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Meeting with Eddie McGrady

I met Eddie McGrady in Downpatrick on 13 January.

The following points of interest arose:

The new Government

- McGrady is extremely pleased with the composition and policies of the new Government. He is looking forward to an early meeting between the SDLP and the Government.
- He was very complimentary about the section on Northern Ireland in the Programme for Government. He welcomed, in particular, the emphasis laid on the importance of North/South economic cooperation and of cooperation involving the private sector and voluntary bodies.
- He also strongly approved of the avoidance of an explicit reference to possible constitutional change arising from resumed political talks.
- He mentioned some exchanges which he had with David Trimble in a TV interview following the formation of the Government. In response to Trimble's claim that the Labour Party's participation in Government would make very little difference to the prospect of resumed talks (as Fianna Fail were still in Government and "Dick Spring comes from the depths of Republican Kerry"), McGrady underlined the Government's total dedication to dialogue and their sincere and compassionate wish to achieve

political progress in relation to Northern Ireland.

The prospects for fresh talks

- McGrady favours the fullest possible coordination between the SDLP and the Government in advance of any resumption of talks. Ideally, he would like to see a series of structured meetings devoted to the key issues which will arise, notably the nature of possible North/South institutions and policing/security arrangements. He would like the Government and the SDLP to identify clearly common objectives in these areas and a strategy for achieving them.
- He presumed that the Government will wish to reflect in detail on the extent to which they are prepared to devolve executive functions to new North/South institutions and on the modalities by which this might be achieved in the various sectors.
- He admitted that the SDLP has a lot of "homework" of its own to do before talks resume, not merely in relation to North/South institutions and security (on which it does not have an agreed position) but also in relation to the institutional arrangements which have been discussed in Strand One, notably the question of where executive authority within the North should be located.
- As regards the format for fresh talks, he has no difficulty with the informal bilateral meetings which characterised the final stages of last year's Talks. He could not contemplate a return to the formal multilateral sessions, which had produced much heat but very little light. If bilaterals resume, he would like them to concentrate on major issues of disagreement (the approach which the SDLP favoured last

year).

- McGrady's perspective on Articles 2 and 3 is that the right kind of agreement, i.e., an agreement establishing powerful North/South institutions which would enable real progress to be made towards agreed Irish unity, would effectively remove the need for these Articles in their present form. If institutions with sufficient executive functions could be agreed, the electorate in the South might conclude that the sentiments set out in Articles 2 and 3 would henceforth receive an important practical expression and that the "territorial aspect" of these Articles could, accordingly, be deleted.

Local government elections

- McGrady regards the May local elections as essentially irrelevant to any resumed talks. Inevitably, tensions will rise between the UUP and the DUP during the campaign and a certain hardening of positions may become evident. But fears about the impact which this could have on talks presuppose that the two Governments and the parties would be on the brink of an agreement by next April, which McGrady considers unlikely.

- Furthermore, the elections are unlikely to cause any significant alteration in the status quo. The UUP will maintain their position or improve it slightly (as the DUP have never been strong at local level). The SDLP position will remain largely as it is.

Local government

*Important
re: Select
Committee* - McGrady has been struck by a number of recent hints by British Ministers, both in public and in private, that there is merit in the UUP case for local government

reform. At a meeting with Minister Hanley last week, he warned the latter that, if the British Government openly endorsed this well-publicised UUP objective, they would jeopardize the prospects for a successful outcome to any resumed talks.

- He also emphasized to Hanley that it is wrong of British Ministers to suggest (as they have been doing) that the Unionists are willing to share power on the Councils. In Dungannon, the political arithmetic virtually dictates an annual rotation of the Chairmanship; no generosity is involved. Elsewhere, all the key positions remain in Unionist hands. Recent hints of flexibility on Belfast City Council are essentially a public relations exercise in advance of the May elections; only peripheral positions would change hands.

The UUP

- Recalling some divergences between UUP representatives which became apparent during the bilateral phase of last year's Talks, McGrady suggested that the UUP is composed of at least four separate constituencies.

- N/S | First, there is the UUP electorate, who, in McGrady's view, desperately want an agreement of some kind which offers a prospect of ending the violence. Second, there are the UUP Councillors, political backwoodsmen who have no interest whatsoever in an agreement. Third, there is the professional/middle-class element - typified by the McGimpsey brothers, Reg Empey and Josiah Cunningham - who are anxious to reach an agreement which will bring economic stability. And fourth, there are the UUP MPs, who are wary of new arrangements which might marginalise them and are, at best, indifferent to political talks.

- In any resumed talks, McGrady suggested, it will be as difficult to identify the authoritative UUP position as it was during last year's Talks.

David Donoghue

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