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cc Mr F Finlay  
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26 January, 1993.

Mr. Sean O hUiginn,  
Assistant Secretary,  
Anglo-Irish Division,  
Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Dublin.

Conversation with David Trimble MP

Dear Assistant Secretary,

David Trimble was among the guests at a party last night, 25 January, in the LSE to launch Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry's new book - "The politics of antagonism - understanding Northern Ireland". I availed of the opportunity to have a chat with him.

Personally I have always found Trimble to be one of the more awkward of the OUP to relate to socially. He has an edgy, wary manner and an unfortunate demeanour that suggests a great deal of barely suppressed anger. I was first introduced to him by John Hume shortly after Trimble's election when he made an infrequent visit to the Strangers Bar. I recall Hume's subsequent comment to the effect that Trimble, despite his academic background, was a deeply sectarian individual who would never be entirely at ease in the company of Catholics. Last night's conversation was, however, one of my more comfortable encounters with him, partly perhaps because we steered clear of contentious issues. The following points from our conversation may be of some interest to you.

A Northern Ireland Select Committee

He is absolutely confident that this will be achieved during the lifetime of this parliament. According to Trimble, the chairman of the Select Committee on Procedure, Sir Peter Emery, remains well disposed to it as do most of his fellow Conservative members. There are also several Labour members whom Trimble believes are in sympathy. The Government have never actually pronounced against it but have simply put it on hold for the duration of the talks. This time saving excuse cannot hold water for ever especially, as he put it, "when it registers that the talks are going nowhere."

Trimble is well aware of our misgivings about a Select Committee. He feels, however, that we and the SDLP are putting excessive emphasis on the integrationist aspect and ignoring the practical benefits. From a Westminster perspective, it is simply anomalous to have a situation where the Scottish Office and the Welsh Office are subject to the scrutiny of a Select Committee and the NIO is not. He contended that now that the Scottish Select Committee has been reconstituted, the principal political barrier against the establishment of an NI Committee has been removed.

I asked him about the composition of such a Committee were it to be established. That, he said, has "all been agreed". He referred me back to the formula set out in the report of the Committee on Procedure which allowed for five Northern Ireland members, 3 OUP, 1 DUP and 1 SDLP with the Unionists holding the chair. In Trimble's opinion, this is the balance which will be used.

We spoke about the existing Northern Ireland Standing Committee which met once during the last Parliament, in May 1991, to consider fair employment. This was its first meeting in six years, the previous one being in June 1985 when Enoch Powell led a walk out by the Unionists in protest at the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Trimble felt that more use could be made of this Committee despite its limited scope when compared to that of a Select Committee. According to Trimble, we can expect the OUP to request the reconvening of the Standing Committee during the coming months to consider issues such as electricity privatisation where there is a strong measure of cross party consensus.

#### Westminster

He complained about the difficulty of getting to grips with the procedures and ways of Westminster. The whole place he said "works on a system of nudges and winks". He nonetheless takes obvious pride in his own mastery of the system. He is one of the more active of the OUP attending regularly and intervening on a wide range of issues. This, he told me, ensures that he is more likely to be called and listened to, on those issues in which his constituents have a direct interest. (There is no doubting Trimble's tireless activity but I refrained from telling him that it seemed to be in inverse proportion to the degree of annoyance which he manages to engender on the Tory benches where he is viewed as one of the least likeable of the Unionists).

He told me that Molyneaux had hoped to get him nominated onto the prestigious and important Home Affairs Select Committee. (Fortunately they failed in this endeavour). They have, however, succeeded in getting Martin Smyth onto the Health Select Committee and Clifford Forsyth onto the Social Security Committee. In addition, John Taylor is a member of one of the two scrutiny committees for European secondary legislation. From talking to Trimble one can get a sense of the relative effectiveness of the OUP in working the Westminster system. From what he said it is clear, for example, that Molyneaux strategically marshals OUP interventions at Northern Ireland questions and debates, dropping a note in advance to the Speaker's secretary indicating which spokesmen he wishes to see called. It makes an interesting contrast with the ad hoc seat of the pants approach of the SDLP!

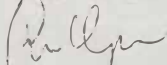
I asked him if he detected any greater interest in Northern Ireland affairs among the new MPs. He responded by telling me about a recent debate on electoral reform. Bill O'Brien, the number three man on McNamara's team, had led for Labour and half way through his speech it had become clear to Trimble and others that Bill did not know that the PR system was in use in Northern Ireland. Time and again, according to Trimble, he came across similar examples of profound ignorance. On the other hand, he admitted that the OUP had found "some helpful attitudes" among the new Tory members many of whom had backgrounds of one kind or

another in the defence forces. There was, he felt, a greater understanding of the Unionist viewpoint than was the case in the previous parliament. One could, however, make too much of this.

We touched on a number of other matters. He spoke for example about the committee stage of the Maastricht Bill, still wending its tortuous way through the House. I could get no clue from him as to how the OUP will vote on the social chapter which is currently under consideration. Trimble was more interested in talking about the amendments on a referendum. These will be the last to be reached and, according to Trimble, represented the only real possibility of a Government defeat. His own guess was, however, that the number of Labour defectors who would vote with the Government would cancel out the effect of the Tory dissidents and the Liberal Democrats.

Our conversation was finally disrupted by the untimely appearance of Tom McMullan, the ponderous stringer for the "Cork Examiner". McMullan had arrived at the party in time to hear Brendan O'Leary announce that his next book would touch on the issue of a condominium solution for Northern Ireland. With characteristic tact, McMullan enquired from Trimble if he would care to provide a few on the record comments on this. Trimble beat a hasty retreat telling McMullan that his personal view was that condominiums were best left to the Pacific islanders!

Yours sincerely



Joe Hayes  
Counsellor