

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Secret

Sec Gallagher

Conversation with Séamus Mallon, Stormont, 21 September 1999

1. I met Séamus Mallon at his office in Stormont on 21 September for a general discussion. He is refreshed after a lengthy Summer break, following his resignation in July as Deputy First Minister Designate, and is in generally good spirits. The passage of time, and the contacts he has had over the Summer (including a mailbag of over 3,500 letters), have served to convince him further of the rightness of his decision to resign. I should also add that, while considerably less than it was in the immediate aftermath of 15 July, there remains a residual disappointment on Mallon's part that the two Governments did not insist at the time on the resignation of David Trimble also. He understands the nature of the circumstances that obtained, and the unprecedented terrain everybody was in, but he continues to feel that Trimble's holding on to office is in contravention of the spirit if not the letter of the Agreement.

State of Opinion within Nationalist Community

2. Mallon believes that the events of the last few months - and indeed in the wider post-Good Friday period - have perceptibly altered the mood within what he calls "political nationalism". He cited comments made to him at the ordination last Sunday of Rev. John McAreavy as the new Bishop of Dromore as a good barometer of that mood. He spoke to a large number of those present at what he felt was a classic "conservative Catholic" occasion, with several members of the Hierarchy in attendance. The message privately to him from all to whom he spoke was the same:-

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- Deep anger at unionism/Trimble for what is seen as the frittering away over the last 18 months of the opportunity represented by the Agreement;

- A view that Sinn Féin did move in July, but that this too was "spurned" by the UUP;

- An overwhelming sense now that the primacy of blame for the non-implementation of the Agreement lay with the unionists;

- A consequent shift in the attitude to decommissioning; whereas most Catholics did not see decommissioning as critical, they had considered that "something should be done about it to get it out of the way", so that the Agreement could proceed. Now, however, they were coming to the view that decommissioning, if it happened, would simply be "pocketed" and replaced by a new demand on the part of unionism. Consequently, there was a falling off in support among Catholics for a pre-emptive gesture on decommissioning (this is reflected also in recent opinion polls);

- Strong support for Mallon personally in his decision to resign. This is couched in terms of defiance - "you were dead right to do what you did; they must never be allowed to walk over us again". By the same token, Trimble's decision to remain in office was described to Mallon by one normally mild-spoken Bishop as an "obscenity"!

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Mallon Guarantee

3. Mallon has been reflecting further on the implications of these developments. One consequence is that he personally is definitely convinced that there are now no circumstances, short of a breakdown in the ceasefire, in which the SDLP could agree to move ahead in an Executive without Sinn Féin. [To that extent, the "Mallon Guarantee" - that if there were no decommissioning by May 2,000, the SDLP would, in effect, support the expulsion of Sinn Féin - is off the table.] This is a significant shift on Mallon's part. Part of the reason for it is an increasing sense on his part, contrary to doubts he had harboured previously, that the republican war is indeed over. He, like us, has noted as significant that over recent months, for instance, Sinn Féin spokespersons no longer talk in terms of a failure to break the political impasse as having automatic consequences for the ceasefire - rather they stress the need in those circumstances for the two Governments to press on with the other elements of the Agreement. Mallon believes that this view (that the war is, in effect, over) is increasingly widely shared in the broader nationalist community and is feeding into the overall "mood" in that community described above.

Mitchell Review

4. Mallon is approaching the Review in a positive frame. Mitchell has told us that he is impressed with the statesmanlike and constructive tone that Mallon has struck - for instance in the encounter between the UUP and the SDLP this week. Despite the deep anger that Mallon personally feels towards Trimble about his handling of the last year, he is prepared to take a more conciliatory public stance in order to give the Mitchell process every chance (this was in evidence on Wednesday night also in his positive remarks about Trimble in the BBC programme "Straight Up").

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5. Privately, Mallon's hunch is that, despite the enormous obstacles, a breakthrough remains possible. He is convinced that, notwithstanding the hard line being articulated by the UUP leadership, there remains a deep well of support within the broader unionist community for the Agreement. He told me that roughly 50% of the 3,500 letters he received after his resignation came from unionists. Practically all were supportive. The vast majority also used their names and addresses - Mallon sees that as a significant departure from past traditions of reticence in this regard. He is convinced that if a package could be constructed which the parties were to sell positively, there would be solid support for it from a majority of unionists.

Own Future Plans

6. Mallon has taken no definitive decisions on his own future plans, and, in particular, as to whether he would return to the post of Deputy First Minister, should there be a breakthrough. Our sense is that he is now more positively disposed towards returning than he was in the immediate aftermath of his resignation. What is clear is that he would drive a hard bargain with Trimble about the terms of any return - he would countenance no going back to the trend that Trimble had previously been evolving of an increasingly stand-alone, "Prime Ministerial" approach to the Office of First Minister. Mallon would require a very tight "Code of Conduct" in any new arrangement in that regard.

Patten

7. Mallon was deeply pleased with the Patten Report and sees it as being of profound significance, both in terms of policing and of its impact on wider

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politics. As you know, he also regards it as something of a personal moment of truth after decades of difficult struggle with the issue. In practical terms, he believes that the Report meets all the needs required of it under the Agreement. He also believes that the worst is over in terms of unionist reaction and that the constructive approach to the Report of Ronnie Flanagan has seriously curtailed the space within which unionists could launch a realistic attack. Mallon has to be cautious to a degree in terms of how he manages the issue of Catholic support for a new policing service, but he is seeking to be as forward as he can, subject to the constraints that he has to operate under. He has a group in the party looking at the Report in detail. As you know, a meeting has been arranged for next week between Gary Ansbro's side and this group on the matter.

DJC

T. O'Connor

24 September 1999

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