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Conversations with Seamus Mallon and Joe Hendron

You may find the following comments drawn from conversations which I had this afternoon (14 July) with Mallon and Hendron of interest. Both men attended a small farewell party for me following this afternoon's session of Northern Ireland questions. I spoke to both separately and I felt I should convey to you as soon as practicable the gist of what they had to say.

Seamus Mallon

Mallon was in good form, looking physically well and clearly pleased to be coming to the end of the parliamentary session. We have only had fleeting sightings of him in recent weeks since he has been heavily preoccupied with hearings on the review of the constituency boundaries.

Despite his good humour however he conveyed the clear message that he feels neglected and side-lined in recent weeks. He made several wry comments about the fact that we probably needed clearance to speak with him these days. In the circumstances I would recommend that someone call on him - or perhaps have a chat with him on the phone - if only for therapeutic purposes.

As usual relations are not good with the leader. They had a row last week - the casus belli being the familiar one of inequitable burden sharing.

Mallon went on at some length about what he believes is the unnecessary and excessive deference being paid to Sinn Fein. The point has been reached he said when to oppose Sinn Fein in public is to run the risk of being accused of undermining the peace process. This is a dangerous avenue to follow and a difficult one to retreat from. It is particularly fraught for the SDLP and the party may yet rue the day it went down that particular path. As you can see the script was a familiar one and was interspersed with disparaging references to John Hume's misplaced vision and semi jocular asides about the imminent advent of peace.

Referring to to-day's questions which Helena Nolan has reported on separately, Mallon felt there had been ominous signs of a shift in mood on the British side. He pointed in

particular to Mayhew's response to Trimble and his reference to the British Government's willingness to go it alone. (This comment incidentally is likely to be the main theme of media coverage of to-days exchanges).

Joe Hendron

A bronzed, fit and water drinking Joe Hendron was on his first visit to the House since his return from a family holiday in Portugal and had to run the gauntlet of several pointed enquiries about his state of health from the Labour Whips. In his usual disarming way he told them that his unavailability was all due to a last minute decision by his impetuous wife who had kidnapped Joe and the children and insisted that they flee immediately to the Algarve. A deeply reluctant Hendron had been obliged to put aside his Order Paper and follow his wife for the sake of domestic harmony.

On a serious note Hendron raised one specific theme with some directness. He entirely agreed he said with nearly everything the Taoiseach had said in recent months but he felt that some of the remarks attributed to him in Minnesota, both in substance and timing, had caused justifiable concern among moderate unionists. Why pick the 12th of July to hammer home points on the nationalist agenda which were bound to raise Unionist hackles? He told me at length about the support which he drew from the Unionist community in his constituency and how many of the decent Protestant people of the Shankill contacted him on constituency business. The concern he spoke of came from these quarters and we should be aware of it. Like Mallon he too hadn't liked the atmosphere at today's question time but for different reasons. What had disturbed Hendron was the venom and toughness of Unionists comments and having read some of our recent public statements he confessed to understanding where this mood came from.

Hendron's concerns which relate almost exclusively to his perception of the state of his electoral health are more easy to deal with than Mallons more complex angst. His remarks were however remarkably robust and seemed to be well founded to the extent that they reflected points of view expressed to him at local grass roots level.

He also spoke about the inevitability of a revenge attack for the killing of Ray Smallwood whom he seems to have met on a number of occasions. He is due to visit some community project on the Shankill next week in company with Cecil Walker and as he put it "I'll be keeping a nervous eye over my shoulder."

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