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Downpatrick
This note is of considerable
interest. JM 3/5/95

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Meeting with Eddie McGrady

I met Eddie McGrady in Downpatrick yesterday.

The following points of interest arose:

SDLP/UUP meeting

- McGrady had just returned from the SDLP's meeting with the UUP at the Dunadry Inn in Antrim.
- He had been among those in the party who had pushed for these contacts and was pleased with the results of the first two meetings.
- While his preference would ordinarily have been to defer structured cooperation with the UUP until agreement was reached on new political structures, he had concluded that a move in this direction was desirable at this stage for two main reasons:
 - First, the "ninety percenters" (McGrady's shorthand for the anti-Sinn Fein vote in NI) were increasingly unhappy with the heavy media focus on the Sinn Fein/British Government dialogue and, in McGrady's view, needed reassurance that other forms of politics were still possible in Northern Ireland;
 - Second, the socio-economic issues addressed by the SDLP and the UUP were ones which required urgent attention. Action on issues such as the growing "quangoisation" of NI or escalating electricity prices could not be deferred until wider political talks got underway and a political settlement was reached.
- McGrady, who had initially proposed to his colleagues that contact with the UUP should cover political issues, looked forward to a "natural progression" in due course from the strictly social/economic agenda of the current meetings to wider political issues.
- He could not say, however, when - or, indeed, whether -

this would happen. He was conscious that his party leader was likely to take a different view (with an eye to Sinn Fein's needs) and to confine the meetings to economic issues.

- As they stood at present, the meetings reflected Hume's long-standing commitment to "working the common ground" with the Unionists on economic issues.
- They also performed a valuable role in terms of building trust between the two parties (shaken since the onset of the SDLP/Sinn Fein cooperation).
- On the substance of what had been discussed with the UUP, McGrady said that "a common programme of action" had been agreed in relation to the various issues. These included (i) job creation; (ii) the fragmentation and quangoisation of NI Departments such as the Dept of the Environment (most of whose key services had now been contracted out to agencies - "it's reaching the stage where there will be nothing left to devolve"); (iii) the privatisation of energy services; (iv) the reorganization of the health sector (with more and more powers being ceded to unaccountable Hospital Trusts - staffed exclusively, it would seem, by Alliance Party members); and (v) the reorganization of schools.
- He remarked on the expertise which the SDLP delegation had brought to the UUP meeting (between them, the SDLP's four MPs and Sean Farren had sectoral interests in each of the areas covered). He also spoke well of the UUP delegation (Molyneaux, Empey, Nicholson and Beggs).
- In contrast, he saw little value in having another meeting with the DUP (though one would probably be arranged for cosmetic purposes) and was equally unenthusiastic about a meeting with the Alliance Party. He did not regard the party's recent meeting with a Sinn Fein delegation as having official status.

The two Governments and the Framework Document

- McGrady suggested that the efficiency shown by the two parties in setting up the recent meetings might be an inspiration to the two Governments in their search for ways of achieving political progress. The two Governments had taken more time than he would have liked to convene bilaterals on the way forward.
- He suggested, indeed, that, had it not been for the stimulus provided by the first SDLP/UUP meeting, the

Secretary of State might have delayed even further his decision (announced in the CBI speech) to invite the NI parties to bilaterals after Easter.

- McGrady was highly complimentary about the Framework Document but felt that the two Governments had shown insufficient determination to hold onto the political initiative following its publication. By permitting the discussion of papers other than the JFD, they had let the Unionists "off the hook" and had given the impression that they were ready to ignore the JFD if necessary.
- I queried this interpretation. The two Governments had flagged in different ways the authoritative status of the JFD, though they had not declined to consider other papers which might be put forward. Their approach to the Unionists had been, in essence, to challenge the latter to come up with alternative means of achieving the same goals.
- I also pointed to the need for a "cooling-off" period in terms of initial Unionist reactions. It would not have been productive to propose dialogue immediately after the publication of the Framework Document.
- McGrady would have preferred to be invited to bilaterals hosted jointly by the two Governments. I explained that, while this remained a possibility for the future, separate discussions were probably all that was realistically attainable for the moment.
- As to the format/substance for bilaterals with the British Government, McGrady said that the SDLP and the UUP were in agreement that they did not want a return to the "endless exchanges of papers" which had characterised the Ancram talks. They each wanted to focus on practical political issues and on how these might be handled in new political structures.

Sinn Fein

- McGrady's main concern was that the bilaterals process now announced by the two Governments would be delayed until such time as Sinn Fein was ready to join it.
- The "ninety percenters", he argued, would be deeply unsettled by any indication that the search for wider political agreement was taking second place to the effort to bring Sinn Fein on board.
- It was essential that the latter effort should not have

the effect of undermining the SDLP. To "include" Sinn Fein should not mean to "exclude" the SDLP. The SDLP were facing an increasing political threat from Sinn Fein (e.g. Sinn Fein were now "infiltrating" constituencies such as his own where they had barely existed before). Greater sensitivity to the SDLP's position was required from both Governments.

- When I asked to what extent his party leader shared these concerns, McGrady replied that he had recently put it to Hume that he would have to decide which of the two parties he was leading.
- His fear is that the Sinn Fein/British Government dialogue will drag on indefinitely; that, despite protestations to the contrary, the British Government will see this as the only area of real political interest; and that the media "obsession" with the dialogue will, accordingly, continue.
- His prediction is that, in the period up to the next election, the British Government will settle for an indefinite round of bilaterals and make no serious effort to achieve a political settlement.
- In response, I emphasized the Irish Government's very serious and urgent commitment to political dialogue leading to a settlement. We would wish to see full use made of all bilaterals - those convened by the two Governments and those agreed among the parties themselves - to achieve an agreed basis for collective talks which would produce the kind of accommodation sketched out in the Framework Document.
- McGrady was reassured to hear this. In this general context, he looked forward to an early meeting between the Government and the SDLP - partly in order to prepare for the forthcoming talks process and partly with a view to correcting any public impression that "there is now only one nationalist party".

Select Committee

- McGrady described himself as the only nationalist representative on the Committee (he would not place Clive Soley or Tommy McAvoy in this category).
- He indicated that, against this background, and with the Committee meeting on a weekly basis and requiring

considerable input, he has had to withdraw effectively
from the SDLP's Forum delegation.

David Donoghue

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Anglo-Irish Division
2 May 1995