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20 February 1995

LUNCH WITH UNIONIST DELEGATION

Dear Secretary

1. Martin Smyth, Jim Nicholson and Geoffrey Donaldson of the Official Unionist Party are in Washington this week for a series of meetings, including with Nancy Soderberg (and possibly Tony Lake) at the White House. I had sent a message to Jim Nicholson, who is an old friend, that I would be delighted to see the group and to help in any way possible with the visit. In the event, Nicholson telephoned me at home over the weekend, and all three came to the Residence for lunch to-day.
2. I was somewhat surprised that Martin Smyth was happy to come, although I had known him in London in the 1970's (the fact that he was comfortable in coming may, perhaps, have something to do with his awareness of Jim Molyneaux's friendly relationship with me in the past).
3. The discussion was very friendly and relaxed. However, Smyth's narrow and rather plodding approach made matters somewhat awkward for his two colleagues. As a result, Nicholson (who likes a pint and congenial company!), tended to be rather deferential in his contribution. Donaldson, who is a much clearer and deeper thinker than Nicholson, was likewise not as forthcoming or adventuresome as he would, I believe, have wished.

Framework Document

4. If the three visitors are in any way representative of Official Unionism, the party is effectively all over the place on how to handle the framework document. As to substance,

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their particular concern is not so much with "imposition" but rather that, with what they expect will be a "massive selling campaign" nationally and internationally by the two governments - allied to the promise of substantial international economic support - Unionists could be boxed into an isolated corner both in their opposition to the text, and in the follow-on negotiations. Smyth drew parallels in this regard with the successful British Government referendum campaign to sell European Community membership in the North, against and over the views of most of the parties there, including Sinn Féin.

5. Donaldson was also afraid that British "concessions" in the text would remove much of the Unionist negotiating flexibility in future talks; his specific argument was that, while negotiations must always have "give and take", the fact that the British seem already to have conceded a great deal takes away much Unionist manoeuvrability and leaves them in a vulnerable negotiating position.
6. Overall, the arguments of the visitors against the thinking behind, and general thrust of, the Framework Document were rather tentative and, somewhat to my surprise, not very well developed. They were also unsure of when their own talks document would be published, some party members apparently having argued for it to be published in advance of the Governments' text, with others being in favour of a later date. In the event, and given that this week's publication of the Framework Document has overtaken matters, Nicholson thought that an immediate, formal Unionist response would be limited to a holding statement following Friday's meeting of its Executive Council.
7. On a more positive note, Nicholson and Donaldson were extremely interested in the constitutional dimension of the Framework Document and, while remaining sceptical about the likely text, clearly wished to be welcoming and forthcoming on this aspect, if at all possible. Wednesday's text could, therefore, be a help to those (minority but important) elements in the party trying to move thinking and attitudes forward.

8. Nicholson and Donaldson were also curious about the role envisaged for a Belfast Assembly in the North-South relationship. As a result, I have a sense that a presentational emphasis on the North-South Body being in significant part Belfast driven would be reassuring and encouraging to the progressive elements in the party. (In this general regard, all three curiously referred to an occasion during the 1992 talks when, in the context of future North-South institutional cooperation, a Unionist reference to the North valuing an input into the planning and upgrading of the road network in North County Monaghan was - they claimed - rebuffed by the Southern side).

Decommissioning

9. All three saw decommissioning as a crunch issue for the Unionist party, if they were to enter into talks involving Sinn Féin. However, in follow-on discussion, they seemed to accept that it was not realistic to expect the IRA unilaterally to hand over their arms or explosives in advance of real progress towards a settlement.
10. Donaldson showed some willingness to think creatively on this by suggesting that it might be helpful for Unionists if Sinn Féin were to receive a new mandate in advance of talks. While there is something of a "chicken and egg" difficulty here, it does at the same time show that some of the more progressive elements in Unionism may be prepared in due course to face up to the issue. (It is perhaps significant in this regard also that, while regretting that Adams was given a visa, they made little or no serious attempt, unlike on other issues, to justify the argument).

Comment

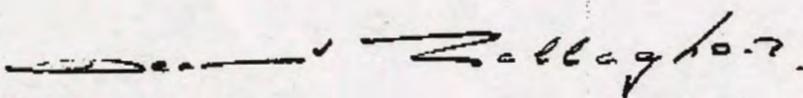
11. The reality that Unionism has not for some considerable time been a monolith was reflected in the three strands represented around the table to-day: Donaldson, reflective, progressive and, I suspect, courageous; Nicholson, the rural, easy-going South Armagh farmer, not unlike his nationalist counterparts,

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and with many of the interdependent instincts that one expects to find in a mixed agricultural community; he, interestingly, made the point at one stage that the "weakness" of much of Unionism is its wariness of "pluralism", and it has, as a result, to be "moved along slowly"; Smyth, very much Belfast, with all its suspicions, pettiness and (sectarian) baggage.

12. Overall, and allowing for the constraints referred to above and, in particular, the unwillingness (inability?) of Smyth to show any flexibility or imagination, it was a relaxed and enjoyable luncheon, with the visitors being exceptionally warm in their appreciation of the discussion and hospitality.

Yours sincerely



Dermot Gallagher
Ambassador

Seán Ó hUiginn Uas
Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs