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Meeting with Lower Ormeau Concern Community

22 April 1996

I met with the committee of the Lower Ormeau Concern Community (LOCC) at the headquarters of the Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG). LOCC is independent of LORAG in the strict sense that its *raison d'etre* arises from the parades issue but it does draw on the facilities (and personnel) of LORAG. LORAG is a community organisation with funding from various sources including Belfast City Council (and I understand that that funding could be called into question if the independence of LOCC from LORAG was successfully challenged). The LOCC committee included John Gormley, Gerry Rice, Michael Goodman and five others who were introduced on a first name basis but whose comments clearly indicated that they were residents of the area.

The main speakers were John Gormley and Gerry Rice, with occasional comments from Michael Goodman and lively (largely humorous) asides from the rest of the committee. Gormley was polished, articulate, eminently plausible and in his middle class, casual appearance slightly out of place: Rice struck me as a low to mid level political operative who was comfortable working to instructions; Goodman seemed to have a professional community welfare approach, though he remained watchful and largely silent throughout the meeting.

Points of interest which arose in the course of the meeting included the following:

1. They expressed both satisfaction and uncertainty about the RUC decision (announced some hours earlier) to ban the Orange march down the Lower Ormeau planned for 28 April next: satisfied that the march was banned but dissatisfied that the decisions on marches continued to be taken one at a time.
2. The committee wanted parades to be dealt with as a singular issue on which a decision would be made in principle that local consent was the key requirement in determining

parade routes. When I explored their assessment of Deputy Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan, they expressed their (mild) appreciation of his efforts thus far but were of the view that he was an RUC officer (and subject therefore to its interests) who would take each parade as it comes so long as the current basis for parade assessment endured.

3. They suspect that a march down the Lower Ormeau will be allowed on 12 July and one committee members expressed fears that local residents would be “hammered” by the RUC then.
4. They dismissed suggestions that the LOCC was simply a Sinn Féin front and insisted that the LOCC represented the views of the local community. They had made numerous offers to meet the local Orange lodge this year, all to no avail (a point contradicted by the Orange lodge leadership in conversations with Alasdair McDonnell). They had made every effort to avoid confrontation, including clearing bottles, stones and potential trouble makers off the streets prior to parades. They recalled the incident in July 1992 outside the Sean Graham bookie shop in which five fingered salutes and jeers of “five nil” by loyalist marchers indicated satisfaction with the five deaths which had occurred there the previous February (and Rice invoked by way of support Secretary of State Mayhew’s colourful condemnation of the marchers - “would have shamed a bunch of cannibals”) Those scenes, they said, had left a deep impression on local residents and the feelings of disgust had yet to dissipate.
5. They were dismissive of the efforts of SDLP Councillor Alasdair McDonnell to mediate a compromise with the local (Ballynafeigh) Orange Lodge. He was out of touch with the views of local residents and failed to appreciate the depth of feeling which the parade issue generated locally. Furthermore, they believe that he was being used by the Orange Order in what was at bottom a media exercise designed to give the Orange Order more positive coverage i.e. by helping to create the impression that the Orange Order was prepared to engage in dialogue.

6. They were profoundly suspicious of the *bona fides* of the Orange Order, its local lodge and the local lodge leader, Noel Liggett. Their conversation on the Order returned to the incidents outside Graham's bookie shop during the February 1992 march. They indicated that the Orange Order would have to overcome that legacy if they were to win the confidence of the LOCC.
7. They were not convinced that Liggett was either willing or able to deliver his local Lodge (or the Order generally, for that matter) in the event of a compromise being brokered with him. They remarked that the Ballynafeigh Lodge was struggling to survive in the face of dwindling and aging membership. What marches they did mount required the support of other loyalist areas and groups. Neither did they hold much store by unionist councillor Chris McGimpsey who they dismissed as being an Orangeman.
8. They question some of the claims that Ballynafeigh marches are traditional (particularly in relation to marches seeking to go along the Ormeau to the Donegall Pass; they said that the Sandy Row Lodge, whose area covers Donegall Pass, had lost none of its parades there) and commended Gormley for his dismissal of the sanctity of tradition - Gormley had previously commented in a radio interview that it had also been traditional to own slaves and send children to work in mines.
9. On the composition of the west side of the Lower Ormeau, they said that it was very mixed, with many students, and in all likelihood that there was a slight nationalist majority there. (Goodman in a private conversation earlier remarked on local concerns that developers were moving into the nationalist side, buying houses and letting them to students, thus reducing nationalist numbers).
10. On the question of an independent tribunal, Gormley said they supported the idea. But in the ensuing discussion, it emerged that they appeared to do so in so far as such a tribunal would be predicated on the principle of consent i.e. that the purpose of the tribunal would be to investigate whether local consent for a march was forthcoming or not.

11. On the question of ever conceding to a loyalist march down the road, they said that they had no objection to marches but felt that their consent was the key, in other words that a march down the Lower Ormeau was in their gift. In such a situation, they would be sympathetic to requests for permission to march. Mention was also made by Gormley of a three month moratorium (i.e. by the Secretary of State) on parades there, after which time they would be more comfortable about parade requests.

12. The point was made by a member of the committee who described herself as having been born and raised in the area, that the issue had a political dimension in that if consent was not granted on the matter of parades, then it could be legitimately asked what could be expected from political talks.



Eamonn McKee

Security Section

25 April 1996

**c.c. Second Secretary
Joint Secretary
Counsellors/First Sec.s A.I.**