

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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To: HQ
For: Second Secretary

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

re Parades 97

Subj: Meeting with Orange Order representatives

1. As I mentioned earlier this week, two senior representatives of the Co. Armagh Lodge of the Orange Order were in touch with the NIO recently to seek reassurances about the role of the Secretariat in relation to parades. The two representatives were Denis Watson and Rev. William Bingham, respectively Grand Master of the Armagh County Lodge and Chaplain to the Lodge.

2. Watson and Bingham made direct contact with Peter Smith of the NIO's Political Affairs Bureau. They sought confirmation that there was no substance in a rumour, which was being put about by Joel Patton, that a deal had been facilitated by the Secretariat whereby the Orangemen would be allowed down the Garvaghy Road in exchange for Unionist acceptance that, in the event of a restored ceasefire, Sinn Féin could take part in the talks without prior decommissioning. They also wished to have general reassurances about the role of the Conference and Secretariat in relation to parades.

3. The matter was referred to my British counterpart, who favoured inviting the two men to a discussion at Maryfield. It was agreed that, in deference to Orange sensitivities, the meeting would involve the British side of the Secretariat only (though I would be available to join it if our visitors wished).

4. John Steele, the senior security official at the NIO, then intervened to propose that the meeting take place at Stormont rather than Maryfield - in order to protect the two representatives from the risk of a loss of standing within the Orange Order were it to emerge that they had had discussions in the Secretariat. (Steele's solicitousness would appear to have been related to a NIO desire to make use of these relatively moderate Orange leaders in promoting an accommodation on Drumcree this summer).

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5. The meeting in question took place at Stormont today. Steele, Bell and Smith represented the NIO. According to Bell, the British side gave a presentation which emphasised the legitimacy of the Irish Government's concerns about parades, under Art. 7 of the Agreement, and the benign role which both the Conference and Secretariat play at all times in this area. They made clear that the present British Government and any possible successor are fully committed to the Agreement and the role which the Irish Government has under it.

6. When the Orange representatives claimed that the Irish side of the Secretariat is entitled under the Agreement to instruct the Chief Constable on the routing of individual parades, the British officials denied this categorically. John Steele explained that parades and marches are the subject of regular discussion between the two Governments, before and after the event, both in the Conference and in the Secretariat. However, no instructions issue to the Chief Constable from such discussions. (My impression is that, in deference to his visitors, Steele represented these more as briefing sessions and played down the Irish input in the form of "views and proposals" under the terms of the Agreement).

7. The British view of Bingham and Watson is that they are decent and responsible people and among the more constructive Orange representatives. They are clearly no friends of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, however, and had to be disabused of some rather extravagant misconceptions about it (though they did not bring up the Patton rumour which they had mentioned to Smith). They voiced general apprehension about the prospects for this year's marching season in view of last night's unsatisfactory outcome in relation to Dunloy, the consequent failure to resolve the associated problem of Harryville and the deepening stalemate over Drumcree.

8 No reference was made to any contacts which Bingham and Watson, or other Orange representatives, have had in order to find a way out of the impasse. The British side laid emphasis generally on the desirability of dialogue with the Irish Government and urged contact with the Tánaiste. (They suggested privately to us afterwards that there might be value in contact being established with Bingham and Watson at official level on the Tánaiste's behalf). They also expressed the hope that Bingham and Watson would come to Maryfield for a meeting with both sides of the Secretariat once the pressures of this year's marching season are out of the way. The two visitors took note of this suggestion without commitment.

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