

237/96

Page: 75

CONFIDENTIAL

From: Robert Crawford
Political Affairs Division
21 August 1997

UNDER
SFC
66718
29 AUG 1997
CENT SEC

HEAD OF THE N.I.
28 AUG
CIVIL SERVICE

- cc PS/Mr Ingram (B&L) - O
- PS/Mr Murphy (B&L) - O
- PS/Sir David Fell - O
- Mr Thomas - O
- Mr Steele - O
- Mr Stephens - O
- Mr Leach - O
- Mr Hill - O
- Mr Maccabe
- Mr Warner - O

C

Mr Watkins

Mrs Black
Mr Jones
LD16/10

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - O

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH THE METHODIST COUNCIL
AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: 20 AUGUST 1997

On 20 August 1997, the Secretary of State met representatives of the Methodist Churches Council and Social Responsibility. The Methodists were represented by the Reverend David Cooper, Dr David Gallagher, the Reverend Harold Good and the Reverend Dr Johnston McMaster. The Secretary of State was supported by Mr Steele and Mr Maccabe. I was present to minute the meeting.

2. [Following the meeting the Secretary of State asked that work be undertaken to follow-up the suggestion made by Dr Gallagher (para 11) that HMG should set up a Social Exclusion Unit in Northern Ireland. Such a Unit has been set up in Great Britain and the Secretary of state believes that a Unit in Northern Ireland could co-ordinate work on TSN, PAFT, the SACHR report on Employment and Equality and Fair Employment generally. Action: Mr Watkins].

CONFIDENTIAL

2. The Secretary of State began by welcoming the Methodist representatives and inviting them to raise whatever issues they wished. The Reverend Cooper thanked the Secretary of State, saying that they wished to discuss the situation in general and confidence building in particular. The Methodists appreciated everything that the Secretary of State had done since she had taken up office - it was clear that she was aware of the sensitivities on both sides. The Secretary of State said that this had been very much a joint effort and she had been very grateful for the guidance and experience of her civil servants. So far as confidence building measures were concerned, she noted that the main problems to address were the lack of respect, fear and distrust that existed between the two communities in NI.

3. The Reverend Cooper said that the Methodists regarded inclusiveness as important in building confidence. The Reverend Good said that the Secretary of State had furthered this by building relationships with people and giving them the impression that they were being heard. Individual announcement eg on prisoners, represented only a one day headline, particularly within the Republican community. The Protestant community was very frightened and hurt. The Reverend Good said that the Methodist Church was attempting to explain to others outside the Protestant community how confidence could be built for Unionists. They had developed contacts with Republicans to explain this and thought they were beginning to understand. The Secretary of State observed that people had different mindsets. Sinn Fein had shown they understood that their assistance with parades could build trust with Unionists, however to say that they had done this was perceived by them as playing HMG's game. Sinn Fein could understand the short term advantage but found it much more difficult to recognise the potential for longer term advantage.

4. The Reverend Cooper confirmed that he had spoken to Mitchell McLaughlin during the Methodist Conference and had told him that the issue of Sinn Fein involvement in residents groups was an important issue for Unionists.

CONFIDENTIAL

It was important that Sinn Fein heard and responded to criticism of such involvement. He had also tried to explain the depth of the hurt experienced by Unionists over many years. Subsequently McGuinness had stated that he recognised the depth of hurt experienced by the Unionist community. Many Unionists, including some within the Methodist Church, were saying that they had been sold down the river. There was a great deal of fear and this had been demonstrated by a higher level of kerb painting over the Summer. Unionists had a view that the green tide was coming in and were marking their territory. The Methodist church had stressed to Sinn Fein what it could do to improve confidence, eg the "transitional" reference made by Martin McGuinness a few weeks ago. The Reverend Cooper and others had taken flak at their conference for speaking in favour of inclusiveness. They had also attempted to break down the idea that one side could only go up when the other went down.

5. The Secretary of State said that it seemed the thinking was at two levels. At one level there was kerb painting and bunting, however at another level it seemed that many people understood the need to go into Talks. Unionist reaction was not always as negative as expected, for example on Sunday Trading. She had also expected a negative response regarding the UUP's statement that they were considering remaining in the Talks, but this had not happened. Dr Gallagher commented that he detected a shift in the wider Unionist community, one of his colleagues involved in the voluntary sector and part of the UUP consultation had reported the same. All of the voluntary sector would be telling the UUP to remain in Talks [confirmed by our own feedback]. The Methodist church would also be arguing for this.

6. Dr Gallagher said that he was not sure why the Unionists were arguing for a change of format. They thought that there was a concern regarding a straight deal with the SDLP. He thought that this was not possible and that any deal must be more inclusive. The Reverend Cooper added that there was a need to release Unionist minds from the idea of domination, to demonstrate that there was a way forward other than through domination, through being enriched

CONFIDENTIAL

rather than threatened by contact with others. Dr Gallagher commented that the ordinary citizen would feel left behind when the Talks began. Of necessity, negotiation would be behind closed doors, but it would be as important to be as transparent as possible about what was happening. He thought that the Independent Chairmen and the Secretary of State had an important role in this, to attempt to include the wider community. From his experience of the Opsahl Commission there could be almost an alternative process involving the community and voluntary sectors. There was a lot of experience here, both Unionist and Nationalist, which could be tapped into, which had the wellbeing of NI at heart.

7. The Secretary of State said that HMG had stated its role would be to facilitate. Bertie Aherne on the other hand said that he would be looking after Nationalists. He noted that the management role referred to by Dr Gallagher might not always be the same as her role representing HMG in the Talks. Similarly there were items from the Labour manifesto, eg police issues, the North Report etc, which would be dealt with outside the Talks. To that extent, her role within the Talks would be polluted by her role as Secretary of State. The Reverend Good thought that the model of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation was useful. He had attended and found it moving at times, an opportunity express feelings and be heard. Something similar in NI would be useful.

8. Dr Gallagher observed that during the Convention there had been an advisory group for the Chairman which had been given the role of helping the Chairman with discussions. He noted that there was a facility within the rules for the Chairman to consult with experts. Mr Steele suggested that the right approach would be for the people taking part in the Talks to be more outward looking, as the UUP had already begun to do, rather than attempting to involve a greater range of people directly in Talks. Mr Maccabe suggested that the involvement of outsiders might be opposed by political representatives. Some form of outreach by the politicians themselves would however be different, as

CONFIDENTIAL

already initiated by the UUP and also to an extent by Labour, the Women's Coalition and the Loyalist Parties. He suggested that it would be very difficult for the UUP to refuse similar consultation in the future. Dr Gallagher said that he had made the suggestion to John Hume and Mark Durkan that they too needed to reach out as the Unionists were doing.

9. The Secretary of State wondered whether an open session for the people of Northern Ireland, perhaps every month, would be useful. She suggested that consultation should also be built into Minister's meeting with District Councils, perhaps setting aside 30 minutes on each visit to take the views of Councillors on Talks issues. The Reverend Cooper suggested that there was a need to achieve consensus other than consultation. He had been impressed by the South African experience where the opportunity had been provided for people to tell their story to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Secretary of State distinguished South Africa, observing that there had been grassroots support for reconciliation. Mr Steele commented that in NI the likelihood was that some grassroots opinion would be opposed.

10. Dr Gallagher said that the Methodists, with ECONI, had last year tried to develop a Church based initiative to build greater understanding of the different political views. It had received reasonable support from the Evangelical side, but some resistance from mainstream churches. The Reverend Good commented that it would not be possible to have an initiative like the Truth and Reconciliation commission until there had been honesty between the NI communities. What was needed at present was to create the idea that there was opportunity for people to feel heard and to tell their story. There were many who felt unrepresented, unheard and excluded. In some cases, violence was the language of those who felt excluded, but others tended simply to opt out. Such a process could push the parties as it was pushing the UUP. The Reverend McMaster suggested this might best be done in an uncentralised way. The model might rather be through local communities. Churches could have a role and should perhaps be more proactive. The Secretary of State commented that

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

some people in NI managed to live quite comfortably and simply didn't want to know. She did not know how to get through to such people, but they could have an important input.

11. Dr Gallagher said that he had made the point at the Methodist Conference that the Secretary of State had to perform a balancing act on confidence building measures - it would be very important to deal with these sensitively. He suggested that the Government might set up a Social Exclusion Unit in NI to provide an opportunity for those not currently heard to provide their ideas forward. The Secretary of State suggested that consultation with the 26 District Councils and the District Partnerships could provide useful input. She might also announce that HMG was willing to listen to the views of others and in 3 to 4 months time it might be possible to have central sessions with the voluntary and business sector, perhaps similar to the recent G7 lunch.

12. The Reverend Good said it was difficult to get people into fact to face contacts. he thought that the lack of this might be a difficulty once negotiations began. Unionists had been very resistant to the idea of meeting Sinn Fein, even where this could be organised outside NI. The Secretary of State commented that she was not as optimistic as some and was not yet convinced that Unionists would be present. The previous Unionist leadership had consulted on many occasions but this had not necessarily led anywhere. She added that Unionists were, however, beginning to realise that they had to talk, although at the moment they said they were going to come into the Talks but nothing was going to change. She thought that there would therefore be no movement immediately, although HMG and the Irish Government would be pushing for movement. She thought that not all Unionists and not all members of Sinn Fein would agree, but some would begin to move. Unionists and Sinn Fein already worked together on the 26 District Councils; it might be helpful for the Secretary of State and Ministers in their visits to Councils to ensure that there was media coverage of them sitting with representatives of both sides discussing issues such as welfare to work etc.

CONFIDENTIAL

13. In response to a question from Mr Steele as to what HMG or the political parties could do to build Unionist confidence, the Reverend Cooper said that there were different levels of rational and emotional thinking. It was very difficult to get beyond the emotional reaction. Many Unionists did not trust the Government and repeated statements of reassurance were themselves not sufficient. This was why the Prime Minister's speech had been so very important as it had connected with the emotional thinking. There was a need for HMG to find ways of convincing Unionists, possibly by interpreting or re-stating the commitment. One possibility might be the Forum: HMG might, when it was time to make the decision, decide to continue its existence and encourage the SDLP to participate. The Secretary of State noted this, but commented that there was a lack of attraction to this because of the way the Forum abused the NIWC and others.

14. The Reverend Good said that for some people, the more reassurance given, the less they were inclined to believe it. Unionists felt somewhat like orphans - they needed to feel their parents were there and that those parents had their best interests at heart. He also suggested that Unionists preferred to see firm Government and could cope much better with that style. The Secretary of State agreed and added that she had found that straightforward decisions received a better reaction. There might be an initial negative reaction but this quickly settled. Overall, this helped to build trust and confidence, even where the Government response was negative. The Reverend Good said that Ulster people found this easier to understand than waffle and indecision. The Reverend McMaster added that there was however, some self-delusion in this - in particular, the Ulster reputation for straight-talking did not extend to listening to such talking.

15. Mr Maccabe observed that there was a difference between the two sides. Nationalists had much clearer ideas about what confidence-building measures they would like, whereas Unionists had no such list. Sinn Fein's position on

CONFIDENTIAL

consent was very important, the Reverend Good said that at the Methodist Conference Alex Maskey had said that the consent meant equality. He went on to suggest that the word "agreement" would be more acceptable to Sinn Fein than consent, although it was noted that much depended on what was to be agreed. The Reverend Cooper pointed out that Mitchell McLaughlin had used the word consent just the day before. Mr Steele said that Sinn Fein were looking for agreement on their own terms, although it was hoped that they might move into something more democratically based. David Ervine had expressed it well - they needed to move from "in your face" politics. The Reverend Cooper said that progress on confidence-building would be painfully slow. Unionists believed that Labour had a Republican agenda. The Methodist Council had also been labelled as Republicans for putting forward a different approach. It would be important to keep repeating that the Union is secure although this would need to be done carefully to avoid driving Sinn Fein and other Nationalists out.

16. On Parades, the Reverend McMaster said that the Methodists very much appreciated the Secretary of State's role. A lot of work had been put in and the outcome had not been the disaster that had been expected. The Secretary of State had said that she had put in considerable emotional energy and that this had, she thought, paid off. She praised the tremendous courage of some of the Orange leadership and suggested that both sides might have needed the emotional release of the Garvaghy Road to allow progress to be made. The Reverend McMaster said that the Methodist church had a working party on its links with the Loyal Orders, which were informal rather than formal. This working party had already spoken to the Orange Orders and to the Black Preceptory and was likely to report the Conference next year. This report was likely to raise some very sharp theological issues. He understood that the Church of Ireland was also carrying out a similar exercise.

17. The Secretary of State gave a brief overview of the current position on the implementation of the North Report. In particular, the registration of bands was not favoured. Mr Steele explained that any such scheme would have to be

CONFIDENTIAL

court based and it would be difficult to find an objective way of making an application to ban a particular band and its members. It would also be difficult to prevent bands from changing their identity to get around such a ban. There would also be ECHR difficulties in preventing band members from walking on their own street. It was therefore thought much better to adopt the approach of allowing the Parades Commission to control where marches could take place. Mr Steele added that the Parades Commission would not be in full operation until next year, until legislation had been passed.

18. The Reverend Good commented that he had previously suggested involving specialist conflict resolution experts to provide the expertise and skills not currently available to politicians or civil servants. However, it might be better to use people who were using such skills day to day rather than a guru. In NI there were cultural, psychological and theological differences regarding such areas as authority. It is important for people to know that those with management/Government responsibility understood where they were coming from.

19. The Secretary of State said that there was a need to increase the number of Catholics within the civil service. She was aware that Nationalists often had the impression that when they met civil servants they were meeting Brits and Prods. The Reverend Good commented that for the Protestant community as well needed to feel that those in authority understood their position and point of view. The Secretary of State suggested that sometimes a Northern Irish accent helped to create this feeling. She added, however, that even with increased representation of Catholics in the Civil Service, there would still be the problem with Nationalists that Civil Servants lost credibility when in meetings they adopted a position other than that desired by the Nationalist representatives.

20. The Reverend Cooper thanked the Secretary of State for her time and expressed the Methodist Church's appreciation of the Secretary of State's work. He noted that there was an historic affinity between Methodism and Labour and

CONFIDENTIAL

welcomed the new sense of hope and forwardness brought by the new Government. The Secretary of State in return said that she had appreciated the day to day work carried out by the Methodist representatives and their honesty and positive contribution.

(Signed)

ROBERT CRAWFORD
SH Ext 27088

CONFIDENTIAL