



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Meeting with Mr. Reg Empey and Mr Chris McGimpsey

1. I met Messrs. Empey and McGimpsey in Belfast on 1st February to see how matters stood in the OUP in the wake of the decision to suspend talks until after the British election. Both are on the liberal and open-minded end of their party spectrum, however relative these terms may be when applied to the OUP. They were inclined to be very positive about the "soft landing" of the talks process the previous Monday, acknowledging that the electioneering process would have made things very difficult and that the temptation for Paisley to exploit or undermine the process for short term political gain would have been overwhelming. They were critical however of the SDLP position that the Unionists could be permitted no pause for stock-taking in the event of a change of Government. They had no very clear explanation of the change of heart about the talks which took place among the Unionists in the course of last December, but were inclined to view it as due to their own internal lobbying since the summer break, bearing fruit in helpful party meetings from November onwards. Empey spoke approvingly of the distinction, which he attributed to Mallon, between "negotiations" and "dialogue" and said the briefings in the run-up to the elections would be valuable both as dialogue and in themselves, since the long period of direct rule meant that local politicians often were vague on details such as financial and administrative arrangements for Northern Ireland.
2. As regards the future both were anxious the talks should begin as soon as possible after the election. They were dismissive of the belief that talks could not continue during the marching season, saying that neither the Grand Master (Rev. Martin Smyth) nor anyone who knew the Orange

Order, held them in the same awe as a political force that outsiders seemed to. McGimpsey assumed that in the event of a Conservative victory, Mawhinney would be returned as the "link man" for the talks, possibly even as Secretary of State. (Note: Allowance should be made on this point for the fact that Mawhinney himself is busily plying the mirrors of rumour, to launch and magnify such reports). They both denied that he had any partiality for the Unionists and saw his priorities and motives as essentially careerist. They stressed the OUP interest in talks, and claimed that Hume's fear that they were interested only in suspension of the Agreement was more a matter of clever tactics than of conviction. Empey said that while Molyneaux had given a general blessing to inter-party contacts at any level, to the point that Empey no longer needed to check back with him, Hume had refused to let Alasdair MacDonnell participate in proposed contacts with OUP members of Belfast City Council.

3. I asked them whether they thought a short gap could accommodate negotiations of the scope and complexity needed to address fundamental issues. They said they assumed that if the negotiations took off, ways could be found to extend discussions. Empey, in particular, was most emphatic that their interest was to go to the root of the problem, that is, basic issues relating to the 1920 settlement, however difficult or risky that might be. There would, he acknowledged, be very serious risk all round. He surmised that the British were actually less interested than the Unionists in doing this, instancing Brooke's move from a refusal to address the question of Articles 2 and 3 at the beginning of his term of office, to his present position on this issue which, Empey thought, reflected Unionist representations to him. Their analysis of the British position was that the British had now concluded that they could not in fact withdraw from Northern Ireland without

leaving chaos behind, and they saw Hurd's Blackpool statement (reflecting obliquely, McGimpsey thought, 'concerns about Germany's frontiers) as another reflection of this.

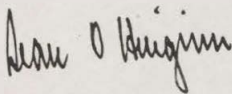
4. I said that going back to fundamental issues raised problems also on the nationalist side which they should not underestimate. Even Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement had raised nationalist misgivings. I asked them how Unionists would view the substance of that article, leaving aside its repugnant association with the Agreement. McGimpsey said that the Supreme Court decision in the McGimpsey case had undermined the relevance of that article. They said the alternative versions of the Agreement (i.e. the different titles for the two parties in the Irish and British versions) had also loomed large in the Unionist dismissal of the article, although they were personally inclined to minimise that aspect. They said they accepted fully that an amendment of Articles 2 and 3 could be carried only in a positive, dynamic context, and that it would probably have to be a change to the aspirational rather than a simple repeal. McGimpsey mentioned a proposal, which he ascribed to the President before her election, that Article 1 of the Agreement should be incorporated into the Constitution. They both felt the European dimension could be a key factor in providing neutral options or context in any future talks. Empey said he expected that Hume would put forward a "European" model at any resumed talks. (They seemed however to assume that the European dimension would be neutral on their side, i.e., in making the status quo more acceptable).

5.

Sinn Fein

had had a policy some years back of sidelining their

"political" councillors in certain areas and substituting "hard men" candidates, whether to neutralise the former or politicise the latter they could not say, but this had added to the problem in that Unionists were in some cases sitting in Councils with their potential assassins. They said Sinn Fein were very worried about the European dimension and 1992. Their strategy to build links with the South in the mid-eighties had not worked. The British would not talk to them. The Irish certainly would not. Hume had learned his lesson from his last attempt. Sinn Fein were even making overtures to Unionist politicians at present. Their leaders had also grown afraid for their own safety since the assassination of Fullerton and O' Hagan. (Note: Much the same point was made to me independently by John Hume). I asked whether there would be any Unionist tactical voting in West Belfast to unseat Adams. Empey said that unless there was a Unionist candidate the 5-6,000 Unionist voters in the constituency would have no incentive - or excuse - to go to the polls, and it was inconceivable they would vote openly for Joe Hendron. He assumed Adams would retain his seat comfortably.



Seán O hUiginn

3 February, 1992