a way forward;
- Others also, he continued, need to come out of the trenches to shake off "an imperialism inherited from ancient Rome";
- He recognized that there are no easy answers to the thorny questions of sovereignty and political allegiance and identity in Northern Ireland. Most of all, however, confidence must be built between the communities in NI and between NI and the Republic;

- He questioned the assumption by NI nationalists that demographic trends point to eventual Irish unity. The birth-rate for NI Catholics is declining. Middle class Catholics, furthermore, are increasingly unlikely to favour Irish unity;
- Noting Senator Gordon Wilson's Forum remarks of the previous day, he said that the timescale in which he himself sees Irish unity happening would be one of "generations" rather than several decades. However, he could see it happening earlier "if the 26 Counties come back into a new relationship with the UK".
- Introducing a point about the care required in the use of language, Smyth recalled that, when in 1973 he had arranged private calls on Unionist colleagues for Dr Garret FitzGerald (at the latter's request), he had been taken aback subsequently to find Dr FitzGerald saying on TV that Martin Smyth had "invited" him to visit NI;
- He underlined the need for clarity of intentions on all sides and "no hidden agendas" at any future political talks. Unionists continue to mistrust both the SDLP and the Irish Government;
- On Articles 2 and 3, he said that Unionists were anxious about these "until recently". However, the proposal that the British Government should "tamper with the Act of Union" in exchange "is too high a price for us to pay";
- The Irish Government would demonstrate a real commitment to the peace process if it were to agree to remove these unilaterally;
- Dublin's track-record in implementing promises is not reassuring. Assurances were given in the context of Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish Agreement that Articles 2 and 3 would be rescinded but these were reneged on. How can the Irish Government be trusted to honour future promises?
- There are also questions about the Republic's good intentions towards the UK in the European Union context (despite the supposed closer cooperation in the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Joint Declaration). These doubts were reinforced by Ireland's support for Spain in the recent dispute over fishing rights in the "Irish Box";
- Smyth also claimed that NI businessmen encounter (unspecified) barriers to trade with the South;
- The precise meaning of the "consent" principle must be

clarified by the two Governments;

- While ideally a future settlement would be supported even by extreme Republicans, in the real world this will be virtually impossible to achieve. There can be no giving in to Sinn Fein pressure based on threats that, if certain political concessions are not made, it will not be possible to "control the hard men etc".
- The representatives of the Loyalist paramilitary organizations are proving more effective politicians than the DUP, who risk (e.g., with the recent defection of two Councillors) becoming "a rump political party";
- While accepting that there are three relationships to be addressed, Smyth sees no positive gain in linking them and wishes to see the three strands of future talks treated "consecutively";
- The outcome of the "nothing is agreed..." approach is that nothing gets agreed. Smyth noted approvingly criticism of this formula by Padraic O'Malley in a recent Belfast Telegraph interview;
- The NI parties must identify areas where agreement is realistically possible. Smyth prefers the formula "Whatever can be agreed should be agreed". Those who hold out for the most advantageous deal may end up with nothing.

In a subsequent question-and-answer session, Smyth was asked why the UUP would not take part in the Forum. He said he could not hold out any hope of this "at this stage". The Forum was an initiative to be undertaken by the former Taoiseach "in his jurisdiction"; any Unionist involvement in it would imply acceptance that Northern Ireland fell within that jurisdiction. The UUP's absence from the Forum, he felt, was being noted and this was in itself important as a means of getting people to take Unionist concerns seriously.

Asked why the UUP would not join the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, he referred to the link between this initiative and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. He hinted that, had the initiative been presented as arising solely from the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council, it might have been possible for Unionists to participate - "but the Anglo-Irish Agreement put us beyond the Pale". Linking the Body to the Agreement, he claimed, was necessary in order to persuade the Oireachtas to accept formalised cooperation with the British Parliament.

Asked for his view of cross-border bodies with executive powers, Smyth chose not to address the point directly but to

recall a UUP exchange with the Irish Government delegation during the 1992 talks. He claimed that, when one of his colleagues had "mischievously" suggested that a cross-border body with executive powers might, in the transport area, be able to decide on a bypass around Monaghan town, the then Tanaiste had retorted that "Nobody is going to come down from the North and tell us what to do". The UUP had not felt encouraged by this response.

Smyth recalled that the former Stormont Government had agreed to cross-border cooperation in the form of the Foyle Fisheries Commission and the Shannon hydroelectric scheme. However, cross-border bodies which were accountable to Dublin "and not to Belfast" would be unacceptable. If they could report ultimately to both, he hinted, they might be acceptable. The Irish Government would also have to put up two-thirds of the funding.

On the subject of the 1992 talks, Smyth claimed that Sir Ninian Stephen had advised at that time against "going down the road of Irish unity".

Asked about the UUP's readiness to talk to Sinn Fein, he ruled this out "for the moment" (citing inter alia the IRA's murder of Rev. Robert Bradford, "the reason I'm in elective politics"). He could contemplate talking to Sinn Fein only when the IRA had handed over their arms and when Sinn Fein had acquired "a proper electoral mandate" (he claimed that their current share was only 7% of the NI electorate) and "began to be a bona fide political party". Elections to a new Assembly would help to establish the size of Sinn Fein's mandate.

Asked whether he thought the new Irish Government might have a better appreciation of Unionist concerns, Smyth gave an evasive reply. He had doubts about the traditional stereotyping of Fine Gael as the pro-British party and Fianna Fail as the "old guard". Fine Gael, in his view, were no different from any other Irish politicians - "looking after their own interests and their own country". Smyth illustrated this with further anecdotal material relating to Dr Garret FitzGerald. He recalled sardonically a description by Dr FitzGerald of his mother as a Unionist ("when she clearly wasn't"). Unionists remembered Dr FitzGerald as the Taoiseach who had got Mrs Thatcher to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement. He had been, in Smyth's eyes, "one of the more dangerous kinds of nationalist".

David Donoghue

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16/1/95