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Meeting with Prof. Desmond Rea,
Belfast, 18 November 1985

I had a brief meeting in Belfast yesterday with Prof. Desmond Rea, a moderate Unionist and prominent lay Methodist.

Among the points which he made were the following:

- He is quite unhappy with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In some respects it goes too far, while in others it does not go far enough.
- Clarifying this view, he said that the many Unionists with whom he has spoken over the weekend (who, for the most part, share his own moderate inclinations) feel a deep sense of betrayal at the hands of the British Government. The Agreement goes too far in that it provides the Irish Government with a much more significant foothold in Northern Ireland's affairs than anybody had anticipated.
- On the other hand, it does not go far enough in that it has conspicuously failed to extract as the price of this concession an explicit undertaking by the SDLP to take part in a power-sharing government. There is not even a recommendation to, let alone an obligation on, the SDLP to explore the possibility of such participation. The SDLP has thus been "let off the hook" - with the Conference permanently in the background, it is under no significant pressure to agree to any internal arrangements. Rea finds this the most disappointing aspect of the Agreement. He feels that, had the Agreement firmly locked the SDLP into participation in a power-sharing arrangement, it would have been much easier for moderates such as Bob McCartney and himself to sell its less palatable aspects. Unionists "do not like fudges": there should have been a clearly expressed obligation on the SDLP to enter into a power-sharing government. As

it is, there is nothing in the Agreement which can shore up the middle ground of Unionism against the tide of extremist sentiment. When I pointed to the recognition of the identity of Unionists and the protection of their rights, Rea responded that this already existed in de facto terms and its mere codification in this Agreement is not a major gain. By the same token, he would not personally be seeking the repeal of Articles Two and Three. What Unionists want most of all is a return to political stability "on the ground" in Northern Ireland. This, in Rea's view, can only come about if the SDLP play its full part in the government of Northern Ireland.

- Rea's first emotion on reading the Agreement last Friday was one of "shame": chiefly at what he sees as the succumbing of the British Government to the diplomatic skills of the Irish negotiating team, but also at the failure of Unionist politicians to agree to full executive power-sharing with the SDLP. If the SDLP had been offered "seats at the cabinet table" a long time ago, the Anglo-Irish Agreement could perhaps have been headed off altogether. Rea feels that the more intransigent Unionist politicians have now paid the price for their "short-sightedness". He also, however, blames the British Government: "Margaret Thatcher should have gone for broke on this" (i.e., should have forced Unionists, in parallel with this Agreement, to accept full power-sharing and then written the latter and the SDLP's participation in it into the Agreement).

- An indication of the pressure mounting on moderates like himself is that, as Convenor of the Methodist Church, Rea has been forced by Harold McCusker and other Methodists to bring forward to tomorrow evening (from next week, as originally envisaged) a meeting of the Church to discuss the Agreement. In contrast to the relatively mild statement issued over the weekend by the Chairman of the Church's Belfast district, Rea expects the tone of

tomorrow's meeting to be "closer to that of the Presbyterians".

- Rea predicts that the Alliance Party will be irreparably divided by the Agreement.

I also obtained reactions from other individuals whom I met at a meeting in Belfast yesterday:

- Trevor Pearson, a senior member (Principal Officer rank) of the Central Secretariat in Stormont Castle, told me that he is unhappy with the Agreement and that feelings of unease, a sense of betrayal and a fear that the British Government is engaged in a "sell-out" are widespread among his colleagues.
- On the other hand, John Gaston, Chairman of the N.I. Electricity Service and a self-professed "Loyalist", argued to Desmond Rea that there are some significant gains for Unionists in the Agreement and that it should at least be given a chance to work.
- A young BBC journalist of Northern Protestant background, furthermore, told me that the great majority of her young Unionist friends are taking a relaxed view of the Agreement, seeing in it a chance of restoring peace to Northern Ireland.

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19 November 1985

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