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Confidential

Billy Wright and the LVF - Conversation with Brendan McAllister

20 August 1997

Brendan McAllister heads Mediation Network, a Belfast based organisation dedicated to improving cross community understanding through structured mediation. McAllister maintains a wide range of contacts to facilitate the work of the organisation and has shown considerable skill in maintaining his credibility with these contacts despite the pitfalls and traps which accompany attempts at compromise in Northern Ireland, most notably the parades issue in which McAllister has been involved since 1995.

As part of his efforts to maintain contacts with all the relevant players, McAllister arranged to meet Billy Wright, renegade mid-Ulster loyalist and leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), at the Maze on 11 August last. The following points of interest arose:

1. The LVF wing at the Maze was highly disciplined, spartan and regimented. McAllister was struck by the barrack-like atmosphere there. It was more militaristic than the IRA, UVF and UDA wings. He felt that this was a group out to prove itself and that its leader exuded energy, vigour and ambition. Wright was accompanied by five colleagues, only one of whom spoke besides himself. This was Alec Kerr, a former member of the South Belfast UDA. (McAllister has learned from a UDR officer that Kerr had served in the UDR - the officer remembered him as a loner but a good soldier.) McAllister believes that one of the other five may have been involved in the Greysteel massacre.

2. Wright addressed McAllister without introductions - he appeared to know of him and his activities. His remarks implied that he knew that McAllister had access to the Secretary of State and others inside and outside Northern Ireland, including the Government. (Indeed Wright claimed that he had had regular contact with a Government source prior to the change in administration here). He asked McAllister to convey the following to Dublin:

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- Articles 2 and 3 had to be revoked.
- loyalists were alarmed and were re-arming; the source of their alarm was the trend of recent political developments which ran contrary to the interests of unionists (e.g. the Joint Communiqué, the Joint Framework Document).
- the imperative was to end the fears of unionists.

3. McAllister asked whether it would be "a bad winter" i.e whether the LVF would engage in violence over the coming months. Wright replied in the affirmative and said that his members expected to be jailed for the actions they would undertake to register the alarm of loyalists. The other loyalist groups had gone soft, Wright claimed, and had been bought off. He claimed that the UVF did not exist anymore [as an organised movement] and derided the CLMC as a non-entity. [The attack by the UVF on the LVF bar on 20 August in Portadown is an ominous signal of very real rivalry; the LVF will undoubtedly wish to avenge this.] Wright said that there were now 29 LVF members in the wing and he was expecting another 20. As to membership outside prison, Wright gave no numbers but Kerr claimed that their membership stretched across Northern Ireland (pointing to a colleague from Derry and another from North Antrim among those present) and Wright indicated that most of the membership was rural.

4. Wright complained about the attitude of the prison authorities to the LVF and claimed that they were being discriminated against in terms of visits (venue and times) and access to handicrafts and computers. He predicted that, unless these issues were resolved, the LVF would take action. (The LVF subsequently destroyed their wing and began a campaign of intimidation against prison officers and their families; this has been called off pending talks.)

5. McAllister found Wright articulate, intelligent and charismatic. His personal magnetism was the source of the loyalty he generated rather than fear, McAllister believed. I asked whether there were any hints of religious fundamentalism. McAllister confirmed this and said that he thought at the time that "God is important to this man". (Loyalist killer turned pastor, Kenny McClinton, is Wright's spiritual mentor.) Had Wright mentioned

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McCrea? McAllister was unsure whether the name had cropped up but said that when he had asked Wright about who would articulate their views politically, Wright had replied that there were others to do that for him.

6. McAllister believes that the LVF threat has to be taken seriously. Wright has combined a potent mix - magnetism and leadership, a sense of purpose, idealism and probity, a cadre of disciplined and motivated followers with a proven capacity for sectarian violence and a philosophy which stridently mixes notions of territory, identity and religious fundamentalism. He and his followers see themselves as the custodians of a unionist integrity which has been lost sight of by the mainstream. McAllister believes that the LVF represents a new strain of militant loyalism which will want to register the fear of the unionist community in a time of political transition. He speculated that the most likely targets for LVF action would be Catholics who have come to the fore on the parades issue in rural areas.

Eamonn McKee
Security Section
21 August 1997

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