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Meeting with Reg Empey

1. I had a meeting with Mr. Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party in Belfast on the 8th January. Mr. Empey was part of the Unionist delegation in Strand Two of the political talks. He would be among the stronger advocates of political dialogue and accommodation within the Unionist leadership and is personally courteous and conciliatory in manner.

2. We discussed the possibility of resuming political talks. Mr. Empey felt that the formal Talks had fulfilled their function. He did not see any particular value in reverting to round-table discussions. The Ulster Unionist Party were anxious to resume dialogue, but before they could relaunch themselves into the process they needed an insurance against failure. He said there should even be an agreed fall-back position before new Talks were launched (e. g. some low-key cooperative structures between the Northern parties which could be implemented in the absence of wider agreement), as a contingency plan against another public failure. He said the process that his party had in mind was not unlike classical diplomacy. Matters could be prepared intensively at subordinate level and then referred to the principals when the road to agreement was clear. He felt the re-involvement of Sir Ninian Stephen would be called for only if discussions were nearing fruition.

3. Mr. Empey stressed that another set-back to political dialogue would be dangerous on two counts: The first was the resurgence of loyalist paramilitaries. Mr. Empey, who is on the Police Authority, gave a general account, which would be familiar to our own Department of Justice, of the reorganisation of loyalist paramilitaries into a cell system

with a new and more ideological edge to their activities. They were mimicking the IRA in many respects. There was a serious danger that if, or indeed when, they gained access to explosives they could greatly escalate their activities, including in the South.

4. A second area of risk for his party was of course the political one. There were local government elections in May and the European Parliamentary elections next year would directly engage the party leaderships. He was cautiously optimistic about the UUP chances of outdoing their DUP rivals. While Paisley could by no means be written off, he had nevertheless peaked politically. Molyneaux had the great strength that no-one could accuse him of treachery. He had built on this to "embrace and neutralise" Paisley. They were temperamentally at entirely opposite poles, Paisley rushing to funerals and grand-standing on all possible issues, Molyneaux detesting "high-wire acts" and reserved and low-key in his personal demeanour. Paisley was a one-man band. When he departed the scene McCrea would inherit the Church which was the core of the party. Mr. Empey agreed that Peter Robinson would endeavour to make the transition to main-stream Unionism. He felt however he had "left it almost too late". In the meantime he was most unlikely to face Paisley down on the conduct of the Talks.

5. We reviewed the issues at stake in the Talks. He accepted the analysis that the Unionist insistence on change to Articles 2 and 3 as a precondition for agreement forced the Irish Government to go into deep political waters in a referendum, and therefore to seek a balancing measure on the other side. He accepted that some constitutional balance might be necessary to carry a referendum, but he stressed that this could not involve a change of status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. He denied that there had been any prior understanding with the British in

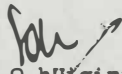
relation to Articles 2 and 3 or that the UUP had had any understanding with the British on the constitutional issue towards the end of the last phase of the Talks. He said that for the same reason (i.e. maintenance of the Union) the unionists would remain adamantly opposed to the SDLP proposal for a six person Commission, partly appointed from outside. However he personally seemed to go along with the idea that the "Panel" might appoint the political heads of department from within the ranks of Assembly members.

6. Mr. Empey also reiterated the unionist opposition to the SDLP proposals on policing. He said that unionists had the clear impression that the Irish Government would have some reservations also for their own security reasons. He was dismissive of proposals to separate the police force into an armed and unarmed service. He said the unionists interpret this proposal as "having one police force to be shot at and one not". He felt however there were areas related to security, such as prisons and the issue of police accountability, where there could be agreement between the two communities. He accepted however that the central security issue remained very problematic and that any new devolved administration would be probed strongly by the terrorists in this area.

7. He complained also that his party found John Hume very difficult to deal with. During the Talks process Hume had not been there on a number of significant occasions. He instanced also efforts in Belfast City Council to develop dialogue with Alasdair McDonald (who is a personal friend of his). He said that Hume had treated these proposed contacts with great suspicion and had vetoed them. He accepted fully however that the role of Mr. Hume and of the SDLP would be crucial in the event of a constitutional referendum on Articles 2 and 3 in our jurisdiction.

8. As regards Unionist conditions for a resumption of dialogue, he felt the essential condition was that they should have a sense that the dialogue was worth pursuing. He accepted there were realistic limits on what could be said in advance on Articles 2 and 3, but some signal would be valuable. He *NB* speculated on the possibility of a speech being made on behalf of the Government which might be discussed discreetly with the UUP in advance. If the terms were reasonable it might be possible for the UUP to give a positive response and thereby open the way for informal contacts. He added that he felt this behind the scenes choreography might appeal very much to Mr. Molyneaux' temperament.

9. I expressed some scepticism about the notion that preparatory contacts could be kept low-key and in the "diplomatic mode". The subject was so fundamental that any contact, no matter what level it was pitched at, would tend to become a major story. There were strong arguments for recognising this as inevitable and building in the involvement of senior political figures from the outset. I agreed with him that the idea of a response to a speech was worth investigating, while cautioning that there was no way of knowing whether the incoming Government would view this with favour or whether the terms of the speeches they would make on Northern Ireland would be such as to commend themselves fully to the Unionist leadership. We agreed however that we would stay in touch informally on the issue and that when we had indications of the likely views of the new Government we might look again at the possibility. I suggested also to Mr. Empey that he make personal and informal soundings on his side among his party colleagues to establish an all-round picture of how they saw the process of dialogue being relaunched, and any other avenues of potential progress they would wish us to explore with them.


Seán O hUiginn
10 January, 1993