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Conversation with Eddie McGrady

I met Eddie McGrady in Downpatrick on 8 October.

The following points of interest arose:

Hume/Adams talks.

- The unease with which McGrady has viewed this initiative from the outset has deepened considerably in the light of recent developments.
- As he sees it, the initiative is of benefit to virtually everyone but the SDLP. Hume's efforts to "get Gerry Adams to the negotiating table" have given the Unionists a cast-iron excuse to stay away from political talks. The Unionists can now expect enhanced sympathy at Westminster and there will be few objections if the British Government, which could otherwise have been embarrassed over its dependence on UUP support, takes early action on the measures sought by Molyneaux.
- Sinn Fein are the biggest winners. Even without the initiative going any further, their media exposure and general respectability have been significantly increased. McGrady remarked to Joe Hendron last week that he could now regard himself as the "ex-MP for West Belfast" and Hendron sourly agreed.
- The meeting of the four MPs which Hume called on 21 September was used solely for the drafting of a statement of party solidarity on the talks (in the wake of critical

comments by Mallon and Hendron). Hendron assured Hume at the meeting that he had not intended his remarks as criticism. McGrady, on the other hand, requested the deletion from the draft statement of proposed references to "unanimity" among the MPs about the talks.

- He is unhappy at Hume's failure over the past six months to brief the party on the substance of the talks. He was shown sight of a document shortly after the talks began last April but has since been told nothing.
- He observed also that, while Hume had evidently not briefed the Taoiseach and Tanaiste during that period, he had clearly briefed the British Prime Minister on 16 September - i. e., before the Irish Government.
- On the afternoon of 25 September, Hume rang McGrady at a meeting of SDLP Councillors to tell him of the proposed joint statement. McGrady expressed reservations at the move but saw that Hume could not be dissuaded and confined himself to suggesting some drafting amendments (one of which, the inclusion of "support" as well as "allegiance", was taken on board while another, a suggestion that "Dublin" be replaced by "the Irish Government", was not).
- McGrady has since learned from Mallon that Hume left with the latter early on the morning of 26 September a copy of a document which he had previously despatched by courier to Dublin. He intends to seek a copy of this document from Hume.
- McGrady believes that the SDLP, not just in his own area but in other parts of the North as well, will suffer serious political damage because of perceptions arising from this initiative that it has softened its long-

standing opposition to violence. Its principled stand on violence was the reason why many people joined the SDLP in the first place. This core value, as McGrady sees it, has been called seriously into question by the pursuit of a joint strategy with Sinn Fein.

- He is also worried about the attacks on SDLP Councillors and spoke of rising fears on the latter's part and of the related problems which the party was now experiencing in his own area in attracting new activists.
- He is also certain that Sinn Fein will ensure that no credit comes to the SDLP for any success which the initiative may have.
- McGrady views the decision to refer the initiative to Dublin as an effort on Hume's part to extricate himself from continuing dialogue with Sinn Fein as next year's European Parliament election campaign approaches. It is likely that Adams will contest Hume's seat (as he did in 1989) and that a continuation of the talks would strengthen Adams' challenge and therefore be prejudicial to Hume (who has already forfeited the moderate Alliance/Unionist support which helped him in 1989).
- If, of course, Adams were not to contest the seat, that would be viewed as conclusive proof of a "pan-nationalist conspiracy".
- Looking ahead to the next Westminster elections, McGrady warned that, if he saw evidence of SDLP/SF cooperation in that context (e.g., a deal by each not to challenge the other's candidates in, respectively, Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh-South Tyrone), he would have to reconsider his membership of the SDLP.

- McGrady feels that Hume has been duped by Adams. This is evident e.g. in the prominence given in their joint position to the question of self-determination ("Provo language"). If anything at all comes of the initiative, and in particular if Sinn Fein reach the negotiating table, Hume will have helped to achieve this and violence will be seen to have paid off after all. The basic values which the SDLP has defended for twenty years will be stood on their head.

- McGrady fears in consequence for the future of the SDLP. He is afraid that the party will lose its identity and that Sinn Fein will ultimately absorb it (rather than the other way round).

- Hume's public referral of the matter to Dublin means that the average "reasonable Unionist" now has clear proof of a "pan-nationalist conspiracy" directed against him. Many Unionists in McGrady's area have concluded that the Irish Government will now effectively be involved in a negotiation by proxy with Sinn Fein.

- McGrady remarked that Hume had placed the Irish Government in a very difficult position by referring the initiative to the Government before he had taken it to a conclusion. He was very sceptical, furthermore, about explanations suggested within the party for Hume's decision to make this move public (variously, that Adams had warned that he himself would refer the matter to Dublin if Hume did not or that Hume suspected that a media leak was imminent).

- McGrady summed up his basic objection to the Hume/Adams process in the following terms. Even if a total cessation of violence is achieved, that will merely mean that more favourable conditions are created for the

dialogue with Unionism. The process cannot be a substitute for the latter and it is, in fact, destroying any prospect of the latter taking place.

Political talks

- In a more positive vein, McGrady was encouraged by indications I gave him of the efforts which the two Governments have been making to see whether they can agree the elements of a new agreement which might be put to the parties. (He remarked that he was glad to hear that there was "something else going on").
- He was particularly interested to hear that the Governments were giving consideration to Strand Two and Strand Three issues, as his conversations with Michael Ancram had indicated a heavy internalist bias in the British Government's approach to new talks.
- It was disappointing, however, that Molyneaux now seemed to be pulling away from talks. In recent contacts with a number of UUP figures, McGrady had formed the impression that Molyneaux would be content to re-enter talks, partly because of the security provided by his "understanding" with the Prime Minister and partly because he relished the opportunity to wrongfoot Paisley by involvement in a process from which the DUP would probably absent themselves.

David Donoghue

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11 October 1993