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Taoiseach
The reportage on the
UUP is depressing
and the
views on parades worth noting

Cops

(3)

PST, PSS, S/S Ó hUiginn,
Counsellors A-I, Section,
Messrs Teahon, Donlon &
Dalton, Ambassadors
London & Washington, Joint
Secretary

Confidential

Conversation with Chris McGimpsey, 7 November 1996

Ms Nolan

13-11-96

(25)

hh
13/11/96

1 I called on McGimpsey at Belfast City Hall. He was characteristically open and friendly, but understandably preoccupied by his own future as an elected representative and within the Ulster Unionist Party.

Talks

2. McGimpsey admitted that he was not following the talks with close attention. He said that in his view there was minimal public interest in them, and virtually no expectations of any positive outcome. Even within party circles there was little discussion of the proceedings - matters were entrusted to the leader and the talks team, who were, for now at least, not in any real sense accountable, or under any pressure from the grassroots.

6.

Tensions within the UUP

3. McGimpsey was much more interested in talking about his own position within the UUP. He was adamant that there exists a right-wing conspiracy to force out MPS and councillors who are perceived as too moderate, or as potential critics of David Trimble. He admitted that he did not know whether Trimble himself was actively involved, but felt that as a minimum he must be turning a blind eye. Cecil Walker was convinced that Trimble was directly sponsoring moves against him.

4. He nominated Peter Weir and John Hunter as the leaders of a cabal, many of whose members are, like them, young unionists with a background in Queen's University. He speculated that the "republican" atmosphere of the university had fostered in them an embittered sense of siege. He thought that many of them were deeply sectarian, claiming that Weir had, at a meeting last year, said that what the UUP most needed were people who "hated Taigs". When I queried him on this, he replied that he personally had been present. Others involved included Drew Nelson, Gordon Lucy and Nelson McCausland. He also remarked on the fresh prominence of former Vanguard members, led by Trimble himself ("what you need to get on in the Ulster Unionist Party is to have opposed it in the past.")

5. Weir he described as a "failed barrister", whose briefless state freed him to play a prominent role in the talks - Hunter, on the other hand, has a more lucrative practice and is hence less consistently available.

6. I remarked that, so far, attempts to unseat MPS had been unsuccessful - Hunter had fared poorly against Clifford Forsythe in South Antrim, for example. McGimpsey agreed, but said that the campaign was more advanced at local level. The previous week, a sitting UUP councillor from South Belfast, Alan Crowe, a Dublin-born businessman whose accountancy background had helped him play a very constructive role in Council business, had been deselected in favour of Weir. His brother Michael's reselection (this coming week) was by no means certain, nor was that of Councillor Margaret Crooks. He would know his own fate on 25 November: attempts were being made to disqualify from voting a branch in North Belfast which was particularly supportive of him.
7. McGimpsey made the point that the numbers involved in unionist politics were very small. There might be no more than a hundred members in a parliamentary constituency (most of them inactive) , and proportionately fewer at Council level: thus "entryist" tactics by a small group could be quite successful.
8. *Interesting change of view* Consequently (and in this McGimpsey appeared to have changed his mind since he and his brother met Mr McDonagh in the margins of the Labour Party Conference) he appeared to take a very jaundiced view of Trimble, saying that the best that could be said of him was that he was "erratic". He emphasised that the net effect of all the changes within the party was that it would be much less inclined to reach an agreement with the SDLP or the Irish Government than it would have been in 1992.

Belfast City Council

9. McGimpsey confirmed that Fred Cobain, the leader of the UUP group, is now speaking in favour of full power-sharing between the UUP, DUP, Alliance and SDLP - there is already a sharing out of committee and sub-committee chairmanships, and the next step would be a rota for the positions of Lord Mayor and deputy Lord Mayor. Including Sinn Féin (the largest party in Belfast) was not on the cards.
10. *Note worthy* In McGimpsey's view, Cobain's conversion has been motivated by two factors: first, a realisation that, if the present talks fail, the preferred unionist option of strengthening the powers of councils is only likely to be looked on positively if those controlled by Unionists, and especially Belfast, have cleaned up their act; and, secondly, a pragmatic appreciation that Belfast City Council will probably have a nationalist majority, if not at the May 1997 elections,

then at the next ones

Parades

11. While advising McGimpsey that I did not have responsibility for our handling of the parades issue, I asked him, as a prominent member of the loyal orders, if he saw any scope for compromise. He said that the North Commission had invited him to make a submission, but, though he had assembled materials, he had not got around to doing so. He began by making a couple of predictable points: nationalist opposition was being orchestrated and manipulated by Sinn Féin, though he conceded that there was a reservoir of genuine resentment at past excesses; and nobody could be allowed to "own the Queen's Highway".

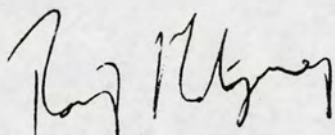
12. That said, he felt that a number of considerations could be usefully factored in to calculations:
 - in granting licences to march, the police should take account of the overall number of parades in a particular area and recent trends up or down (no new parades should be permitted, but credit should be given for a reduction in frequency - this has not happened on the Lower Ormeau, he alleged)

 - distinctions should be made between different sorts of parade, with band parades being treated more circumspectly than those of the orders themselves;

 - conditions could be attached as to numbers, flags, bands etc., as well as to routes;

 - any major breach of those conditions should be penalised by withholding permission for the following year's march;

 - however, the idea of bonding parades was impractical, as most lodges had very few funds (at most a "thousand pounds, half of which goes on hiring a band").



Rory Montgomery

11 November 1996