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Meeting with Eddie McGrady

I met Eddie McGrady in Downpatrick on 17 August.

The following points of particular interest arose:

Developments at Westminster

- McGrady was troubled by the developments at Westminster in late July. While a formal deal may not have been concluded between the British Government and the UUP, the mere perception that one exists has been enough to reinforce the UUP's position and to wrongfoot the SDLP.
- He expects that movement of some sort will be evident in the autumn in relation to the UUP's "wish-list" of a Select Committee, an end to the Order in Council arrangements and strengthened powers for local government.
- He is frustrated that the SDLP and the Irish Government have so far been unable to ward off the prospect of these concessions being made to the UUP.
- While the issue has not yet been debated within the SDLP, he believes that the party will have little option but to participate in the proceedings of a Select Committee if there is a decision by Parliament to set one up. The SDLP have traditionally been strongly in favour of dialogue. For example, they criticised the Unionist parties for boycotting the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body. The SDLP policy of boycotting

the former NI Assembly was never popular.

- Notwithstanding their consistent opposition to the idea, a negative or even ambivalent attitude towards a Select Committee would create serious credibility problems for the SDLP's four MPs, particularly if (as McGrady expects) the Labour Party decide ultimately to go along with it. The party would be unable to explain to voters its absence from a forum in which amendments were being proposed to draft legislation directly affecting their interests.
- McGrady hopes that it may yet be possible for the British Prime Minister to be persuaded that to go down the integrationist road in this or any other form would be a direct contradiction both of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and of the policies of successive British Governments.
- He is unhappy not only because the UUP are perceived to be making tactical advances but also because this is happening at a time when the SDLP are exposed to particular criticism arising from the continuing Hume/Adams talks. As evident from the current campaign against the SDLP in the Independent newspapers, this criticism is not confined to the North.
- He complained generally that the juxtaposition of these factors with the absence of any prospect of an early resumption of political talks and a lack of internal coordination within the party (due partly, but not solely, to the holiday period) has generated a "strong sense of drift" in the SDLP at the present time.

Hume/Adams talks

- McGrady is strongly opposed to this initiative, which he

regards as fundamentally misjudged. He believes that it is most unlikely to be productive and that, while there will be propaganda benefits for Sinn Fein, the SDLP will pay a heavy political price for it.

- It must, of course, be borne in mind that, unlike Hume, Mallon and many other members of the party, McGrady represents a constituency where Sinn Fein is of marginal political significance and where a middle-class, Alliance-type vote has to be wooed in order to achieve a SDLP victory.
- McGrady argues that, while the SDLP/Sinn Fein contacts in 1988 could be presented as essentially exploratory, the attempt on this occasion to devise a "joint strategy" (which, he notes sourly, was announced in a joint statement issued from Sinn Fein HQ) undercuts the credibility of the SDLP's total rejection of paramilitary violence.
- He is also inclined to blame the Hume/Adams talks for the series of attacks on SDLP Councillors by Loyalist paramilitaries (who can invoke the "joint strategy" in self-justification).
- McGrady has told Hume of his reservations on a number of occasions. He spoke out against the initiative at a party meeting convened to discuss it at the outset. He had hoped for support from Seamus Mallon and other senior party figures at that meeting but this was not forthcoming. While Sean Farren, Brid Rodgers and one or two others have told him in private that they share his reservations, they have not yet "stood up to be counted".
- McGrady has managed hitherto to avoid revealing his unhappiness in public. However, he feels that he cannot

maintain his silence indefinitely. If tangible results are not apparent by "the autumn", he will feel obliged to "say something".

A strengthening of local government powers

- McGrady believes that the Unionists' main objective is to secure for the Councils a role in relation to planning.
- They might also seek a role in relation to housing but McGrady cannot see the British Government easily agreeing to this.
- Other additional areas on which they might conceivably focus include roads, water and sewage, health services and education. However, none of these would have the same political significance as planning or housing.
- It is extremely difficult to see how responsibility for planning could be sensibly entrusted to 26 separate District Councils. McGrady thinks it possible, accordingly, that the British Government might turn to another long-standing Molyneaux idea and amalgamate the 26 Councils into a much smaller number of regional authorities, which would accommodate a transfer of responsibility in the planning sphere at least.
- The two reorganization models which have been mooted most frequently are: (i) a system of eight authorities - two corporations (Belfast and Derry) and six Councils covering the remainder of Northern Ireland; (ii) a system of three authorities - one for the North, one for the West and one for the South. (While it is not clear where Belfast would be assigned, the assumption is that one (the West) would be effectively a nationalist Council, one (the North) effectively Unionist and the

third (the South) contested between both).

An end to Orders in Council

- While the SDLP will resist this UUP objective on grounds of principle (its integrationist connotation), McGrady admitted frankly that it is less problematic than the other two objectives. They cannot object for very long to a measure which would ensure more Parliamentary time for NI business (though in practice this may be less than the UUP imagine) and from which they themselves will also benefit.

Possible resumption of talks

- McGrady is not optimistic about the chances of achieving a resumption of political talks in the autumn.
- He had a meeting with Michael Ancram recently but heard nothing to suggest that the Unionists were ready to return.
- I briefed McGrady in general terms on recent discussions between the two Governments at both political and official level. He approved strongly of our Government's efforts to persuade the British Government of the importance of a joint position which might provide a basis for resumed talks.
- He also fully endorsed the points made by the Tanaiste in his recent Guardian interview.
- In the event of talks materializing, McGrady would like to see the closest possible coordination in that context between the Government and the SDLP. In particular, he would like to see joint Irish Government/SDLP papers

being tabled at any future talks. He also underlined the need for detailed preparation of the positions which both will need to take up in relation to institutions in Strands One and Two.

- McGrady hopes that it will be possible to arrange in the near future a full Government/SDLP meeting to discuss the prospects for political progress. He remarked that he and Seamus Mallon had found the last such meeting (last February) the best of its kind that either could recall.

David Donoghue

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23 August 1993