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25

4 October 1996

Mr S O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

Dear Secretary

Taoiseach
This is quite important -
and fits with your
own instincts and
analysis. Again,
A, B, C and D
suggest that we should at least
explore if there is a way to help
Mr Trimble get off the hook by
exploring the alleged loopholes in
whatever way
is best.

COPY TO:
PST
PSS
MR. P. TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T. DALTON

SEEN BY
TAOISEACH

Conversation with Michael and Chris McGimpsey

I met with the McGimpsey brothers for an hour and a half over afternoon tea yesterday (Thursday) afternoon in Blackpool.

8/10/96

The McGimpseys approached me in the corridor in the Winter Gardens to convey their urgent sense of the pressures under which David Trimble is currently operating. We agreed to meet later in the Pembroke Hotel, where I was staying, to continue the discussion in a quieter atmosphere. Chris McGimpsey was our guest to dinner at home during the year. I accompanied Michael McGimpsey on a punting expedition during the recent BIA conference in Oxford. Our meeting yesterday was very open and friendly. The McGimpseys were accompanied by a Unionist friend Tom Sheridan who concurred fully in the views expressed by the two brothers.

The burden of the McGimpseys' message is that

- * David Trimble was forced to change the UUP position on decommissioning because of political pressures
- * the document published by the UUP on Monday was drafted by Trimble himself and contains "let out" clauses which as the McGimpseys admit are more obvious to Trimble's legal brain than to the general reader
- * Trimble is conscious that the UUP will be blamed if the talks break down on decommissioning and he also aware of the dangers which will flow from a collapse in the talks; moreover his leadership of the UUP may be at stake
- A* * Trimble is open to solutions on decommissioning

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B Trimble could accept a new approach, making acceptance of a compromise a "confidence issue" in the UUP, or alternatively reconvening the Executive Committee which according to an agreement reached on Saturday can now meet more frequently.

I did not have the impression that the McGimpseys, in putting forward all of this, were acting directly on Trimble's behalf. On the other hand Michael McGimpsey is a member of the Executive Committee and was present at Saturday's fateful meeting - although I gather that for one reason or another he left early.

The Unionist Labour Group and the Labour Party Conference

Michael and Chris McGimpsey, along with the abovementioned Tom Sheridan, were among the five co-founders five years ago of the Unionist Labour Group, which aims to promote an economic and social agenda within the Unionist Party and to provide a bridge between the UUP and the British Labour Party.

The McGimpseys, with the help of New Dialogue, were the authors of the fringe meeting on 2 October addressed by Trimble, Minister Gilmore and Denis Haughey. I will be reporting separately on Northern Ireland-related aspects of the Labour Party Conference, which is continuing in Blackpool this morning. Generally speaking, the McGimpseys felt that Trimble acquitted himself well at the meeting but that the mood of the Labour Party members present put him on the defensive. The McGimpseys were especially grateful for the contribution of Minister Gilmore and in particular for his refusal to speculate on alternatives to the present talks process.

The pressures on Trimble

The McGimpseys painted a grim picture of the pressures on Trimble in the UUP. They did so from the perspective of having voted for another candidate [comment: if I understood correctly, Michael supported Ken Maginnis and Chris supported either Maginnis or Taylor] in the Ulster Hall in September 1995.

It seems that John Taylor does not regard the verdict in the Ulster Hall as definitive and believes that under certain circumstances he can succeed Trimble even in the short term. One possible opportunity would be the discrediting of Trimble as a result of the collapse of the talks process.

Four members of the parliamentary party - Beggs, Ross, Walker and Forsyth - are not on speaking terms with Trimble and refuse to sit beside him during Question Time in the House of Commons.

Molyneaux is hurt by the manner of his dismissal.

Ken Maginnis, although a liberal, has traded on his contacts in the security forces to argue the view that the IRA have never wanted peace. This means that he is not an ally of moderation on the decommissioning issue.

This means that Martin Smyth, with his limitations, is the one member of the parliamentary party with whom Trimble has a satisfactory understanding.

As most of the Unionist MPs are in their late 60s or their 70s, there will be several retirements at the next general election and more particularly, at the next general election but one. John Taylor is especially active in grooming candidates for the vacant seats. John Hunter and Peter Weir, delegates to the talks, are Taylor's men.

The circumstances of Trimble's election post-Drumcree 1995 mean that his natural constituency in the party is "McCartneyite". All of Trimble's main advisers - Weir, Hunter, McCausland and Lucy - are to the right of him politically and owe him very little personal loyalty.

The members of the Executive Committee who are regarded as Trimble supporters are also far to his right.

The Executive Committee Meeting, 28 September

All of the above provides the background to what happened last Saturday. In the wake of the arms finds in London, there was enormous pressure on Trimble to harden the UUP position. To pre-empt this, Trimble produced a paper of his own which is drafted so as to include very few paragraphs of real substance. Those paragraphs, especially the final paragraph and the final sentence of the penultimate paragraph, are drafted [comment: according to what I was told] in such a way that there is room for movement.

Mention was made in passing of Dermot Nesbitt as a particularly formidable opponent of Trimble on the Executive Committee.

Mention was also made of Trimble's account to the Executive Committee on the consultations with the two governments. It seems that Trimble argued that the UUP had relatively little "input" into the paper tabled by the two governments. The Governments listened at length but in the end produced roughly the same proposal as they had in mind at the beginning of the consultation process. [Comment: I did not press my interlocutors as to how this account by Trimble is to be reconciled with the assertion that the position taken by the UUP on Saturday was forced on him by others. Could it be that Trimble, who might in other circumstances have pointed up the merits of the two governments' proposal, was distancing himself from it as best he could?]

The UUP position: is there an exit?

I asked the McGimpseys to explain their view that the Unionist paper contains loop-holes which will permit Trimble to move.

Their explanation was offered by Michael McGimpsey and had two parts.

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First, Michael invited me to consider what will happen in practice if Sinn Fein joins the negotiation after ten days or one month. At face value, the Unionist paper implies that they will be excluded from the negotiations proper until a "first instalment" of weapons is handed over. The question to ask, however, is whether the PUP and the UDP will have handed over weapons at that early stage. If not, and the PUP and UDP are full participants in the negotiations, how is the "Washington Three" interpretation of the Unionist paper to be reconciled with the requirement that decommissioning shall be mutual? Can the 'Washington Three' interpretation therefore be correct?

The McGimpseys at this point entered into a lengthy explanation of how Trimble has been careful to maintain a "comfortable" relationship with people like David Ervine and John White. They, the McGimpseys, are in no doubt that Trimble's strategy is to keep the Loyalist parties in the talks. This is the clue, in their view, to what will happen in practice on decommissioning if Sinn Fein declares a ceasefire.

Michael McGimpsey's second main point revolved around the last line of the UUP paper, "until they have demonstrated their commitment to exclusively peaceful means." McGimpsey observed that this condition is nowhere directly - in so many words - associated with decommissioning. Trimble has kept open the possibility that Sinn Fein could demonstrate their commitment to peaceful means in some other way.

In response to my obvious question, McGimpsey mentioned as alternatives the use of the word "permanent", an end to punishment beatings, perhaps in conjunction with a similar decision on the Loyalist side, an end to targeting, an end to procurement, or an end to recruitment.

Exploiting the loop-holes

I explained to my guests how UUP actions are viewed in Dublin and as far as I know in London. This said, I asked them how in practice the loop-holes could be exploited, assuming that they exist, and how Trimble will overcome the formal problem that the Executive Committee appears to have taken a decision of a particular kind.

Their view, as it emerged in conversation, is that the flexibility that exists will have to be elicited from Trimble by others. The Irish government should consider a "charm offensive". Ideally, a third piece of paper should be prepared [comment: by whom, it was not clear] which could be presented as a compromise between the proposal of the two governments and the position of the UUP Executive Committee.

If Trimble were satisfied with this paper, he could accept it on his own authority, making it a "confidence issue" within the UUP, or he could even if he judged the climate propitious, reconvene the Executive Committee. Trimble obtained the agreement of the Executive Committee last Saturday to meet more frequently than once every three months, if urgent matters arise.

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The overall message

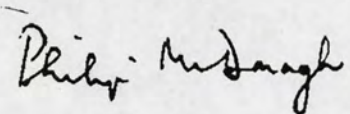
The McGimpseys spoke eloquently of the deplorable right wing tendencies in their own party ("the Mujahadin"), of the blame which their party carries for the failure of the talks so far, and of the very real pressures on the Loyalist ceasefire.

They further argued that as former critics of Trimble they have come round to the view that he is the most intelligent of the UUP MPs and the only one capable of leading the party towards a settlement. They were adamant that this is what Trimble wants to do. Michael McGimpsey in particular insisted with passion that "in there, there's a good man trying to get out". The fact that Trimble is a poor administrator and an inexperienced politician should not cause us to lose sight of his basic good will.

Chris McGimpsey drew my attention to the various incidents in 1996 which make it very difficult for a Unionist to argue that the IRA wants peace. The intransigence which engulfs many of Trimble's colleagues is almost inevitable against a background of continuing violence.

Our discussion ended because the McGimpseys needed to catch a plane. I was convinced that I had heard a sincere plea from moderate Unionists for help in enabling their party to overcome its own contradictions. On a factual level, I am left in no doubt that differences in the UUP are real. For example the tension between Trimble and Taylor is more than a staged disagreement or a negotiating tactic on the part of the UUP collectively.

Yours sincerely



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor