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Confidential

Conversation with Dennis Rogan, Belfast, 24 February 1997

1. Dennis Rogan, a South Belfast businessman, last year succeeded Jim Nicholson as chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party's Executive Committee. Though his main interests are in textiles, he has recently become the vice-chairman of Drury Communications, the chairman of which is David Kennedy. Drury's Northern office is headed by Tom Kelly, the former SDLP official.
2. Rogan is glad of the opportunity to observe the Southern economic boom at first hand: he seemed more willing than previously to acknowledge its genuine strength, and the fundamental factors, notably the reform of the public finances and the quality of our education system, which underpin it. He acknowledged to me that EU support is only one of a number of mutually reinforcing elements. At the same time, he remarked that his Northern Presbyterian suspicions were aroused by a certain feverishness and ostentation in the present situation: we recalled the rule of thumb applied by Sir Kenneth Cork, the well-known receiver, who found the use of marble in a company's office, and the acquisition of Rolls Royces with personalised numberplates, to be sure signs of impending collapse.
3. As in our previous conversations, I found Rogan affable and frank in his assessment of the political situation. He acknowledged that the stalemate reached in the talks is largely a result of UUP insecurity vis-a-vis the DUP and the UKUP. However, while he personally has always regarded the party's stance on decommissioning as mistaken, he was not optimistic that it will prove possible to get off the hook even after an election. First of all, any mandate David Trimble receives will be based on a fairly hardline position. Secondly, the unionist community as a whole is more and more convinced of the bad faith of the republican movement, and will want "deeds as well as words" to convince it of any change of heart.
4. Rogan felt it would "take something rather special" in any IRA/Sinn Féin

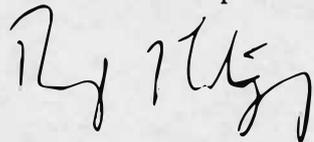
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announcement of a ceasefire to start building unionist confidence (his expectation is that there will be a pre-election ceasefire, for purely tactical reasons, but that it will be “the usual old guff”). He was interested in the Taoiseach’s recent emphasis on possible republican acceptance of the principle of consent, and suggested that a “no first strike” commitment could also be valuable: but he stressed that these were personal views, and that most of his party would expect at least some action on decommissioning before they could face the prospect of talking to Sinn Féin.

5. Rogan admitted to finding Mo Mowlam an engaging and attractive personality, at least at a personal level: he thought however that while her style might be different from that of her male predecessors, she was at bottom pretty cautious, like New Labour generally. He expressed some doubt as to whether she would in fact be appointed as Secretary of State: I said that there was no evidence, other than vague gossip, to suggest that she wouldn’t, and plenty to suggest that she would.
6. He said that while John Hume’s recent statements distancing the SDLP from Sinn Féin were interesting as far as they went, there was a large residue of unionist suspicion of Hume, which had built up over several years. He engaged in the now familiar praise of Séamus Mallon as a man with whom unionists could do business. I said that it was regrettable that only now were unionists coming to recognise Mallon for what he always had been: a committed constitutional nationalist with a deep abhorrence of violence. Rogan also articulated the standard unionist criticisms of the Tánaiste: I sought to demonstrate that he had over his tenure of office sought a genuine balance between the two communities, and that he had in fact frequently addressed unionist concerns (even if, regrettably, the media often chose to highlight only those aspects of his speeches and interviews focussed on Sinn Féin). I suggested to Rogan that unionists were too quick to interpret the expression of a views which challenged their own perceptions either as some kind of attack on them, or as evidence of a plot.
7. Rogan returned on several occasions to the question of whether the Government would

- accept any settlement to which the UUP and SDLP could agree. I said that I was sure that it would, but emphasised that in my view it would be a serious error to expect the SDLP to go for anything much short of the Framework Document, or to plan on that basis. Rogan seemed more relaxed about the question of a North/South body than before.
8. He also stressed that any settlement must be seen as permanent. I replied that, strictly, it was not possible to guarantee against the possibility of a nationalist majority at some stage - a point he accepted. However, our primary interest was in stability, which could only be achieved by agreement. If such an agreement were in place, we would expect all parties to it - including unionists, nationalists and the two Governments - to work it wholeheartedly and in good faith. If that were the case, there would be little patience with attempts, from any quarter, to disrupt the agreement, or to press aggressively for its rewriting - while allowing for revision by mutual agreement. We could not therefore guarantee the permanence of any settlement, but we could say that we hoped it would be stable and long-lasting: a scenario which would allow unionists to try to convince their fellow-citizens that a fair balance had been definitively struck.
9. Rogan admitted to uncertainty about how the elections would go. He felt that tactical voting by unionists for Joe Hendron was unlikely to hold off Gerry Adams in West Belfast. In East Belfast, Reg Empey must have a good chance, especially as the Alliance vote was likely to collapse: Jim Hendron was a decent man, but not the equal of Alderdice, and in an overwhelmingly Protestant constituency no Catholic could hope to do as well as a son of the manse. On the whole though, he expected Peter Robinson to hold on. On the other hand, he thought that Nigel Dodds would be a very strong challenger to Cecil Walker in North Belfast. Dodds was an able and articulate candidate, and would benefit from a sympathy vote. Walker "should have had the decency to go gracefully at his age": on the other hand, it was unfortunate that "passing the torch from one generation to another should have got mixed up in a right-wing plot." John Taylor should be able to defeat Irish Robinson in Strangford.

10. Rogan cheerfully admits to a long-standing personal animosity to Robert McCartney. He reported that McCartney has offended "lots of old ladies and all their relations" through his indifference to constituency matters. He hoped that Alan McFarland might prove able to defeat him in North Down, but admitted that McFarland has a virtually invisible public profile.
11. We agreed that west of the Bann Ken Maginnis should retain his seat, irrespective of the opposition. Rogan expects that there will be single unionist candidates in Mid Ulster and West Tyrone (in the latter case, William Thompson of the UUP - a "decent man but a weak candidate"). He seemed genuinely shocked at my suggestion that even without an IRA ceasefire Martin McGuinness might obtain most of the nationalist vote in Mid Ulster and so defeat William McCrea.
12. Rogan said that he felt that David Trimble's position would be strengthened by an adequate electoral performance, and by the addition of Jeffrey Donaldson to the UUP's parliamentary team (as, a fortiori, by the election of Reg Empey and/or Alan McFarland). He was inclined to dismiss the danger of a covert challenge from Taylor: he sensed that Taylor's star had waned even since the leadership election and that he was coming to terms with being a number 2 - "though a loud one!".
13. At the end of the evening, I asked Rogan what he felt David Trimble really wanted for himself personally - to be head of a Northern Ireland administration? a Westminster MP? or both? To my surprise, Rogan said that he had never thought about the question, or indeed heard any speculation about it - and agreed that this said something about the predominance, to date, of tactical considerations in Trimble's approach.



Rory Montgomery

26 February 1997