

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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cc: Mr O'Flynn

Mr. McKee (already ccd)

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15 September 1998 **No of pages including this one: 3**

To: **HQ**
For: **Secretary Gallagher**

From: **Belfast**
From: **Joint Secretary**

cc Mr Watkins, Mr Weeks, Mr Quinn, PS, Mr Lewis & L

Subj: **Portadown**

1. I have had conversations about the Portadown situation over the past few days with David Watkins, Brid Rodgers and David Armstrong, the editor of the Portadown Times (who was one of the BIA participants last weekend). The picture which they convey is not encouraging.

2. Watkins was gloomy about the prospects for a local accommodation in the wake of a discussion which he had with the Portadown Orangemen on the margins of a meeting they held last Wednesday. He described the discussion as "appalling" and Harold Gracey as particularly unyielding, despite the traumas of the previous weekend. While praising the mediating efforts of Peter Quinn, he could not see any immediate way forward.

3. Brid Rodgers (at whose request we have been raising a number of specific concerns about the situation) felt that any willingness on the part of the Garvaghy Road residents to be accommodating disappeared in the aftermath of the horrific violence instigated by Loyalists last Saturday week. The RUC officer who was injured on the Saturday evening is on a life-support machine and is expected to be seriously brain-damaged if he survives. (His wife is understood to be a cousin of Rev. William Bingham). Brid does not attach any great hopes to the mediation efforts involving Quinn and Roy Magee. She would like to see a new format created, possibly involving a specially created committee of Craigavon Borough Council (which would provide cover for direct dealings with Breandan MacCionnaith)

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4. David Armstrong told me over the weekend that he has never encountered as much fear and tension in Portadown as at present. Loyalist intimidation of Catholics has been continuing on a daily basis since the Drumcree stand-off in July. Because of the threat of Loyalist thuggery, many Catholic traders are unwilling to open their premises and a serious business slump in the town is looming. In letters to his paper, people from outside Portadown are saying that, following the events of the weekend before last, they will never set foot in the town again.

5. The meeting of the local Orangemen last Wednesday came about under pressure from David Trimble, who had warned them earlier in the day (in a meeting at Stormont) of the dire economic situation faced by Portadown for as long as the Drumcree confrontation continues and who pressed them to get back into the proximity talks with the residents. Pressure is also being applied by the Presbyterian Church and by business leaders. The general hope is that the recent violence may have a cathartic effect (rather like the Omagh aftermath), prompting the Orangemen to go for an understanding with the residents which would at least draw a line under the crisis for 1998.

7. Armstrong was sharply critical of the RUC's handling of the recent violence, blaming them for not anticipating last Saturday week that a number of "hoodlums" would break away from the main body of marchers and go on the rampage through the town.

8. He emphasised the capacity of the Portadown crisis to destabilise the entire Agreement. It must be resolved urgently. In his own view, this can only mean allowing an Orange parade (even in very small numbers) down the Garvaghy Road.

9. He warned that, if the Orange "cultural" demonstration scheduled for Saturday 26 Sepember went ahead, violence would result on a major scale. The venue planned for this event was Portadown Park, very close to the Garvaghy Road. It was expected that some 22,000 people would turn out, along with 350 bands. (Note: As you will have seen, this event has now been postponed).

10. We have been highlighting to the British the scale of nationalist apprehension in Portadown and the potential for serious sectarian violence, which may not be confined to Portadown, unless a settlement is found very soon. We have asked them to give us their assessment of the situation and to indicate the steps they are taking to resolve

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it. A meeting for this purpose with David Watkins and Stephen Leach (the two officials most closely involved) has been arranged for Thursday afternoon.

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