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Views of Fermanagh/South Tyrone Unionists

1. I yesterday had meetings in Enniskillen with Sammy Foster, the Ulster Unionist chairman of Fermanagh District Council; Gerry Burns, the Council's Chief Executive; and Ray Sanderson of the **Impartial Reporter** newspaper. I also called on Dr Brian Hannon, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Clogher, at the See House, Fivemiletown, Co. Tyrone. I explained to them that my purpose was to develop, both through direct contact and with the assistance of well-placed observers of the local scene, a sense of the particular preoccupations and expectations of members of the unionist community in the area. The Government was anxious to build on and expand existing contacts at all levels, and to have its position on the peace process explained directly where possible.
2. Sammy Foster, a social worker by occupation, has been chairman of Fermanagh District Council since June. A senior member of both the Orange Order and the Royal Black Preceptory, he is regarded as a comparative hardliner, and as capable of small-mindedness and bigotry (for instance, last year he attacked some of the late Gordon Wilson's contributions to the Forum in a personalised and emotive way). However, after some initial wariness, he was courteous, if blunt. Gerry Burns, who will in January be retiring after twenty years as Chief Executive of the Council, is well-known to many officers of the Department for his helpfulness and shrewdness. Ray Sanderson, a native of Enniskillen, has worked for the **Impartial Reporter**, Ireland's oldest local newspaper, for twenty years. I made his acquaintance through the Forum. Bishop Hannon, whose diocese includes almost all of Monaghan as well as Fermanagh and Tyrone, has been Bishop of Clogher since 1986, after serving in Enniskillen and on the cityside of Derry. He comes from a long-established clergy family and was educated at St Columba's College (where he was a contemporary of Ambassador Campbell and of Mr David Neligan) and at Trinity.

General Character of Area

3. My interlocutors all emphasised a number of special characteristics of the area, Fermanagh in particular. Its Protestant population has from the Ulster plantation belonged virtually entirely to the Church of Ireland. DUP support is comparatively low. There is an absence of overt sectarianism. The unionist community is "middle of the road" (Bishop Hannon), "traditional" (Foster), and relatively undemonstrative in manner. There are traditionally close business and personal links with south Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Cavan. Bishop Hannon feels that cross-community and inter-church relationships have improved steadily in recent years - though he commented that "Protestants often don't behave well until they're in a minority and have to".
4. On the other hand, I was cautioned that the absence of the "edge" characteristic of eastern Ulster did not mean that Fermanagh unionists were necessarily more open to political change, let alone that they were "soft touches". There is a very strong "us and them" feeling, according to Sanderson. Burns reminded me that of all the 26 district council areas Fermanagh had in the 1991 census the lowest percentage (4%) of respondents either declaring no religion or refusing to answer the question (though Bishop Hannon told me that he would put at about 20% the proportion of young members of the Church of Ireland now entering mixed marriages - he commented that the religious, let alone political, consequences are hard to determine, but that there is bound to be a "blurring of lines").

Decommissioning

5. All four men said that in their view local feeling on the decommissioning issue runs very deep. They said that the rural, thinly-populated nature of the area meant that many of the IRA's victims were very well-known, and well-remembered, locally. Foster emphasised the view that there had been a deliberate IRA policy of targeting Protestant farming families near the border. There was thus a need to see tangible progress on disarmament before any sort of trust could begin to develop. Sanderson thought that Ken Maginnis's caution on the durability of the ceasefire reflected much grassroots feeling, as well perhaps as his own UDR

background. Nevertheless he thought that his prophecies of doom had rather weakened his credibility. Foster, however, told me that his own firm instinct was that there would be no return to violence "at least in this generation". When I then pressed him on why he then regarded decommissioning as so important he simply insisted that if arms were not necessary they should then be disposed of. He did admit, however, that Gerry Adams's use of "permanent" the previous day did represent an important advance. He was particularly hostile to Sinn Féin's attempts to equate legally and illegally-held weapons: I commented that the Government, while wishing to see extensive reform of policing and other security/justice arrangements, repeatedly made a distinction between the two categories.

Future Political Arrangements

6. Foster made the traditional unionist case with some vigour. Northern Ireland had been built by the efforts of the unionists, despite the attempts of nationalists to wreck and obstruct. Many nationalists had always been disloyal and therefore unionists had always had to be "on their guard". While "there may have been some discrimination once" now all enjoyed the same rights within the United Kingdom. Nowadays there was as much discrimination against Protestants as against Catholics. Why couldn't nationalists now "settle down in the British family" until such time as there was majority support for Irish unity? As for "Eire", unionists wished to be good neighbours, but nothing more (Burns told me that Foster has been reasonably constructive in his approach to co-ordination between the central border region counties). Why did we seek to interfere in the North's affairs (not least when we could not afford unity - he cited the recent **Birnie and Roche Economics Lesson**)?

7. In reply I insisted that the Government's objective was not to achieve unity through trickery or coercion, but to secure agreement and stability. We were fully committed to the consent principle, and we understood that there was no short-term prospect of majority consent to a united Ireland. What the Joint Declaration and the Framework Document offered Unionists was - for the first time - the

prospect of nationalist acceptance of the legitimacy of Northern Ireland. In return, nationalists were looking for respect for their aspirations; a fair deal within Northern Ireland - on terms satisfactory to them; and an institutional recognition of their Irishness through North-South structures which would be democratically accountable and which would also make good sense economically. Was this such a big price for unionists to pay?

8. Foster repeated his own prescriptions. Moreover, he said, why did Unionists have to be the ones who gave all? I replied that in fact both communities were being asked to compromise: the likely shape of an accommodation hardly conformed to the nationalist ideal. There was no evidence to suggest that a purely internal solution of the sort he advocated could achieve the kind of widespread support needed: indeed the leaders of nationalist opinion had repeatedly ruled out such a settlement. He then denounced John Hume's alleged inflexibility, stating "he's never given anything" and "he runs your Government's policy". I replied that the transformation in nationalist thinking which made it possible for a majority of nationalists to contemplate a settlement along the lines I had sketched out owed a great deal to Hume's vision and prestige: moreover, would he not agree that the North owed a great deal to the SDLP's firm commitment to constitutional politics over 25 years?

9. Foster also mentioned Articles 2 & 3 as an irritant, though he personally was not "fussy about them" - I said that we were committed to recommending change in the Constitution as part of an overall settlement. He also mentioned the dwindling numbers of Southern Protestants since independence: I replied that this phenomenon had complex social and cultural roots and could not be said to have much to do with politics or public policy. He agreed that "many came up here because they felt happier".

Position of Ken Maginnis

10. Bishop Hannon felt that Ken Maginnis's views were broadly representative of the local unionist community as a whole: my other interlocutors were less sure.

Burns commented that Maginnis's personable style in any event led many people to think he was more liberal than he was. Both Sanderson and Foster felt that he had genuinely believed that he had a good chance of being elected leader: the latter, who made no secret of his own support for John Taylor, spoke with ill-concealed satisfaction of the "right good gunk" Maginnis had suffered. He was "quite happy so far" with Trimble - but spoke with some relish of "Big Ian"'s capacity "to tell home truths".

11. Foster and Sanderson both agreed that the revised constituency boundaries should strengthen the unionist position in Fermanagh/South Tyrone, with the latter commenting that he would put money on Maginnis to retain his seat at the next general election even if there were an SDLP/Sinn Féin pact, though it was not a certainty that he'd win. Foster, however, seemed inclined to look the gift horse in the mouth, stating that the boundaries had been redrawn only "because you lot in Maryfield insisted on it to save Eddie McGrady's skin".

Comment

12. These conversations were interesting as a partial proof of John Whyte's assertion of the significance of local variation within Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, although the unionist community in Fermanagh and South Tyrone may in broad cultural terms differ significantly from that east of the Bann, there is little evidence that these distinctions have, or will have, a meaningful political impact. Sammy Foster's views were a reminder of the defensiveness, conservatism, and mistrust which characterise much unionist thinking, and of the skill with which David Trimble will have to navigate, should he truly seek to be bolder and more ambitious than his predecessor.


Rory Montgomery

11 October 1995

cc PST; PSS; Second Secretary O hUiginn; Joint Secretary; Counsellors A-I; Messrs Teahon, Donlon and Murray; Embassies London and Washington.