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Dinner with the Orange Order at the British Embassy

Friday, 2nd May 1997

1. I attended a dinner with members of the Orange Order at the British Embassy Residence on Friday 2nd May. The dinner was organised by the British Ambassador, in conjunction with the Rev. Trevor Morrow of the Lucan Youth Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. Guests included Minister Joan Burton, Deputy Liam Kavanagh, T.D., Senator Pascal Mooney and the undersigned.

2. The Orange Order was represented by Mr. Robert Saulters, Grand Master, The Rev. Brian Kennaway, Chairman, Orange Order Education Committee, Mr. Denis Watson, County Armagh County Master of the Orange Order, and Mr. Roy Kells, County Fermanagh Deputy County Master of the Orange Order.

3. The discussion began before dinner with a general round of discussion on the current situation. Representatives of the Orange Order set out the position as they saw it. They displayed a strong sense of grievance that their story was not getting across, and that they were being misunderstood as bigots. A second, equally emphatic note in their presentation, particularly by the Grand Master, was the need to avoid a "Drumcree three". Guests from the South emphasised the damage done to the perception of the Orange Order by their insistence in marching in areas where they were clearly not wanted, and the incomprehension here that the Orange Order would take Northern Ireland to the brink of anarchy rather than march down from a church by the same route they had taken to go up. The Rev. Trevor Morrow had an emphatically Christian presentation, challenging the Order whether their current demeanour was in fact the best way to give the deep Christian witness they professed to.

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4. Minister Burton and I emphasised the necessary concern which any Irish Government must have about an issue which threatened the authority of the rule of law in Northern Ireland. On the most practical level we had to take cognisance of the damage which that did to our own jurisdiction, in economic, security and other terms. We stressed that, contrary to rumour, we were not involved through the Anglo-Irish Secretariat in the "micro-management" of the parades issue. However, we did have a clear interest and clear views on the broad underlying principles. They might be surprised how much our views agreed with theirs, on the right to march, etc. The only conspicuous point of divergence was our emphasis on the need for dialogue, to "talk over and not to walk over" each other's concerns. Going on analogies with militant Labour, Minister Burton highlighted how much the approach of the Order was playing into the hands of Sinn Féin.

5. Mr. Kells saw opposition to the parades issue as another outcrop of a sinister Sinn Féin strategy, related to the "phoney ceasefire". He gave many instances of the two communities supporting each other's right to parade, and of neighbourly cooperation to make this possible. The clear implication was that if Sinn Féin agitation could be removed, a happier state of affairs could be recovered. (I asked him about the current state of the boycott against his drapery shop in Enniskillen. I understood from him that the situation had recovered considerably, although he put this down to "a lack of alternative supply").

6. There was much discussion about Drumcree. Mr. Watson took the lead role in this discussion, with Mr. Saulters clearly keeping his own counsel. There was no mistaking the genuine anxiety to avoid a repetition of last year's events. Mr. Watson emphasised his anxiety for dialogue, but without contact

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with Mr. MacCionnaith of the residents' group. He had been seeking a meeting with the Rev. Eamonn Stack, and had still some hopes that that would be agreed. There was also another potential channel of dialogue, which he preferred however not to specify. It was fairly clear from his remarks that the Order would now envisage the '95 approach as a reasonable approach to avoid confrontation.

7. We agreed that the '95 approach had been a welcome compromise. The main difficulties had been the "victory dance" by Messrs. Trimble and Paisley afterwards, and the insensitivity of striking a special Orange "jewel" to commemorate the victory.

8. On the first point, Mr. Watson took a highly formalistic view of the matter. He instanced various arcane meetings, access to the "control room", etc. which had not been accorded to Trimble, a circumstance which in Mr. Watson's eye, absolved the Order of responsibility for that development. The entire Orange delegation agreed that the "jewel" was insensitive. They were at pains to say it had been a local fund-raising initiative by a local lodge and should be seen in that context. The Southern guests present stressed that it was hopeless to think that the public perceptions of the event would not be shaped by the headline media events. A good analogy was the "band parades" which, while not technically an Orange manifestation, were universally seen as such, and were proliferating without discipline which it was hoped the Orange Order would exercise in its more formal parades.

9. There was a discussion on the Order's insistence that they could not meet with MacCionnaith (Watson implied there was a formal instruction from the Institution to this effect, and seemed at one point to be wrestling with ways in

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which the technicalities of this instruction could be overcome.) We said that the role of Billy Wright at Drumcree inevitably made the refusal to talk to MacCionnaith appear partisan rather than principled. Furthermore, the refusal to talk at Dunloy, where there was no such element, was a further public relations problem for the Order.

10. The Orange representatives indicated the lengths they were going to to find mediation. At one point Saulters spoke, a little wistfully, of the possibility of Hume and Trimble becoming involved in Garvaghy Road. There was a hope that Brid Rogers could develop her role. I tried to clarify whether the need for the umbrella of such mediation was aimed at making it possible for them to have some contact with MacCionnaith, or, in the alternative, something intended to enable the residents to dispense with MacCionnaith. As far as could be discerned, the thinking seemed to be in the latter direction.

11. There was a discussion over dinner on the more general issues of Anglo-Irish relations, conducted mainly by Senator Mooney with Rev. Mr. Kennaway and Mr. Kells. The message on one side was that supremacist thinking had had its day, and on the other that the aggressions of nationalism, and particularly Sinn Féin, had caused great injustice to unionism, and undermined a very workable situation. This competing parade of motes and beams produced no conversion on either side.

12. In the course of the exchange I was at pains on a number of occasions to pay tribute to Mr. Saulters' role, particularly at Harryville. Mr. Saulter was emphatic that he would "do Harryville every night" if it helped. He was at pains to stress his own background from a small village where Protestants were very much in a minority. He instanced various family anecdotes, to

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demonstrate, with some feeling, that he was not in any way a bigot. He explained also that he currently holds another (County Grand Master ?) function in the Order, as well as being Grand Master. He said he would relinquish one of these before the end of the year, but, coyly, said he had not yet decided which.

13. Overall, there was a clear demonstration that these particular Officers of the Order are anxious to avoid confrontation. They clearly see the '95 compromise as the way to go. (While the '95 approach was a reasonable compromise, the residents understood that part of that deal was that there would be no future parades on the Garvaghy Road. This has been denied by Ronnie Flanagan, and would clearly be a major stumbling block in building agreement around a reversal to the '95 compromise). Mr. Watson spoke appreciatively of the contacts he had earlier with Mr. Montgomery and showed himself willing, even anxious, to continue contacts which might defuse the situation.

Sean Ó hUiginn
6 May 1997

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