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Taisceadh
An interesting report. Again trust, or the lack of it, emerges as a key factor.
my Hogan
26/9

Confidential

by Nolan
hh
26/9

Conversations with UUP Officers, 19/20 September 1996

SEEN
TAOIS
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25-9-96

1. I had meetings in Belfast last week with three senior officers of the Ulster Unionist Party: Dennis Rogan, the Chairman of the Executive Committee (who recently succeeded Jim Nicholson in that office); Jack Allen, the Honorary Treasurer; and Jim Wilson, the full-time Chief Executive. I met Rogan separately from the other two. All three are well-established contacts, and were, as usual, friendly and open in manner. They freely describe themselves as moderates within the party, though Wilson, who was uncharacteristically forceful in discussion of Drumcree and its effects, said that he personally had felt himself moving rightwards (and not in an attempt to fit in with the new leadership).

Drumcree

2. Allen and Wilson emphasised the depth of division and tension now existing between the two communities: "as bad as it ever was." While agreeing that "things happened" with which the bulk of the Unionist community would not have been happy, both emphasised the extreme symbolic importance of the Garvaghy Road route, and the satisfaction that a firm stand had been taken and had ultimately prevailed. They praised David Trimble's role in the affair: he had sought at all points to minimise tensions and to control "wild men", while knowing that the strength of unionist feeling was so deep as to constrain his freedom of action.

3. Wilson bitterly attacked "Sinn Féin/IRA manipulation" both of the parades issue and of the boycotts. He also said that he personally, like most other unionists of his acquaintance, had been enraged by the "sight of Irish Ministers stomping around telling us what to do." When I pointed out that there had been no observers representing the Government at the parades, it emerged that he was referring to the fact that a Government delegation was in attendance at Stormont during July. I said that we were present in Belfast on foot of generally agreed arrangements for the negotiations - as in 1992. We had felt obliged to make clear our views on the situation, both through the machinery of

the Anglo-Irish Agreement and in public, because of the strength, and extent, of nationalist feeling. The Anglo-Irish Secretariat, and the Department of Foreign Affairs, did not sit around concocting grievances out of thin air, but acted on information and views conveyed by community leaders and politicians: unionists would, in my view, be seriously in error if they felt that nationalist anger over all that had happened could be explained by republican agitation or outside interference. Allen (but not Wilson) expressed some appreciation of this point.

The Talks

4. None of my interlocutors has been directly involved in the talks to date, though both Rogan and Allen have been present in Castle Buildings on a number of occasions. [Rogan strongly attacked both the layout of the Castle Buildings complex, and the “stinginess” of payments to representatives of the larger parties attending there, as obstacles to informal contact and dialogue.]¹. I made clear that I did not wish to discuss current issues in detail, but rather to obtain a wider UUP sense of where the talks were going.

5. Nevertheless, I stressed the absolute necessity of getting beyond the current decommissioning crux into substantive negotiations. As our willingness to discuss our proposed legislation demonstrated, we were prepared to offer the UUP substantial political cover for movement on their part. On the other hand, the essential absurdity of haggling over hypothetical conditions which actually made Sinn Féin participation in the negotiations, and hence the goal of decommissioning, more remote, could not be ignored. In addition, following Drumcree, the Billy Wright episode, etc., most nationalists would be inclined to charge unionist politicians with hypocrisy

¹ Rogan explained the “third division” nature of the UUP’s representation at their meeting with the Tánaiste last Tuesday by reference to the reluctance of more senior figures such as himself to “hang around Castle Buildings losing money”. He did not, however, explain what pressing business had detained Trimble at Glengall street. As he had raised the matter, I did not press it, other than by not demurring from his description of the initial UUP team.

6. Rogan concurred with this last point. He has consistently regarded the focus on decommissioning as mistaken, and blames the British Government for obliging unionists to follow them down a cul-de-sac. Nevertheless he, and the other two, whose views would be more orthodox, emphasised the vulnerability of the UUP on this issue. They noted that both Paisley and McCartney had been stepping up public pressure over the previous days. The party had to be able to say that some decommissioning would remain required of both sets of paramilitaries following their entry into negotiations, though they accepted the linkage established by Mitchell between this and political progress. They stressed that they had already moved on decommissioning, away from demands for prior decommissioning, or for a strict timetable.
7. Rogan, Allen and Wilson all said that they were convinced of David Trimble's commitment to negotiations and to a political settlement (Allen comparing him favourably to his predecessor in this regard). They also said that the party as a whole was firmly behind him: there might be some personal doubts about him, but it would be disastrous if he were to fail electorally or to be replaced. Rogan obliquely criticised John Taylor's restlessness and unpredictability. They saw the SDLP/UUP relationship as the key one, and felt that any agreement between the two parties would be so warmly welcomed both internationally and within Northern Ireland as to marginalise both Sinn Féin and the DUP.
8. There was unanimity on the need for substantial progress to be made before Christmas - the imminent British elections would make headway after that date well-nigh impossible.
9. However, all three also said that they had serious doubts about the SDLP's willingness to do a deal with them. Specifically, while elements within the SDLP were eager to get down to business, John Hume's real intentions were obscure. In familiar terms, they criticised Hume's alleged uninterest in the 1992 talks; his patchy attendance thus far at these negotiations; his "obsession" with Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin; his refusal to move from "waffle" into specifics. Wilson wondered if Hume had any interest in the creation of internal institutions within Northern Ireland, even as part of a wider settlement, and

attacked the SDLP's withdrawal from the Forum, which he claimed was now doing good work (for example, on education). At the same time, while Rogan in particular felt that there was now greater internal pressure upon Hume from within the SDLP, they acknowledged that his authority and standing within the nationalist community remained unequalled.

10. Allen and Wilson also complained that the Irish Government ("or members of it") seemed preoccupied with luring back Sinn Féin into a pan-nationalist front. They speculated that Hume's hope was that the decommissioning hurdle to be jumped by Sinn Féin would be set so low as to lead to a savage row within Unionism; and that on Sinn Féin's actual re-entry to the negotiations the UUP would feel obliged to withdraw, leaving nationalists in possession of the moral high ground; and that then the two Governments would move to impose a solution, as sketched out by Albert Reynolds.
11. As to the characterisation of our motives, I said that we had made clear by our willingness to enter into detailed discussions earlier that week our firm commitment to reaching a satisfactory conclusion on decommissioning. We wanted to negotiate seriously with the unionists, but had many of the same doubts about their motives as they had about ours. We were firmly on the record as being committed to the democratic endorsement of any proposed settlement, and knew that the support of mainstream unionists represented by the UUP was vital, as was inherent in the concept of sufficient consensus, which we had been the first to propose. Thus the idea of an imposed settlement made no sense. Moreover, the institutional arrangements envisaged in the Framework Document - our broad objective in the negotiations - required the existence of local institutions in which, inevitably, the UUP would play a leading role.
12. At the same time, we could not agree to a decommissioning scheme we regarded as unworkable and actually counter-productive. More generally, we acknowledged the centrality of the SDLP/UUP relationship. However, the peace process had been based on the view that these two parties, in particular the SDLP, would not be able either to achieve or, in the long run, to sustain an agreement in conditions of continuing violence.

It was probably politically essential, from a nationalist point of view, for Sinn Féin to have had every opportunity to be fully involved in the negotiation of any agreement, whether or not it actually endorsed the end product: a Sinn Féin which could claim to have been excluded would be in a much stronger position to denounce, and oppose, a settlement. Thus I would not hide our continuing enthusiasm for an inclusive process, nor our determination not to act in such a way as to eliminate the prospect of one. This was by no means the same as wishing to frustrate SDLP/UUP agreement, or as minimising the value of such an agreement: on the contrary, we wanted to ensure that any deal was achieved in the best possible circumstances.

13. Rogan said that he saw the logic of what I was saying, and that he, personally, would wish for Sinn Féin to be in, on the same basis as the loyalists. Allen and Wilson were less convinced: they thought that the presence of Sinn Féin in the negotiations would “force the SDLP to be greener” and would create endless opportunities for DUP mischief. They saw no prospect of common ground between Sinn Féin and even the most liberal of unionists. At the same time, they acknowledged that Sinn Féin would have to be permitted entry if there were an unequivocal ceasefire, and said that their own advice would be that the UUP should “stand firm within the talks.”
14. I argued that the logic of the UUP position, including what they had said to me about the timescale, pointed to rapid engagement on the substantive issues. They were clearly perceived to be preventing this and, if their own suspicions turned out to be correct, which I doubted, letting the SDLP and ourselves off the hook. They should put it up to us, and smoke out any ambivalence. Any failure on the part of nationalists to reciprocate would quickly become apparent. They saw some merit in this argument, but said that if they were seen to “go soft on decommissioning” and then to failed to secure a deal, they would be “flayed” for their naivety. On the other hand, they saw little domestic political risk in a harder-line approach, even if that led to the collapse of the talks: they felt that in the eyes of their electorate their position was logical and reasonable..

Comment

15. I was particularly struck by the emphasis my three interlocutors placed on the need for an SDLP/UUP deal to form the heart of any agreement, but equally by their manifest suspicion of John Hume, and the reluctance of both Allen and Wilson to acknowledge the possible value of Sinn Féin's presence at the negotiations. It may be that, consciously or otherwise, the UUP are already preparing to explain the possible failure of the negotiations much as they do that of the 1992 talks: by arguing that pan-nationalism holds a higher value for the SDLP and the Irish Government than does the prospect of moderate cross-community agreement. The argument that, if they genuinely fear this to be the case, they should put it to the test is one they find difficult to answer.



Rory Montgomery

23 September 1996