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-2 MAR 1998
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FROM: C G MACCABE
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
27 February 1998

- cc PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)
- PS/Mr Ingram (B&L)
- PS/Mr Worthington
- PS/Lord Dubs
- PS/PUS (B&L)
- PS/Mr Semple
- Mr Thomas
- Mr Steele
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Bell
- Mr Watkins
- Mr McCusker
- Mr Woods (B&L)
- Mr Hill
- Mr Beeton
- Mr Brooker
- Mr Ferguson
- Mr Warner
- Ms Healy
- Mr Sanderson, CO
- Mr Fergusson, RID
- HMA, Dublin

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Talks
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- 2. in copy 3-3

Edward [signature]
to see file
2/10/3

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

PUBLIC OPINION

This is PAB's second review of local opinion in the run-up to the referendum.

Summary

2. Recent events have done little to encourage public belief in a political settlement being achieved in time for a referendum in May, if at all. While Republicans' reaction to Sinn Fein's expulsion from the Talks has been relatively muted, the wider Nationalist community is frustrated that the Dublin experience proved to be a wasted opportunity rather than a chance to inject some much-needed

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momentum into the process. Despite the more positive signals coming out of Castle Buildings this week, there is confusion and concern about what precisely is going on, and the devastation in Moira and Portadown, and reports of more bombings to come, are adding to the public's apprehension. Capitalising on this climate of uncertainty, vigilantes have appeared in North Belfast. Although their stated aim is to reduce anti-social behaviour (they have imposed a curfew on young people), the real objective is probably to re-assert paramilitary control in the area. Both sides (and both Loyalist paramilitary groups) are involved.

The Unionists

3. Unionists continue to be nervous about the outcome of the Talks, although amongst UUP supporters few outside the UUP Talks team actually believe there will be an agreement by May. Around 90% of the UUP Executive backed David Trimble's strategy at its meeting on 14 February, a figure similar to previous Executive meetings. However, UUP contacts confirm opposition to the strategy within the wider Party has increased due to the resumption and threat of terrorist violence. The suspension of Sinn Fein, while widely welcomed by Unionists, has provided little reassurance. Many believe the Party should have been excluded long ago, and the identification of an early date for re-entry has been greeted with cynicism. It has also increased the perception that HMG is prepared to bend over backwards to keep Sinn Fein in the process to prevent a renewed bombing campaign in GB. The UDP's re-admission on 23 February was also questioned by a wide cross-section of Unionist opinion; and the new appointments to the Parades Commission have been heavily criticised, with Glen Barr and Tommy Cheevers in particular drawing Unionist (and Nationalist) fire. The nervousness mentioned above is expected to surface at the UUP's AGM on 21 March, although no one is forecasting a serious challenge to Trimble's leadership.

4. The Unionist opponents of a settlement continue to develop their support networks. The UKUP are attempting to organise constituency associations throughout Northern Ireland, reflecting (they claim) increased Party membership.

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There is some more evidence that Robert McCartney is continuing to gain support among "moderate" Unionists, partly on account of his oratory and partly because he, unlike David Trimble, is perceived as never having had any dealings with Loyalist paramilitaries, or having engaged in street politics.

5. Although Peter Robinson is reported to be taking a keen interest in the progress of the Talks, all the signs point in the direction of a concerted DUP campaign against any agreement that may be reached.

The Nationalists

6. Sinn Fein are having considerable success in sustaining the "polite fiction" that they are an entirely separate organisation from the IRA, particularly amongst their new tranche of younger voters, many of whom cannot recall Gerry Adams wearing anything but Armani. They continue to wallow in their martyrdom, and to portray the leadership as peacemakers striving to bring along a reluctant rump of the Republican Movement. By suggesting that they may not return to the Talks on 9 March they risk making themselves look petulant rather than persecuted, but the notion of making HMG (including the Prime Minister) go through hoops to secure their re-entry may prove irresistible. A decision is expected at tomorrow's Ard Chomhairle. While many Republicans think the Talks are unlikely to yield much, the indications are that they will follow the leadership's line, at least for now.

7. Adams' claim that the anger in the wider Nationalist community at Sinn Fein's expulsion is "palpable" is an overstatement. While some undoubtedly share his (synthetic?) disgruntlement others are bemused by a week of high drama resulting in such a short period of suspension. There were certainly fewer on the streets following Friday's determination than there could have been. It remains to be seen if the hard men will, as Martin McGuinness has predicted, attempt to exploit the situation.

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8. The SDLP's body language is less nervous than it has been. The positive mood of Tuesday's Strand II meeting (described by Sean Farren as the best day of Talks yet, though John Hume was less enthusiastic) and Seamus Mallon's virtuoso performance, indicate that most within the Party's Talks team have come to terms with Sinn Fein's absence. Amongst their supporters concern lingers about the role and status of any new Assembly and the extent of cross-border powers, but overall most are still hoping (if not exactly hopeful) that the Talks will succeed.

Conclusion

9. The public continues to judge progress against events on the ground rather than the limited feedback coming from the Talks. There is a strong sense that the clock is ticking but the process is not gathering momentum. Some tangible evidence that real progress is being made could, like the publication of 'Propositions', improve the mood considerably both inside and outside Castle Buildings.

10. It will be interesting to see to what extent the New Agenda initiative, launched on Wednesday, helps to create a more positive climate. It is already under attack by the DUP and UKUP (it was a central theme of Robert McCartney's appearance on 'Hearts and Minds' last night)

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