

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Report of Meeting with the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition and the Lower Ormeau Community Council in the Sycamore Room on 1 July 1997 at 4.30pm

In welcoming the residents the Taoiseach said he was conscious of the critical juncture that we were now at - in terms of parades and the wider ramifications for peace. He also acknowledged the pressure that was on the residents.

He said that he had met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in Belfast that day and discussed the parades issue briefly with her. He also met representatives of the Orange Order some weeks ago. It was a matter of regret that direct dialogue had not taken place.

The Taoiseach said he was conscious of the trauma that had affected the residents and he recognised the folly of forcing the march on the Garvaghy road. He also recognised the need for a breathing space. The Government would want to avoid a situation where anyone was humiliated.

He was glad that it was possible to arrange this meeting. He supported and advocated local accomodation and he expressed support for the efforts of the Secretary of State to reach accommodation. The Secretary of State thought that it was too early to write off those efforts. The Taoiseach believed that this Secretary of State had a better attitude and the public believed that she was doing a good job.

The Taoiseach said that he was glad that the residents participated in the proximity talks. It was wise for the residents to do everything they could to accommodate dialogue. He understood that there was some difficulty in arranging a meeting between the residents and the Secretary of State and he hoped that the meeting would take place. The Taoiseach would be meeting Prime Minister Blair on Thursday and he was anxious therefore to meet the residents beforehand. It would be important for him to be able to say that he had met both sides.

Brendán MacCionnaith for the residents said that proximity talks meant that there must be communication on both sides. This did not happen. Alastair Graham, John Steele and Ronnie Flanagan were present and these people had previously shown themselves to be in favour of a march. The residents gave a paper to the Secretary of State on Friday and the response from the Orange Order to this was silence. The talks broke down following this. The residents had exchanges with the Secretary of State - not proximity talks. At the beginning of the year Archbishop Eames had facilitated an exchange of documents with the Orange Order. At the end of February/early March the residents received an offer of a private, informal meeting from the Orange Order. They responded favourably to this offer but they had received no response since. The Hume/Saulters initiative had broken down. The residents believe that whoever was

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saboraging these talks was responsible. As to who was responsible, he recalled that some political careers had been built around Drumcree.

The former Chief Constable believed that there was no logical reason why the Orange Order could not go back the way they came. Last year the Chief Constable did not have the political backup and the British Government capitulated . Anyone advocating marching this year was giving in to Orange Order threats. The Orange Order was holding a gun to the head of the Nationalist community.

Last week at a meeting in the local community centre with youth leaders the residents had advocated restraint. They could not continue to advocate restraint if the police and army were used to force a march on the Garvaghy road.

The residents were committed to dialogue. There were six thousand people in the area and they were under constant pressure. The three principles behind their approach were peace, unity and publicity.

Gerard Rice said that this issue had turned the clock back. If there was a deal , the question was who will guarantee nationalist rights and the rights of Catholic people to live in peace. The message would be might is right.

The Taoiseach said that on the wider issue the Government were committed to finding an inclusive way forward. He had made the point last year that it was important that a solution be found earlier rather than later.

Gerard Rice said that they (in the Lower Ormeau Road) used both the Quakers and the Mediation Network to bring messages to the Orange Order. The Orange Order had never replied to any letter and refused to speak to residents. The residents were dedicated to non violence. The issue is not about personalities but about communities. People in the community had insisted on Brendán MacCionnaith being part of any residents delegation.

In response to questions from the Taoiseach, it was clarified that a meeting had never been offered to the Orange Order by the GRRC in which Brendán MacCionnaith would not be part of the residents delegation. The point was made that Mr Gracie of the Orange Order had met Billy Wright and Sean O'Callaghan. It would be wrong to bring this issue down to personalities. The Lower Ormeau Community Council in 1992 had a grandmother as their spokesperson and the Orange Order would not talk to her either.

This issue had ramifications for peace. Peace must be built around human rights. The residents must have the human right to be free of intimidation, have free movement and live in peace. The message would be clear to catholics and nationalists - that they are non citizens. This was an important juncture. If the message to the nationalist

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community was that you are on your own - you have no rights - this had ramifications for peace. There was a sense that intimidation had to be stood up to. The residents knew the cost to their communities.

The Taoiseach asked if there was any move at all on the Orange Order side. The residents replied that earlier in the year Robert Saulters had said that local lodges should become involved in dialogue. There was also the contact by Archbishop Eames.

The Garvaghy Road Residents expressed their disillusionment with the actions of Archbishop Eames last year. They believe they were duped by the Archbishop's actions in arranging a meeting on the morning when the march was forced down the Garvaghy Road.

In opposition Mo Mowlam had said that the status quo was not an option. Last year Drumcree exposed a sectarian monster. It did not damage community relations in Portadown. Community relations in Portadown were atrocious. The community were afraid and they needed the Irish Government to protect their human rights.

The Taoiseach asked the residents what they thought would happen.

Brendán MacCionnaith said that unless the Irish Government took a strong stand there would be road blocks on Thursday night followed by the erection of screens on Friday. The Garvaghy Road would become the biggest prison camp in Europe. If this was the case , who would guarantee the civil and religious liberty of the residents to get to their place of worship.

The Taoiseach asked if any compromise was possible.

The alternative route - to go back via the outward route was endorsed last year by the Chief Constable Hugh Annesley and Cardinal Daly. Brendán Mac Cionnaith said that the Orange march this year was not wanted on the road. The residents were totally united. In 1995 there was a 48 hour standoff and the residents allowed the Orange Order march. There was triumphalism after the march not just by the political leaders but by thousands of Orangemen. It was time that the Orange Order reciprocated the residents' gesture. There is a need for a breathing space. People had died because of Drumcree.

The Irish Government could help by sending observers. On the Ormeau road last year there was no violence because of the presence of observers. It would also be of great benefit if the British Government were to send observers. If not official observers at least observers should be allowed to come. Eamon Ó Cuiv had influence on the Ormeau Road and had a relationship with the community. It would be very useful if he could be nominated as an observer.

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There would either be a breathing space or violence from the security forces. 98% of the communities on the Lower Ormeau Road and the Garvaghy Road insisted that there would be no march. They wanted to be left in peace and the parades were turning their children towards sectarianism.

Fr.Eamonn Stack (Garvaghy Res.) said that if the Orange Order walked this year they would never talk. The residents were saying that they want to arrive at a situation where the Orange Order would be welcomed on the Garvaghy road. They were talking about a new vision and a new future. They wanted to find a way to facilitate the parade and they were sensitive to the needs of the Orange Order. The purpose of the residents festival this year was to demonstrate that the residents were a community with their own identity and not just individuals objecting to a parade .

The Taoiseach asked what message should he bring to the British Prime Minister from the residents.

BrendánMac Cionnaith responded that the community could not be convinced to accept the parade because of the wall of silence from the Orange Order. There was a need for observers who could be trusted to ensure that the situation did not spiral out of control. Ms. Paddy Kelly (Lower Ormeau) said that the community had to be given the breathing space it deserved. 8,000 plastic bullets were fired last year. "Ensure that plastic bullets are not used in Northern Ireland again." "Do not put 3,000 Orangemen on the Garvaghy Road".

Paul McGarry

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