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Portadown - Meeting with Garvaghy Road Residents

8 May 1996

I met with 11 members of the Garvaghy Road residents group to discuss their concerns regarding the likely attempts by the Orange Order to organise marches through the Garvaghy Road before and during the 12th of July. The meeting was called by Fr. Eamon Stack, the local Jesuit who has been involved in the issue previously. He held back from participation in the discussion until near the close of the (two hour) discussion. Much of the discussion was led by Brendan McCionnaith, though all of the group made contributions with the exception of a local member of Sinn Féin. The following points of interest arose.

Role of the Government

1. McCionnaith began with an aggressive line of questioning about the degree of commitment of the Government to the residents' plight. How many times has the situation there been raised with the British Government? Was it a priority with the Government? How many more and different officials would they meet? Could they expect anything from the Government? He said that the group felt very isolated and morale was very low generally among the residents about support for their cause. The Government claimed to be the 'guarantor of the nationalist interest' (his phrase). It would be an enormous boost if the Tánaiste could meet with a delegation from the group. They had sought other meetings with political leaders in Dublin but with little success.
2. I assured him that the Government regarded the parade issue as a priority because of the many factors involved; the rights of nationalists, confidence in law, order and the police, the impact of violence and confrontation on the peace process. It raised the issue on an ongoing basis at official level and had engaged in intense discussions at political level during the Drumcree standoff last year and at the subsequent IGC (October). Recent discussions at official level were ongoing and would form part of the discussions at upcoming IGCs for which meetings such as this were crucial in keeping the Government informed of what was the situation on the ground. I said that I would certainly explore the request for a meeting, bearing in mind the sensitivities involved, specifically the need to avoid stoking loyalist claims about orchestration from Dublin. McCionnaith took the point and offered that the meeting could be a private one. His main concern was that to ensure that the group had a sympathetic ally.

Offers of Mediation and Compromise

3. They had made numerous offers of contact with the local Orange Lodge, all to no avail. They were inclined to conclude that the Lodge would have little or no influence in brokering a compromise and were caught up in something much bigger. Indeed, they could think of no one who would be able to 'deliver'. They dismissed Eames as irrelevant and though they felt that Trimble might be able to help if so inclined, believed

that he was not seriously interested in dialogue. Why they asked, had he refused to meet them directly, offering only to meet the elderly Canon Arlie? I made the point that the question of whether Trimble was genuinely interested in a peaceful compromise must be considered an open one at the moment. It would be nigh impossible for him to meet with the Garvaghy Road residents directly given his own fears about the loyalty of his colleagues (not least Taylor) who might wish to exploit any perceived weakness on his part. He laboured under the burden of the widespread belief in loyalist circles that he owed his leadership to the events at Drumcree group. It was an issue on which they should keep an open mind.

4. They had offered their compromise about the march they feared most, the march on the return leg from Drumcree Church on the Sunday before the Twelfth i.e. that it be rerouted down the Dungannon Road, a route which was both more direct and which even included a nationalist section (see map attached). They considered this a very significant offer.
5. They said that they would not be calling in Mediation Network to intervene this year. They were considering releasing a statement that Brendan McAllister of the Network had encouraged to accept agreement to the parade last year by conveying a message from RUC Deputy Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan that there would be no more parades down the Garvaghy. They would call on McAllister to confirm this.

Views of the RUC

6. They had had no contact with the local RUC about the likely decisions regarding July. They believed that the local RUC was a fundamentally loyalist force which would ultimately seek to protect loyalist interests, including parades. The events last year had done little to dispel this notion. Nor had the recent serving of summonses for obstruction last July on 5 Garvaghy residents (including Stack), which were delivered the same day as Trimble published a call for evenhandedness in punishing law breakers in the *Portadown News* (copy attached). This, Stack felt, was a purely political attempt to daub both sides as law breakers and appease Trimble. It was an opening move in the political game that would be played out between now and July. (They have requested action by us on this.) Furthermore, there had been no attempt to charge Paisley with incitement for his highly inflammatory comments.

Purpose of the Parades

7. There was some contention in the group about the nature of Orange parades and whether they constituted a legitimate heritage in and of itself or whether they required the demonstrable subjugation of nationalists. The feeling seemed to favour the latter interpretation. The Orange Order had never shown them respect. The respect of the residents had to be earned. If and when it was, then they might well consider consenting to a parade (though they admitted this was a long way off). Either way, they did not want a parade down the Garvaghy Road.

8. On whether they would accept a very tightly controlled and discreet march, they scoffed and said that that had been promised last year. The triumphalism afterward had merely confirmed them in their suspicions about Orangeism and its purposes.

Possible Action by Residents

9. McCionnaith said that community solidarity was high. Another member of the group hinted that they had a plan of action but would not reveal details. McCionnaith said rather darkly, for obvious effect, that they could pack the area with nationalists if it became a numbers game and no amount of RUC would stop their arrival; 'We only have to say the word'. I said that the restraint they had shown last year had earned them widespread respect. One of the strengths of the group was that it was locally based and was believed to represent the views of the community generally (in contrast to the skepticism often and unfairly voiced about the Lower Ormeau Road group).

Independent Tribunal

10. This was an unknown quantity as far as they were concerned. They would have to see the details of what was being proposed but such details would be judged against the view that the issue was one of right or wrong. Even if such a tribunal was predicated on establishing consent, what constituted consent? McCionnaith felt the proposal was mooted by those (he instanced Eames) wishing to avoid taking a moral decision of the issue.

Comment

11. The group seemed cautiously reassured by the meeting but would naturally await developments. They clearly anticipate a major confrontation this year and are preparing a course of action which, they hinted, included mobilising the community to counter attempts to force a parade down the Garvaghy Road. They have little or no faith in anyone or any party to assist them and will give very little quarter to those offering to mediate. They see the issue as a profound one, the principles of which (respect both by loyalists for their nationalist neighbours and by the authorities for the concept of nationalist consent) they will not surrender lightly.



Eamonn McKee
Security Section
9 May 1996

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Box ✓