

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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pa Drumcree 97
a Parades

3 June 1997

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

Mr Colm O'Floinn,
Counsellor,
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Colm,

New Dialogue - Briefing by the Orange Order

I attended a meeting in the House of Commons this evening organised by New Dialogue as an opportunity for the Orange Order to brief their members. There were about twenty five or so people in the audience including Andrew Hunter MP (who left when a division bell sounded), Ruth Dudley Edwards, Patricia Campbell of the UIO and Mary Keen of the BIA. The meeting was addressed by Brian Kennaway (?), described as the Education Convenor of the Order, and William Bigman (?), the County Chaplain in Armagh. Dennis Watson, Deputy Grand Master in Armagh, was in the audience but did not speak.

Brian Kennaway, Education Convenor

Brian Kennaway opened his contribution by saying that he intended to 'talk straight' and hoped that he would not cause offence. He described the parades question as one of civil liberties which are engrained in the fabric of a civic society. He said that perceptions were sometimes more important that reality and suggested that the perception of a pan-Nationalist front 'out to get us' was a widely help perception amongst Unionists.

He described the pan-Nationalist front as having four constituent parts: IRA/Sinn Féin (while they explain 'Brits out' as meaning an end to the British establishment, IRA activities show that what they really want is Protestants off the island); the SDLP (in particular John Hume); the 'Republican Government' (in a long list of complaints he stated inter alia that in the early 70's the Irish Government had financed the IRA, since partition it had reduced the population of Protestants south of the border, there had been troops sent to the border in 1969, extraditions had been refused, Articles 2 and 3 still existed and the Irish Government insisted on styling President Robinson 'the President of Ireland'); and the Catholic Church (he quoted the late Cardinal O'Fiach on the hunger strikes and said that Cardinal Daly had referred to 'political prisoners'. This was not, he continued, to mention Seán O'Callaghan's allegations of collusion by the Catholic Church in the IRA's activities).

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He said that an attack on a parade was seen as an attack on a culture and on a people under threat. Describing the parades down the Ormeau and Garvaghy Roads as the most contentious, he said that the residents' groups there had been manipulated by the IRA and Sinn Féin. This was the opinion of the NIO and also, he presumed, of the RUC. He suggested that talking to residents' groups was seen as 'talking to people of our own demise' like 'turkeys bringing forward the date of Christmas'. The parade on the Garvaghy had been re-routed in the past. Any further change would be seen as 'another step towards our extinction'. He also said that as a 'Christian organisation' the Orange Order had difficulties talking to killers who showed no remorse.

He concluded by suggesting that the parades issue is a microcosm of the problems in the North. If it is addressed and solved then a satisfactory solution to bigger problems could be found. He quoted Rev. John Dunlop's book 'A Precarious Belonging' and his assertion that 'Unionists need to know that they are recognised and respected by Nationalists in both parts of the island'. Nationalists must be heard and seen to care about the concerns of Unionists. The question on the Garvaghy was simple, under what circumstances would Nationalists not object to the expression of the religion, culture and identity of the majority and not block their return from morning prayer at Drumcree Church.

William Bigman

Bigman, in a more moderate address, described how his love of his country and his refusal to see it go up in flames had caused him to become involved in the search for resolution to Drumcree this year. He had been in his first Orange parade at the age of six, when his grandfather took his hand on the walk to the field. It had been a 'great day out' and he wanted this for his own children.

When the Orange Order had said that it was willing to talk to residents, with the only condition being that they would not talk to convicted terrorists,the residents had put 'McKenna' forward on every occasion. He contended that on the Eleventh Night last year when he had wanted to stay up all night to discuss a five point peace plan put forward by the Order, the residents had wanted to go home to bed. Last year, he said, had not been a victory for anybody with common sense.

Since last year he had been involved in 'listening' to politicians from South of the border, Garvaghy residents (but without the Residents' Group), Church leaders, police and business people. He said that as a member of the Order he wanted his rights but was willing to take his responsibilities. He wanted to parade down the Garvaghy Road in a way that caused no offence. He did not want 'consent' but 'consensus'. The Order had been told that flute bands were offensive so they had offered an accordion band playing hymns common to both faiths. They had been told that there were too many parades so they had reduced the number from ten to one (the oldest one which will be 200 years old in 1998). He saw danger in what was said by those who wanted 'no Orange feet on Garvaghy' in that is could create areas exclusive to one people as had happened to Bosnia.

He told the meeting that all residents of the Garvaghy Road would receive a letter in the post tomorrow from the Orange Order who would listen closely to the responses.

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Problems about the parade had arisen in recent years for two reasons, firstly Sinn Féin agitation (they want the Orange Order to confront the RUC this year discrediting the Order and the Union) and secondly because Protestants had been forced out of the area over the past ten years.

He said that he would do all in his power to prevent 'Drumcree '97', and it was his prayer that the people of Northern Ireland build good community relations and move forward together. He was still optimistic that common sense would prevail. The letter which residents would receive would describe how far the Order had moved and would ask them to meet them in this.

Questions

Most of the questions asked were sympathetic to the Orange Order's position with none raising Nationalist concerns.

On what his 'bottom line' might be for Drumcree, William Bigman replied that he wanted his rights maintained but with responsibilities. He wanted to march in a way that caused least offence and addressed genuine concerns. He characterised extremists within the Order as 'our Militant Tendency'. He said the Orange Order was reforming and those in the Order not willing to cooperate should leave. Sometimes, he said, when people leave, 'you're the stronger for it'. On what might happen if there is no agreement on Drumcree he said that he did not believe that there would be mass protests this year but that the loyalist ceasefire could break down and we would see guns on the streets. He personally would abide by the law and would not fail through lack of trying to stop the gunmen.

On the connection between the Order and the UUP, Brian Kennaway said that he personally would like to see it go. To the amusement of one questioner he said that it was not necessary to be a Unionist to belong to the Order, 'a religious body' but he suspected that 99.9% of its members were.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Boban

Helen Blake
Embassy London

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