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Remarks by Chris McGimpsey at Glencree conference

1. I attended last Sunday (3 October) a lecture which Chris McGimpsey delivered at the Glencree Centre on the subject of "The role of the Republic of Ireland in establishing peace on this island - a Unionist perspective".
2. McGimpsey began by challenging the view, which he recognized to be widespread in the South, that Unionists were unwilling to re-enter political talks. He also complained at the instinctive hostility to Unionism implicit in a term such as "Indo-Unionist" (used by Mark Durkan recently to characterise Sunday Independent critics of the SDLP). There was a feeling within the Unionist community that they would never be treated in an even-handed way by the Irish Government. ("Every time you get us into a discussion, you kick us in the teeth"). If the Republic were to accept Unionism as a political philosophy which was as honourable, as legitimate and as well-founded historically as nationalism, that would have a very positive effect.
3. McGimpsey went on to reiterate the standard Unionist complaint that, while the Irish Government spoke for nationalists under the Anglo-Irish Agreement, there was nobody acting for the Unionists, as the British Government had declared itself to be neutral. (In support of the latter point, he recalled the Secretary of State's remarks in the Die Zeit interview some months ago). He asked the Southern parties to consider declaring their own neutrality as between the two communities in Northern Ireland. This might also

motivate the SDLP to negotiate more seriously with Unionists.

4. McGimpsey also complained that during last year's talks Irish Ministers had consistently preferred the term "the North" to "Northern Ireland". He wondered how his Southern audience would react if he were to refer to where we were now gathered as the "Free State".
5. Describing himself as a supporter of President Robinson who had even contributed "a few quid" to her election campaign, McGimpsey criticised the President's handshake with Gerry Adams, "the personification of the IRA's sectarian pogrom against Protestants".
6. He expressed great concern at the Hume/Adams talks, which, he understood, had considered the possibility of joint authority as the price of a ceasefire. The UK Labour Party document showed how nationalist thinking was developing in that direction. At a fringe meeting at last week's Labour Party Conference, Siobhan Crozier had described joint authority as a stepping-stone leading to Irish unity. The SDLP had also made clear that they favoured joint authority. The idea had also received a guarded welcome from the Tanaiste.
7. McGimpsey asked Southern politicians to think through the implications of joint authority very carefully. He endorsed points made by Deputy Des O'Malley about the financial cost and predicted also that public opinion here would react very badly to e.g. a Garda member being killed while on patrol on the Shankill Road.
8. McGimpsey concluded with (i) a presentation of the standard Unionist case against Articles 2 and 3; (ii) a complaint at the fact that it had evidently been possible

for a British TV company to interview Maze escapees in the Republic recently; and (iii) a contention that the Protestant community in NI was also suffering from economic/social disadvantage.

9. Among the points of interest which arose in the subsequent question-and-answer session were the following.

Asked if he was not encouraged by the fact that there was now a new Irish Government in office which included the Labour Party, McGimpsey replied that the UUP had initially expected to take heart from this but that they had yet to see much to encourage them. "The jury is still out". The Tanaiste had made some statements which were very interesting but had said other things (e.g., in his Guardian interview) which they had not liked. He suggested that the Government was not yet fully united and that it would need twelve to eighteen months to "find its feet".

10. McGimpsey mentioned that Jim Molyneaux had prepared a "blueprint for democracy". (He later told me privately that this document was still "internal", as the consultations on which it was based were still in progress, but that the UUP would not "play the same silly games as the DUP" in relation to its publication).
11. McGimpsey also supported a Select Committee for NI at Westminster, arguing that it was important to democratise legislative arrangements there. This should not be seen as an integrationist move and would not affect in any way the party's commitment to achieving devolution.
12. In a private conversation, I drew McGimpsey's attention to the Taoiseach's remarks at his press conference last

Wednesday. The Taoiseach had made clear that Unionist fears about joint authority forming part of the Hume/Adams initiative were misplaced. I put it to McGimpsey that, in the light of such assurances, it was not helpful for Unionist politicians to continue to stir up fears of that kind.

13. Dealing with the allegation of insensitivity here to Unionist concerns, I directed his attention to the Tanaiste's remarks at the UN last Friday evening, in particular his acceptance of the need for "radical and innovative compromise". This reinforced a persistent theme in the Tanaiste's statements on Northern Ireland, both public and private, since taking office. McGimpsey took this point and apologised for not having referred to the Tanaiste's UNGA remarks in his lecture.
14. A final point worth reporting is that John Dew (No. 2 at the British Embassy) intervened during the question-and-answer session to say that it was not true that the British Government was "neutral on the Union" and that those who thought that the Government was indifferent or looking for a way out were mistaken. In response, McGimpsey said that he was very glad to hear that.

I subsequently took this up with Dew in private, expressing surprise that a British Government representative would make such a statement given (a) the position his Government had taken under Art. 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; (b) the care taken by the Secretary of State in declining recent invitations from journalists to describe himself as a Unionist; (c) the acute political sensitivity, notably in the context of the two Governments' efforts to resume political dialogue, of any indication of a partisan stance on the part of the British Government (as illustrated, for

example, in our reaction to the Prime Minister's comments in the Commons last July or to the controversy about an alleged deal with the UUP. The Irish Government, for its part, had been conspicuously careful not to align itself with one or the other tradition (as the Secretary of State himself had recognized in a recent interview).

15. In response, Dew said that, in describing the British Government as "not neutral on the Union", his concern had been to discount suggestions of "emotional indifference" on the part of the British Government in relation to Northern Ireland. I suggested to him that it was both unwise and unhelpful to use politically charged phrases of that kind in a public context. He took this point.

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