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W. Kirkwood

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Summary of Discussion with Reg Empey, Bangor, 5 October 1999

1. Reg Empey - whom I have known for many years - and I had dinner together near Bangor on Tuesday evening.

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2. Empey confirmed that the UUP Assembly party review session in Glasgow had gone well. The Assembly party was fairly firmly behind Trimble and, given the right package, the great majority would support him. The problem was that, given the almost certain legal need for the Assembly to re-elect Trimble and Mallon to their First and Deputy posts, and the consequent requirement for a majority of unionist Assembly members, Trimble would effectively require the support of all his UUP colleagues. Empey did mention that one or two anti-Agreement unionists have privately hinted at a willingness to assist, through possibly abstaining or staying away (some time ago we had a similar indication, but it must be questionable if it can be relied upon). In any event, Trimble's room for manoeuvre is clearly limited.

3. Empey emphasised that Trimble therefore needed the kind of public certainty about decommissioning which could be sold both to the Assembly party and to the wider UUP constituency (he mentioned that the hundred-plus Executive was scheduled to meet next on 29 October).

4. Despite the difficult circumstances, Trimble was determined to give the process "one final go". The UUP leadership knew that this was the final chance. If the institutions were not established quickly, they could not sustain their position. Interestingly, Empey added that, while Adams and McGuinness would also suffer somewhat, the SDLP probably had most of all to lose from failure, and possibly the most to gain - their very survival as a party in the medium term - from being part of an Executive.

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5. In pursuit of his determination to try to find an accommodation, Trimble has actively been sensitising the party to what is required, and also taking on the anti-Agreement unionists, as we would have seen from the UUP Youth Conference.

6. Despite Trimble's lack of room for manoeuvre, he would be prepared to break an approach down into different elements, if this were helpful. While Empey was understandably loath to spell out their detailed thinking on this, the clear sense was that the UUP were prepared to go into an Executive in advance of decommissioning if they were assured that, in a sequencing process, it would happen reasonably quickly down the road. In saying this, Empey did not demur from my spelling out the reality that decommissioning would have to be a voluntary act.

7. Empey's essential point was that, whatever the process or its packaging, Trimble, to survive politically, would have to be able to say to his party that in his clear judgement decommissioning was going to take place by a certain date. Or, as Ken Maginnis put it to me last Saturday, in much the same context, any commitment would have to be real and deliverable.

8. Finally, Empey recalled (with some irony, given that this was the week of the Conservative Party Conference) that the decommissioning requirement had originally been crystallised not by the UUP but by Sir Patrick Mayhew: but inevitably, once it had become an issue, the UUP had become obliged to run with it.

Dermot Gallagher
8 October 1999

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