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Drumcree - NIO/Downing Street's Latest Initiative

Meeting with Frank Blair, Stormont House, 16 February 1999

The NIO organised a briefing and dinner on behalf of Frank Blair at Stormont House to introduce him to the Drumcree issue and, as it were, sell him to those connected to the residents and the Portadown Orange. Mr. Blair works with the Scottish mediation service ACAS. He is the centre-piece of the latest initiative (detailed below) by the NIO and Downing Street to resolve the issue of the Drumcree parade.

The session at Stormont House was led by the head of security at the NIO, David Watkins; Tony McCusker, Stephen Leach and Susan Scholefeld also of the NIO (neither of the latter made much by way of contribution though Scholefeld took copious notes over the four hours of discussions); facilitators Peter Quinn (present for the briefing only) and Rev. Roy Magee: Chris Gibson (CBI NI) in his capacity as negotiating counsellor for the Orange; Ian Milne, who works with Gibson and has extensive local contacts in Portadown.

The following are the main points of interest which arose over the course of the evening.

1. Watkins introduced Blair to the group only hesitating about what to call the undersigned - I lightly offered "unprofessional advisor" - given my anomalous position (see below). He said that the NIO had recognised the deficiencies in the proximity talks even before the December session at Nutts Corner. Mr. Blair was being brought in as a professional mediator but, Watkins emphasised, this was not at the behest or suggestion of the Orange Order. The process would be remain very much under the patronage of Downing Street.

2. Blair outlined what he proposed by way of a mediated process between both sides, following traditional mediation techniques (his outline and time frame of this is attached). He would act as a prompter to elicit from both sides their view of the items which should be on the agenda. These would be organised into themes and hopefully merged into one list. He would then begin to get both sides to agree to prioritise, prompting them with

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the question "please outline the factors that should be taken into account in reaching a lasting settlement/agreement on the Drumcree Parade and related issues." He emphasised that he did not have the answer, that both sides needed to have ownership of the process and that he was committed to the challenge of finding a resolution (though he noted that ACAS itself were hesitant about association with the issue).

3. In response, Gibson and Magee sought clarification on the precise definition of those involved, with Milne offering that if the undersigned's position was made known to the Orange side they might walk out. Some inconclusive discussion followed on this. Blair set out two guidelines - that there should be no passengers and that the most vociferous on both sides should be included. However, he remained open to local advice and nuance on who should be involved. (Later and privately, I agreed with Leach that we would play this aspect very discretely in the first instance on the basis that it might only arise later when joint talks were convened and at which point we might seek cover in the prior arrangements - in short, not make an issue of it if at all possible.) All agreed on the need to keep the process under the aegis of government. Rev. Magee said that Ingram had no credit with the Orange given his meeting with the Loughgall relatives. Watkins and his team agreed that the covering letter for this initiative would come from Prime Minister Blair.

4. Peter Quinn - with his irresistable mix of charm, candour and common sense - said that he foresaw an immediate problem in that both sides would offer completely different agendas. However, he wished the process well and hoped it would work. He said that at Nutts Corner, the Orange had been offered a great deal and had failed to either see or seize it (his point being that their inability to negotiated should not be underestimated). The residents had shown exceptional skill in the talks in terms of timing their offers. He and Gibson agreed with my point that both sides were an inverted triangle in terms of authority and that the scope for leadership was severely constrained. Blair was tempted to take a bet that the issues identified on both sides would actually be similar. Quinn hoped Blair was right, believed he was wrong, but reiterated his support for the initiative.

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5. I picked up the theme that parades were a deeply entrenched ritual whose yearly outcome was measured by the past. The participants in any mediative process would tend to approach the talks process bearing this in mind and offering views designed to counter any possible anticipated advantages by the other side. Moreover, the local depth of feeling was particularly intense and I outlined the impact of Robert Hamil's death on relations in the town. Blair said that such factors would not be untypical in dispute resolution. I wondered whether the paradigm was less a dispute and more a football match - neither side was interested in a negotiated draw and the losing side wasn't going to leave the pitch for fear of their supporter's rage. 1999 was a rematch after the Orange shock of losing in 1998 (though sections of the Orange still refused to admit defeat). He took the badinage in good spirit. I said that while Downing Street had failed to resolve the issue in 1998, the Secretary of State in 1997, the Church leaders in 1996 and Mediation Network in 1995, his initiative appeared at least to have the advantage of being well structured and thought out. Chris Gibson nodded sagely while these exchanges occurred and seemed content, even amused, as I tried to forewarn Blair of the challenges ahead. Gibson offered the comforting thought that the circumstances of each parade were different. Blair remained commendably resilient and modest.

6. The close of the evening's discussions was taken up by Watkins piecing together the presentation, the timing of the package and other logistical matters. I said that timing should be secondary to achieving engagement with both sides and cautioned against the imperiousness of the suggested text, recommending rather a letter of commendation from the Prime Minister for Frank Blair and his process. Watkins was receptive to this and accepted suggested text. Gibson and Milne agreed to speak to contacts in the Orange Order at Grand Lodge level (indicating in the process some skepticism about Denis Watson's real interests). Watkins would look for supportive comments or positioning from key political players. He agreed that any public statements by the Governments should be low-key. The intention was still to have Frank Blair meet the groups as soon as possible (even by Friday, 19 February). The discussion closed inconclusively on possible venues for resumed talks - it was agreed to try and drop "proximity" and use "talks process" instead in any public statements.

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Comment

7. Frank Blair emerged as able, understated, committed (even enthusiastic) and engaging. His Scottish lilt should prove disarming to both sides, presuming they agree to meet him. He is approaching the issue with professionalism and declines to see the issue as anything other than a dispute amenable to resolution by tried and tested means. He resisted any notion that he had heard over the course of the evening anything particularly novel about the Drumcree issue. Indeed, he announces his disinterest - even ignorance - as a boon, though more seasoned observers like Magree, Gibson and Quinn seemed to see it as more naiveté and wondered whether it was all that much of an advantage. The NIO team around him are trying hard to be (or appear to be) sensitive, balanced, open and non-partisan. The remaining question is whether both the residents and the Portadown Orange are prepared to engage in, and stick with, the process that Blair hopes to outline them.

Eamonn McKee
Security Section
17 February 1999

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IN CONFIDENCE

Week of 1 March

Substantive discussions in proximity format on agreed agenda.

Venue: SX3 Centre, Nutts Corner; or Hillsborough Castle; or [one other possible venue being investigated].

Groundrules: For agreement, but assume similar to previous rounds of talks? eg

- no direct contact between two sides, save by agreement;
- FB and facilitators move between two sides in search of an accommodation;
- each delegation to consist of no more than six participants. Neither side to have veto on composition of other;
- no contact with media while process ongoing;
- Government team to be present to be referred to as required by FB/facilitators.

Objective: to reach agreed accommodation on future of Drumcree parade and related issues.

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The Way Ahead

Workshops: Portadown W/c 22 February 1999

Requirements:

2 flipchart stands

3 sets of flipchart pens

6 boxes of " 3M Post-it Meeting Charts" [size 63.5 / 77.47cm]

A supply of blank name cards for participants

OHP/ screen/ pens/ transparencies

Supply of paper and pens for participants

Water/ juice for tables

Catering:

Tea/ coffee on arrival

Lunch [on premises]

Tea/ coffee [afternoon break]

Room:

To seat 20 in comfort

U shape with tables

Wall space at a premium - large volume of newsprint to be displayed.

At close of each event [but not on premises] typist available to prepare report: reproduction facilities to produce/ bind report

Question:

Please outline the factors that should be taken into account in reaching a lasting settlement/ agreement on the Drumcree Parade and related issues.

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Participants:

Maximum of 20 at each workshop

All interested parties within each broad group represented to ensure a diagonal slice views and opinion

Key influencers/ decision makers take part

Meetings:

9.30 to 4.00pm

Round 1 to establish factors

Round 2, establish themes and group issues

Round 3, prioritise issues in each group.

Content of report:

Introduction

Day 1 information

Day 2 information

Summary of priorities from both days

Distribution of report:

To all participants?

To negotiating teams?

Confidentiality/ press?

Sequence of workshops:

If 1 each - which group is first?

If two each - which group is first?

- Are they run with the same party on consecutive days?

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