

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Meeting with the Apprentice Boys of Derry

1. As a follow-up to Minister Andrew's meeting with the Apprentice Boys of Derry, Gerry Staunton and the undersigned met with Alastair Simpson, Governor of the Apprentice Boys and its General Secretary Willie Moore. The meeting took place in Jack Allen's house in the Waterside. Allen is a well respected senior figure in the Ulster Unionist Party and an ally of David Trimble. He was present at the meeting.

2. Simpson said that Minister Andrew's visit to the Apprentice Boys Headquarters in the Memorial Hall in the Fountain are, on 25 February 1999, had been an historic event. He praised the Minister's visit to Derry which he described as very even handed. It was good to see a Southern Minister honour the Protestant tradition by visiting Saint Columb's Cathedral and the Fountain area, as well as Nationalist areas.

3. He said that there had been some criticism internally of the visit but the majority of the Apprentice Boys supported it as evidence of a more open policy. Moore said that the Apprentice Boys branches in the Republic, especially in Donegal, had been very supportive. The opposition within the organisation came from the fundamentalist DUP wing "who opposed everything".

4. Simpson said that the Minister had been very sensitive in his dealings with the press after the visit to the memorial hall and this was greatly appreciated.

5. Both Moore and Simpson reiterated their anxiety to avoid trouble with the Apprentice Boys march on the city walls in August. They said that they were the most moderate of the Loyal Orders, prepared to meet and discuss any difficulties with all groups. However, they were scorned for their moderation by some other Loyalist groups who pointed to their lack of success as evidence of the futility of engaging in dialogue with

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local resident groups.

6. Loyalism and Protestantism was part of the culture of Derry and they had every right to express their identity. They needed the cooperation of the majority community in Derry to do so peacefully and they were actively seeking to enlist it. They mentioned the support they had received from Bishop Hegarty, the Catholic Bishop, as being particularly important.

7. As a means of depoliticising the situation, the Apprentice Boys have initiated a week long festival preceding their August march. This festival will be cross-community and cross-border in nature. A wide variety of groups will be invited to participate. The idea is to turn the celebration of the relief of Derry into a "Mardi-Gras" type event. The festival will be called the Maiden City Festival. The siege of Derry was the biggest historical event in the city's past and they believe that everybody can commemorate it, regardless of community background. In this context, they also mentioned that they would hold a St. Patrick's Day commemoration event next year.

8. The Apprentice Boys recalled Minister Andrews positive response to their festival ideas and asked whether it would be possible to obtain a grant of £10,000 approx. From the Irish Government for the Festival. We supplied them with the appropriate application form and reiterated the Minister's favourable initial response. Their request for assistance is a radical departure from past practice when the Apprentice Boys refused substantial funding from the International Fund, describing it as "blood money".

9. During the discussions, both Simpson and Moore indicated their personal support for John Hume's initiative to break the impasse over decommissioning. They questioned Allen on whether it would be possible for the UUP to back it. Allen replied that David Trimble needed some actual decommissioning before he would move into an Executive with Sinn Féin, but stressed that his party had not taken a formal position on the issue.

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10. The meeting was held in a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere. It was clear throughout the discussions that the Church of Ireland plays a very important part in the life of Protestants living in the Fountain area. In this regard, they mentioned the local community's difficulties with Bishop Mehaffey's presence at Derry City football matches on Sundays.

11. During separate discussions with Allen, he mentioned the UUP's fear of a poor election result in the forthcoming European elections. He said that there is a lot of anger in the party about the role John Taylor has played in leaking information about Jim Nicholson's extra marital affair. Taylor still blames Nicholson for his own premature departure from the European Parliament.

12. Allen said that there was a lot of jittery men in the UUP at present. He mentioned Reg Empey in particular. There was a loss of confidence in the UUP after Hillsborough and the growing realisation that Sinn Féin had become much more hardline on decommissioning. The outlook was not good and he repeated that Trimble needed "something" on this matter to survive. In a curious final question he asked if there was any possibility of an IRA decommissioning gesture before the end of the year.

Ray Bassett
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