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Meeting with Eddie McGrady MP

Downpatrick, 19 December 1996

Eddie McGrady, SDLP Chief Whip and spokesperson on Housing, Local Government and the Environment met with David Cooney and the undersigned at his constituency office in Downpatrick. The discussions covered a wide range of matters and the following points were worth noting.

**WESTMINSTER MATTERS**

1. McGrady said he was concerned by an increasingly integrationist tendency at Westminster with regard to Northern Ireland legislation. Contrary to past practises, Northern Ireland was being explicitly included in many UK Bills and not catered for by separate Northern Ireland legislation. This would cause difficulty if there was to be a decoupling of NI legislation from England and Wales. Each amendment to UK legislation would require going back through the various steps in Westminster while NI legislation could be altered simply by Orders in Council.
2. He said that the Labour party had been "cosying up" to the unionists for the last year and they have used a strict adherence to a bipartisan policy as a cover for this wooing of the unionists. The Labour party spokespersons at Westminster now have more contact with the unionists than with the SDLP. He mentioned, in particular, Jim Dowd as someone who has close contacts with the UUP. McGrady emphasised that the SDLP MPs do not take the Labour Whip but "are guided by it". He has told Mo Mowlam that the SDLP would not automatically support Labour amendments in Parliament unless they were consulted beforehand.
3. On the issue of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, McGrady was unaware of the Secretary of State's letter to John Hume. However, he was not surprised at this and mentioned that his party leader only focused on matters which interested him. McGrady asked the NIO to copy him with relevant letters when writing to Hume although they only did so when it suited them. McGrady did not seem perturbed by

the development and pointed out that the NI Grand Committee had only met infrequently in the past and that the Scottish Grand Committee had been inactive for some time because of the reluctance of English Tories to serve on it in order to give it a Government majority. He expected that the same would happen with the NI Grand Committee. He would, however, be strongly opposed to the Grand Committee having a role in legislation.

## POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

4. Cooney briefed McGrady on the current position in the multi-party talks in Stormont. On the overall political situation, McGrady wondered why Sinn Féin had not declared a cease-fire. He said that they had proved to be skilled political operators in the past and he was at a loss to understand why they did not do "the smart thing" in this case. His own information was that the Provos were not planning a return to violence and this made the lack of an announcement even more puzzling.
5. Most of the major constituencies have already chosen their candidates for the Westminster elections except for Derry where there has been little open indication on whether Hume will stand down in favour of Mark Durkan. McGrady is clearly in favour of Hume staying on and felt that there would be big problems for the party if its leader was not a member of the House of Commons. He stated that in the British system being a MEP did not have the same status as an MP. On the issue of who should stand, McGrady recounted a conversation which had recently with Ian Paisley about the SDLP nomination for the Foyle seat. Paisley said that "John will have to stand, that young fellow will never be able for McGuinness" in a show of solidarity with the SDLP leader.
6. He was very assured when discussing his own chances at the next election. He has reason to be confident. The new constituency favours him and his party organisation is one of the best in the SDLP, controlling the two local councils, Down and Newry and Mourne as well as holding the local Westminster seat. He was dismissive of the local Sinn Féin support, calling their success in taking a Forum seat in May as a "blip". He said that there was little evidence of an effort by Sinn Fein to organise seriously in South Down. He was also unimpressed by his UUP opponent in the election, Dermot Nesbitt, whom he claims to be a weak candidate. He said that he expected to get a considerable level of cross-community support, with approx. 4/5,000

unionist voters supporting him.

7. On the local elections front, he said that the SDLP would lose a seat in the Down Council because they took six out of seven in the Downpatrick area last time which was almost a mathematical impossibility. He mentioned that Malachi Curran of the Labour group in the Stormont talks, has a band of local supporters around him and could win a seat for his new group in the area. He said that Curran, who had two periods in the SDLP, was a front for the militant tendency and had support from "across the water". This had been evident in a recent industrial dispute in a local hospital. He said that Curran was the acceptable-spokesperson for more extreme radical elements.
8. In regard to the neighbouring district of Ards, McGrady did not hide his dislike of the independent nationalist Councillor, McMullan. He said that the SDLP could easily take two seats in the lower Ards at the next local election with the right candidates. He said that the SDLP should call a public meeting in Portaferry and establish a branch after such a meeting. He mentioned that he was staying out of the matter and allowing Tim Attwood to sort things out, including McMullan's party application. He also mentioned that the SDLP would be fielding a candidate in the Strangford constituency at the Westminster election.
9. He remarked, with some mirth, that the SDLP had chosen candidates for the Mid-Ulster and West Tyrone seats. He said that if the party chose candidates for the constituencies then they must intend to contest the election there. However, he did not sound overly convinced.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

10. McGrady said that it was becoming increasingly difficult to hold the SDLP line on local government that any changes must await the outcome of political talks at Stormont. People simply dismissed the likelihood of any such agreement in the short-term and the SDLP would have to have a policy, other than total resistance to any increase in devolution of powers. He did not elaborate on what policy options should be examined. (The SDLP has established a committee made up of party officers and local councillors to look at the matter.)

11. He speculated that there could be a move to re-organise local government into four larger units which would take over the powers at present exercised by the Library and Education Boards and the Health and Social Services Boards. He said Vanguard had pushed this idea in the past and Trimble, as a former Vanguard member, may be attracted to the idea. He felt that there might be an attempt to draw up the boundaries to larger local government entities in such a way as to leave nationalists in a minority in each of the new areas.
12. McGrady mentioned that there might also be an attempt to resurrect a body on the lines of ALANI, the association of local councillors. He said that ALANI was crumbling with unionist dominated councils such as Newtownabbey withdrawing because they regarded it as poor value for money. Nationalist councils withdrew in the past because of the unionist policy of excluding nationalists from executive posts in ALANI. The unionists were promising to behave themselves in any new body but the nationalists would need some convincing.

## PLANNING

13. McGrady said that the issue of planning was one which has become a matter of importance in the local political scene. It is probably the only substantial power which could be devolved to the present local councils. Other powers such as water, roads etc., need bigger entities than the present district councils. There was a lack of appreciation in Westminster about the importance of the issue. He expressed particular concern in relation to the Labour party. Much of the discrimination in the past had been based on planning. He outlined recent developments, including the NI Select Committee report on planning which he had gone along with. The report had identified a democratic deficit in the planning process, as well as highlighting technical deficiencies in the present planning arrangements. He said that there was a bit of "double speak" from the Government on the issue.
14. They said different things to nationalists and unionists. To nationalists they mentioned that the democratic deficit would be rectified by political input at the Stormont level, i.e. after an overall political agreement and to unionists that the input would be at district council level, i.e. a return of planning powers without the need for an overall settlement.

## HOUSING

15. McGrady outlined his concerns on Government policy on housing. He believes that the present changes, including the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) and the ending of house building by the Housing Executive, will essentially kill off the Executive - the one outstanding success story in Northern Ireland. He is particularly concerned that house allocation and personal details could be given over to private companies. He does not believe that information on such private and personal matters should be outside of public control. Minister Moss has assured him that it was not the Government's intention to allow sensitive matters to pass out of its control but McGrady said the draft legislation contained no such assurance.
  
16. McGrady feels that the handing over of house-building to the unionist dominated housing associations could herald a return to the dark days of discrimination in housing. He said that the Government had stated that it will compel the associations to use a common housing list, based on need. This was a nonsense, he asked how could the Government compel an association, which was established to build houses for a specific group, to build for the common good. He said that an association representing a particular area or community, would build houses for those it represented and not for some disadvantaged group with which it had no association. He feared that if the present policy was pursued, it will lead to a small number of large construction companies taking over all housing building in the North.
  
17. He commended the SDLP housing paper which had sought to preserve the powers of the Housing Executive, although he felt that he had been somewhat hung out to dry by the Executive when the Government published its recent Housing proposals. He was briefed by Sid McDowell from the Board of the Executive on the proposals. He repeated in public the trenchant criticism that he had heard from the Executive. The Housing Executive then issued a statement which was very moderate and made McGrady look bad. He was pessimistic about the possibility of a Labour administration changing policy and pointed out that the process of agentisation and externalisation was more advanced in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. He appeared to place a large amount of blame for this situation on the North Irish civil service and in particular on Ronnie Spence whom he claimed is an avid supporter of cutting back government involvement. (He claimed that it was getting so bad that it was difficult to get an answer to a PQ because so many functions and powers of

Government had been transferred to outside control.)

18. McGrady was told by Minister Moss that the reason that the house building programme was handed over to the associations was that they could obtain private finance, something that the Housing executive would be unable to do. McGrady pointed out to the Minister that the Housing Executive, in the past, had in fact extensively used private finance in house building and he was supported on this point by John Gorman, a former Chairman of the Executive.
19. On the question of the Housing Council nominating only unionists to the Housing Executive Board, we informed McGrady that his criticism of the unionist monopoly had been raised through the Secretariat. We had been given the response that the Government would change the method of election to these posts to ensure that the nominations in the future would be fairer. McGrady said that he had been given a similar assurance from Minister Moss.

#### THE NI FORUM

20. McGrady said he felt personally betrayed by the lack of Government action over the way the Forum was developing. The unionists were trying to set up a mini Assembly and the Government were not doing anything about it. He had been with Minister Ancram earlier in the day and was told that the Government could not intervene. During the passage of the Entry into Negotiations Bill through Parliament, McGrady claimed he was assured by Ancram that the Forum would be permitted only to deal with matters referred to it by the multi-party talks or submissions from cross-community groups. It now was going well away from that original concept.
21. There was brief discussion about the involvement of NI Departments with the Forum. McGrady claimed that Ancram had told him that no Departmental official would appear before the Forum. This conflicted with the public perception that officials were in fact answering questions before the Forum's committees. It was agreed that we would look into the matter and inform McGrady of the true situation.
22. McGrady clearly dislikes the Forum and mentioned that he had told Bob McCartney that he would forgive him a lot but would never forgive him for bringing Conor Cruise O'Brien and Cedric Wilson to the Forum.

## SOUTH DOWN

23. McGrady said that he had two specific complaints about the way his constituency had been treated. The first complaint related to the virtual absence of inward investment in the area. During his time as MP, there has been no inward investment project between Strangford Lough and Lough Neagh. He was tired reading about new projects in Ballymena, Dungannon and elsewhere but nothing for South Down. The second issue was the poor state of the roads in South Down compared with the rest of Northern Ireland. With the Government cutting back severely on infrastructural projects, it was likely that the area would never get a good road network. He wondered whether the two issues were connected as industrialists needed to be sure of a good transport system if they were to invest in a location.

## OTHER ISSUES

24. There were exchanges on a number of other issues, including the Educational and Library Boards, the changes in the status of Colleges of Further Education in the North, the Dundalk residents' case in the Irish courts against Sellafield and fishery matters. In the latter case, McGrady said that despite media reports the unionists had received no real assurances from the British Government other than what had been given before. McGrady also mentioned that his call for an official enquiry into the events at Drumcree has been largely unsupported except for the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights (SACHR). He reiterated that demand for an enquiry.

RB

Ray Bassett  
Anglo-Irish Division  
20 December 1996