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Meeting with Eddie McGrady

I met Eddie McGrady in Downpatrick yesterday.

The following points of interest arose:

Local election outcome

- It was foolhardy of the British Government to spread suggestions in advance of the election that the DUP would fare badly and that the UUP would strengthen their position.
- This judgment relied not on any objective analysis but on wishful thinking.
- McGrady recalled that, at a meeting which they had two months ago, the Secretary of State had been "livid" following a particularly trying exchange with the DUP leader and had spoken of the need to find some way of proceeding with talks without Paisley.
- The Secretary of State has allowed his political judgment to be clouded by such experiences. Wishful thinking also caused the British to exaggerate the electoral prospects of the UUP, who, in McGrady's area at least, conducted a "non-existent" campaign.
- The problems caused by faulty predictions were compounded last Thursday by initial indications (on which the media dwelled heavily) that the DUP and Sinn Fein had done better than later proved to be the case.

- The result has been an entirely false perception that the DUP and Sinn Fein performed well in this election. The reality is that party strengths remained virtually unchanged and "the election did not tell us anything we hadn't previously known".

Prospects for talks.

- I gave McGrady a full briefing on the present position from the Government's perspective.
- He is in complete agreement with our analysis of the prospects for progress.
- While he would like to see talks resume immediately, he believes that a resumption before the autumn is unlikely. He is happy that there will be continuing contact between the two Governments at both political and official level in the interim.
- He has not yet had an indication from the British of the likely content of their paper. (He does not believe that his party colleagues have either).
- He has, however, told NIO contacts that he is interested in a British Government paper only as a contribution from "one of the six participants". He is not interested in a British paper which would seek to set parameters for new talks. He will not accept anything which "boxes us in" from the outset.
- He expressed some mild irritation at the media emphasis on the British paper and the impression created that only the British are working for a resumption of dialogue. He would ideally like to see the British paper balanced by an equally publicised Irish paper which would

underline the Irish Government's role as co-sponsors of the process.

I explained that the production of an Irish paper at this stage might be problematic in tactical terms and that the Government saw greater merit in exploring the scope for a joint approach to new talks which the two Governments could present to the parties.

To this end, we would be elaborating a structured response to the British proposals which would highlight the omissions and deficiencies of the British approach. (I referred him in this context to the Joe Carroll story in yesterday's Irish Times).

McGrady agreed fully with our approach. He suggested that the basic question which might be put to the British Government would be whether they are pursuing an actual solution to the problem, or are merely interested in "tinkering at the edges", looking for a "quick fix" with the primary intention of conciliating the Unionists.

He hopes that the Government, having decided on what it would wish to see in a new agreement, will work out a detailed position for new talks and, in close consultation with the SDLP, decide on a strategy for achieving its objectives.

He would like the detailed position to address the question of all-Ireland security institutions. While readily acknowledging that these raise difficult issues of sovereignty, he would like the Government to put down a general marker in support of such arrangements (in the fairly certain knowledge that they will not be deliverable for a long time because of British and Unionist opposition).

- McGrady also advised the Government to build "fall-back positions" into whatever ideas it tabled. He reflected ruefully on the SDLP's failure to do so in the Strand One proposals it tabled last year and the criticism it has incurred ever since for its apparent unwillingness to move ("we've got ourselves on a hook from which we can't get off"). He himself still supports the external element of the SDLP proposals but has always felt that the European dimension was unrealistic and could be dropped in negotiation.

- McGrady strongly supports the Government's view that fresh talks must take place on the right basis. If it does not prove possible to negotiate such a basis within a reasonable period of time, a decision should be taken to bring the process to a close and continue instead with the implementation of the present Agreement.

#### Hume/Adams contacts

- McGrady was bluntly critical of the Hume/Adams talks.

- He indicated that he is in "a minority of one" among senior SDLP figures on this subject. He was disappointed that he received no support from Seamus Mallon during two crucial discussions with John Hume, despite Mallon's reputed reservations about the initiative. (Note: it should, of course, be borne in mind that Mallon and others in the SDLP are dealing in their constituencies with considerably worse patterns of nationalist alienation and disenchantment than those which arise in South Down).

- Although he did not publicise his objections during the election campaign (in the interests of party unity),

McGrady will feel less constrained now that the elections are over.

- He has told Hume privately that he believes that Sinn Fein are using him; that no good will come of the initiative; and that, even if it were to achieve something, Sinn Fein would ensure that no possible benefit accrued either to Hume or to the SDLP.
- Describing Hume's frame of mind in relation to this initiative as "messianic" and "obsessive", McGrady criticised the issuing of a joint SDLP/Sinn Fein statement because of its implication of a joint "strategy". He also resented the attribution of the statement in media reports to "Sinn Fein headquarters".
- McGrady has also emphasized to Hume the considerable problems posed for SDLP campaign workers by an initiative which seemed to blur the distinction between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. He attributes the SDLP's reverses in West Belfast, Dungannon and elsewhere to this factor.
- He is also worried about the party's credibility problems at the wider level, which have been exacerbated by the spate of IRA bombings in recent weeks, and feels that it has laid itself open to charges of a "lack of integrity" in relation to the talks process.

*David Donoghue*

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