

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2021/52/748
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pl. pa. 300. 628

Confidential

Briefing on Parades Commission

23 February 1998

1. Stephen Leach came to the Secretariat today to brief us on the new members of the Parades Commission (due to be announced at a press conference by the Secretary of State tomorrow). Peter Bell and Jackie McGimpsey from the British side of the Secretariat were also present. Present on our side were David Donoghue, Steve Magner, Kieran Dowling and the undersigned.

SUMMARY

2. - **Leach** informed us that the Secretary of State had reappointed Alastair Graham (Chairman), David Hewitt and Frank Guckian to the Parades Commission. Berna McIvor had asked to be relieved of her duties for personal reasons. In addition, Tommy Cheevers, Glen Barr, Roseanne McCormack and Aidan Canavan had been appointed as new members.

- These appointments would be disclosed by the Secretary of State at a press conference the following day at which she would formally launch the new parades mechanisms (the Parades Bill received Royal Assent last week).

- **Leach** provided details of the background of each new member (see below).

- While accepting the need to strike a balance in terms of community representation on the Commission, we expressed concern that the appointment of an ex-UDA man (Barr) and a member of the Apprentice Boys (Cheevers, who will step down as an office holder, while remaining a member of the organisation) would undermine the credibility and independence of the Commission in nationalist eyes. We maintained that a member of one of the residents' groups

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should have been appointed as a balance to Cheevers.

- We pointed out that the two new 'nationalist' members, while capable individuals, would not have the same credibility for nationalists on the parades issue as Cheevers and Barr would have for unionists. Indeed, the fact that Roseanne McCormack , one of the supposed 'nationalist' members, had served on PANI for six years, would further increase nationalist unease.

- **Leach** advised that the Parades Commission still intended to issue its preliminary view of the marching season at the end of March or early April. While no determinations would be made at that stage (under the law, determinations could not be issued this far in advance of a march), the Commission's initial thinking on how the 7 or 8 most contentious parades should be handled would be made known.

DETAIL

3. Pointing out that the Parades Bill had received Royal assent last week, **Leach** said that the Secretary of State had appointed four new members to the Parades Commission and would make an announcement on the matter the following day (11.30am). She would also avail of the opportunity to formally launch the new parades mechanisms.

4. **Leach** said that the Secretary of State had decided to reappoint Alastair Graham (Chairman), David Hewitt and Frank Guckian. Berna McIvor had asked to be relieved of her duties for personal reasons. In addition, Glen Barr, Tommy Cheevers, Roseanne McCormack and Aidan Canavan had been appointed as new members.

5. Taking each of the new members in turn, **Leach** said that Glen Barr clearly needed no introduction. Apart from his obvious credibility within loyalist circles, he also came with considerable cross-community pedigree having served on the Community Relations Council. He was also active on cross-border matters (ie. with Paddy Harte on

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commemoration monuments). Despite his loyalist background, Barr was very capable of appreciating both sides' perspective on the parades issue. He had given a commitment to accept any determination by the Parades Commission on the basis of collective responsibility.

6. **Donoghue** said that while he accepted the logic of appointing an individual with considerable credibility among loyalists, Barr's involvement with the UDA in the 1970s would present problems for many nationalists. While he had come to be identified with cross-community work over the past decade, he remained a sinister figure for many nationalists and would strike many as a dubious replacement for Roy Magee (who recently resigned from the Commission).

7. Turning to the next new member, **Leach** said that Tommy Cheevers was a well known member of the Apprentice Boys in the Lower Ormeau area. While his appointment required him to resign as an office holder within that organisation, he would continue as a member. Cheevers had been a distinctively constructive figure in seeking to defuse tensions over parades in the Lower Ormeau area and had been very helpful to the Commission in a series of private discussions. Indeed, he was one of the very few members of the Loyal Orders to offer advice on the Commission's recently published Code of Conduct and Code of Practice. He genuinely wished to make a positive contribution to the parades issue in a manner that would benefit the whole community.

8. While acknowledging the positive contribution made by Cheevers, on occasion, over recent marching seasons, **Donoghue** maintained that his continued membership of the Apprentice Boys was problematic both in terms of building nationalist confidence in the Commission and in maintaining the latter's perceived independence. How would the Secretary of State respond to the assertion that Cheevers should resign as a member of the Apprentice Boys in order to maintain the independence of the Commission?

9. **Leach** said he recognised that Cheevers' appointment might cause some controversy. A decision on his part to leave the Apprentice Boys would do little to remove the

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perception of him being closely identified with that organisation. He added, however, that, unlike the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys were not an oath bound organisation and, consequently, Cheevers would not be under any obligation to follow its line. Cheevers was "a force for good" with a lot of cross-community links in the Lower Ormeau area. There was also a strong argument for including on the new Commission an individual with a direct insight into the parades issue.

10. **Dowling** inquired if the British side had considered appointing a member of one of residents' groups as a balance to Cheevers. Moreover, the appointment of an ex-UDA member and a member of the Apprentice Boys was something that would hardly inspire nationalist confidence in the Commission's impartiality.

11. In reply, **Leach** said the British Government had examined the possibility of appointing a member from one of the residents' groups. However, it had not proved possible to locate a "Cheevers' type person".

12. **Leach** suggested that the two new members with a nationalist background, Roseanne McCormack and Aidan Canavan, would provide the necessary balance. Describing McCormack as a "class act", he said she was a young (33 year old) barrister who had provided a moderate but very firm nationalist voice during her six year membership of PANI. Originally from Keady, she now lived in Belfast.

13. **Leach** said that Aidan Canavan (whom he described as very able and a very good communicator) was a solicitor by profession who had once served as President of the Law Society. He had also been involved in a number of cross-community initiatives.

14. **Donoghue** said that, while the two 'nationalist' members were no doubt able individuals, they did not carry the same credibility and resonance for nationalists on the parades issue as Cheevers and Barr would for unionists. **Leach** remarked that the Loyal Orders regarded the new parades mechanisms as a real blow and were threatening to boycott the Commission altogether. In choosing the new members, the Secretary of State had felt the

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need to address this confidence deficit and, consequently, the new unionist members were slightly more "high voltage".

15. **Donoghue** pointed out that after last year's experience, nationalists had little faith in the Parades Commission and its Chairman, Alastair Graham. The perceived independence of the Commission would be further undermined by the inclusion of a member of the Apprentice Boys. The inclusion of a credible individual from one of the residents' groups would have helped show the relevance of the Commission to nationalists directly affected by contentious marches. **Dowling** remarked that given the nationalist community's dissatisfaction with PANI, Roseanne McCormack's six year membership of that body would do nothing to reassure them.

16. In terms of the overall balance of the Commission, **Leach** said that David Hewitt, though considered a unionist, was not regarded as a friend by the Loyal Orders.

17. Recalling discussions on the matter at a briefing on 4 February, **Donoghue** asked how the Secretary of State intended to respond to any PQs on whether or not nominations for the new appointments had been sought from the Irish Government. In reply, **Leach** said that this problem would be dealt with whenever it arose. He now accepted that our nominations had been sought and that Angela Hegarty and John Larkin had been very strong candidates. The drafting of a reply to a PQ on the matter would be done in consultation with us.

18. **Dowling** asked if the British Government had encountered any difficulty in persuading individuals to put themselves forward for the Commission and if Alistair Graham had been involved in the selection procedure. He also asked if either of our nominations had been approached. In reply, **Leach** said that many prospective candidates had not been put off by the 'poison chalice' nature of the position, but rather by the time demands placed on the Commission's members. Quality candidates were often unable to spare the required time. Alistair Graham had been involved indirectly in the selection procedure and had met with several of the candidates, including the four successful ones.

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Leach indicated that, while very serious consideration had been given to Angela Hegarty's nomination, neither she nor Larkin had been directly contacted.

19. In reply to **Donoghue**, **Leach** said the Parades Commission still intended to issue an overall preliminary view of the marching season at the end of March or early April. While no determinations would be made at that stage (under the law determinations could not be issued this far in advance of a march), the Commission's initial thinking on how the 7 or 8 most contentious parades should be handled would be made known. It was hoped that the presentation of a balanced and fair overall package would receive the support of moderate opinion throughout Northern Ireland.

Joe Hackett

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