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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

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Radio Ulster Report, Friday, 28 January, 1994
Contacts between Unionist Politicians and
Loyalist Paramilitaries

Presenter: The Secretary of the Ulster Unionist party has said he had heard of a meeting earlier this week between Loyalist paramilitary leaders and constitutional Unionists on the Downing Street Declaration. Chris McGimpsey was speaking last night on BBC Northern Ireland's "Spotlight" programme in which a number of Loyalists confirmed for the first time that such contacts were taking place. Meetings have been held even as Unionist politicians have condemned any suggestion that the Government should clarify the document to Sinn Fein. Elizabeth Bouchet reviews the central points of the Spotlight programme.

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Reporter: On "Spotlight", Security correspondent Brian Rowan reported that there was a two-day meeting on the Downing Street Declaration in East Belfast this week attended by the Loyalist paramilitary leadership and at least one Unionist politician. This was the latest in a series of exchanges in which the terrorist leadership sought clarification about the document. In an interview following the report, Ulster Unionist Chris McGimpsey said he had heard rumours that such a meeting had taken place.

Mr. McGimpsey: I've just heard that a meeting took place which involved people discussing the whole Downing Street Declaration.

Interviewer: So maybe one of your colleagues thinks its all right to talk to terrorists ?

Mr McGimpsey: That's possible.

Reporter: Sammy Wilson of the Democratic Unionists denied his party had made such contacts.

Mr. Wilson: I can assure you categorically that the DUP was not involved in the two-day conference to which you have referred.

Reporter: Presbyterian Minister the Rev. Roy Magee who has been a key intermediary in talks with Loyalist terrorists, told "Spotlight" their leaders had been in the consultation process.

Rev. Roy Magee: It is accurate they have had and are having and indeed they will be having consultation not only with politicians but with academics and experts in the legal field about the whole constitutional matter and the Declaration itself.

Interviewer: When you talk about contact are you talking about contacts between Loyalists and constitutional Unionists?

Rev. Roy Magee: Yes, people who are close to the party, the workings of the party.

Reporter: Further confirmation came from Ray Smallwoods of the Ulster Democratic party which draws its support from hardliner Loyalist areas.

Mr. Smallwoods: I am aware that contacts have been made to different groups and so on, but I don't feel able to discuss it.

Interviewer: Are you talking about contacts between Loyalists and constitutional Unionists ?

Mr. Smallwoods: I understand that contacts have been made.

Reporter: David Irvine also knew about the contacts. He is a spokesman for the fringe Unionist group, the Progressive Unionist party, itself believed to be involved in the process.

Mr. Irvine: We are aware of contacts. I wouldn't wish to say much more than that other than to say well I imagine that there are concerned Unionists and Loyalists as well and I am sure that they want to find out the best possible understanding of what is of course, a deeply ambiguous document.

Reporter: At the Province's top security prison, the Maze, Brian Rowan heard from a UDA leader on the wing that the Loyalist prisoners had made their views on the document known to the paramilitary leadership on the outside. He spoke of the Loyalist inmates' deep suspicion about the Declaration and its objectives, particularly as the Government had admitted secret contacts with Sinn Fein. The UDA's man voice is spoken by an actor in accordance with Government restrictions.

UDA Prisoner: I have no doubt this is a stepping stone to other things. The message that we sent to our leadership was "yes", we all want peace, any right-thinking person wants peace, so for them to explore every possibility of peace, but really what it comes down to, we have also told them to prepare for war because we feel that this is a stepping stone towards giving the Republicans more.

Reporter: William Smyth of the Loyalist Prisoners Welfare Association says there is scepticism about the document, but also hope.

Mr. Smyth: The prisoners have looked at it and they have seen aspects such as the veto or the promise of the majority rule in regard to the Constitution. I mean that's a positive side to the document which are aspects such as joint authority between different bodies, between North and South. I mean

obviously people are looking at that and saying - oh is there a danger there that that may go too far so I mean its not all negative. The document is such a document where people are saying well let's give it a try like, lets see how far we can go.

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Interviewer: Well listening to that report is Seamus Mallon the Deputy leader of the SDLP. Mr. Mallon good morning.

Mr. Mallon: Good Morning.

Interviewer: Your own party of course has been subjected to quite a bit of Unionist criticism for its contacts with Sinn Fein. What's your reaction to these allegations.

Mr. Mallon: Well could we first of all clear that out of the road. There has been a remarkable degree of hypocrisy within Unionist ranks, both the Unionist parties or should I say, the three Unionist parties especially at Westminster where we have been subjected to all types of abuse because of our discussions with Sinn Fein. And I think this will show very clearly to people that that was cant, that it was hypocrisy and that it was not the type of utterances that one would expect for responsible politicians at a period like this. Let me say that I agree with those within the official Unionist party who have been talking to the Loyalist paramilitary groupings provided, provided that what they are doing is trying to clarify what I agree is a very difficult document. If however, they are engaged in what has been suggested in a previous part of your programme, secret negotiations, then that is another matter. But I will take it at face value, I will take it on trust that in effect they were talking to these people to try and clarify that document. If they were doing that I think they were doing the right thing. I would support them in doing it and I would have no reservations whatsoever because I know how difficult it must be for them to have to sit down and face people who are involved in the most horrific violence.

Interviewer: But you heard the UDA prisoner talking about the confusion that faces Loyalists because of the diverse positions of the Unionist parties.

Mr. Mallon: Well, you see this is one of the things that struck me when I watched Spotlight last night was the statement of Chris McGimpsey that the Ulster Unionist Party does not support or endorse the Joint Declaration. Now that seems to me a remarkable statement coming from a member of the party led by Mr. Molyneaux, who made the views perfectly clear I thought at Westminster and members of his party have embarked on a war of attrition with the DUP on this very issue so I wonder how many people within the Ulster Unionist Party are playing it as straight as Ken Maginnis is and how many are trying to ride too horses at the one time and I think that's one of the difficulties for the Unionist community at the present moment of time, is that ambiguity which is being created by a lack of courage within the ranks of the various Unionist parties.

Interviewer: The two murders Seamus Mallon in the last 24 hours perhaps point out the importance of someone reassuring Loyalist paramilitaries that they are not threatened by the Declaration ?

Mr. Mallon: Well I think, and I would go to any lengths to clarify this document for either people on the Republican side or the Loyalist side whatever their deeds, and their deeds are heinous in the extreme. I think there is a certain amount of ambiguity in terms of the scripting of that document because of the necessity. I think it was necessary that it should be but I mean one thing is absolutely clear from it and has been accepted by both sections of the community, that within it there is no threat to either the Nationalist or to the Unionist community and that is absolutely clear and that does not require clarification and I think it is absolutely spurious if in effect a Loyalist paramilitary organisation or organisations were to use the confusion that existed about this document and ignore the fact that within it there is no threat to their position simply as an excuse to continue with what is a sectarian motivated killing campaign.