

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Proximity Talks - Orange Order, Garvaghy Residents

Armagh, 21 July 1998

The talks reconvened at 6.30pm with the intention of breaking by 10.00pm. Jonathan Powell chaired them and was assisted by the facilitators - Peter Quinn and Rev. Magee. Robert Crawford and Nick Perry were the main NIO officials. The residents were represented by Breandán MacCionnaith, Rosemary Nelson, Catriona Ruane (non-SF)[1], Joe Duffy, Joanna, Orla, Pauline and Patsy. The Government was represented by the undersigned.

The following are the main sequence of events:

1. The attitude of Powell and Crawford was brisk and business-like, in contrast to the patient and exploratory approach of previous meetings. It was evident from our first conversations that they did not expect much to come of the evening. (Indeed after the first meetings with the delegations, Powell asked to be booked on an early flight.) Without significant movement from either side, Powell indicated he would quickly wrap things up and offer a press line that both sides would embark on further consultations and resume when some progress had been registered. That in fact is what happened.

2. At the first meeting with the residents, Powell was told by MacCionnaith that they had had consultations with their community and the strong feeling was that they needed the full breathing space of one year. Other security related issues were addressed - the lack of consultation about the de-escalation of the security presence in Drumcree, the attempts by loyalist on the previous evening to get onto the Garvaghy Road and so on.

3. Following his meeting with the Orangemen, Powell returned to the residents - quipping

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[1]Non Sinn Féin (or NSF) are a cadre of individuals who are not card-carrying members of Sinn Féin but operate as part of their organisation using official deniability. NSF includes leading members of resident organisations, Cearta and community/economic/social/cultural organisations. Ruane's expertise - besides a belaboured sincerity - is in managing festivals in Belfast. Her role in the Garvaghy delegation is to act as its secretary, draft statements and to advise on the details of any proposed social and economic programmes.

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that it looked like we would meet the 10.00pm deadline - to say that the Order was prepared to engage in the Civic Forum and to discuss parades in that body with the residents (through a chair) but only on the condition of a parade this year and arrangements for all future years. MacCionnaith insisted that discussions about parades between the Orange Order and the residents should be in a parallel mechanism rather than in the civic forum. Powell asked the residents if they could offer some incentive to the Orange Order to engage in talks through a chair. He complemented the approach of the Lower Ormeau Road residents in accepting a parade on 13 July with only a token protest. This prompted an acrimonious response from MacCionnaith, Duffy and Joanna who cited the differences between the two situations, the fact that the Drumcree parade was a law and order issue between the Orange Order and the British Government, that the community was entitled as of right to a social and economic programme. Powell offered two approaches - to consider an incentive to the Orange or to attempt to work on an agreed text.

4. From this point, it was evident that a managed break was the only outcome since MacCionnaith's assertion that the community were insisting on a year's breathing space was met with equal Orange insistence that everything was dependent on a parade this year and in future years. The residents set about drafting a press statement, anticipating that there would be jockeying with the Orange Order about culpability for the deadlock. Peter Quinn joined the residents to review what had transpired over the talks as whole.

5. In conversation as we parted, Peter Quinn said that in one of the meetings with the Orange, Dawson (?) had blurted out that they were going to use the Drumcree standoff within the Assembly to bring Trimble down. Quinn noticed at the time that Denis Watson was noticeably uncomfortable with this blunt revelation. I said that this had been an ongoing concern for Dublin throughout the parades crisis, though I added that David Thompson (Trimble's local agent) had said to me that Trimble was not interested in saving the Orangemen from the hole they had found themselves in. [Comment: while Trimble's attitude might be predicated on simple distain for his enemy's predicament, he may seek to make a virtue of this difficulty to ease the pressure for delivery on the terms

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of the Good Friday Agreement - a fear voiced to me by republican sources.] Quinn concluded by speculating that the British Government would slow down delivery on any social and economic package in light of the deadlock. I agreed that may be their instinct, though that attitude would simply replicate the failed patterns of the past.

6. As the talks looked doomed to deadlock, Powell and I agreed that both sides had not had sufficient time to develop their thinking beyond the attitudes that had marked their respective approaches to Drumcree. I offered the view that bilaterals should continue between the British Government and local parties on a social and economic package, and on a basis which allowed for SDLP participation and, with it, access to the SDLP electorate in the Garvaghy area (sight of which has been lost lately). Those two essential ingredients would be crucial to an eventual breakthrough on the question of parades. Powell appeared to assent, mentioning the need for our side to talk to the NIO's Tony McCusker asap. His mind, however, was clearly on departure from a difficult and at times harsh round of talks in which human agency seemed to be perpetually defeated by inexorable circumstances and unyielding attitudes.

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22 July 1998

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