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AN RÚNAÍOCHT IDIR-RIALTASACH NA BREATAINE-NA hEIREANN BÉAL FEIRSTE

BRITISH-IRISH INTERGOVERNMENTAL SECRETARIAT BELFAST

Confidential

Meeting with Duncan Shipley-Dalton, UUP (30 May 2000)

1 I had lunch yesterday with Assembly Member Duncan Shipley-Dalton. He is a strong supporter of his party leader, David Trimble, and is identified very closely with the liberal wing of the Ulster Unionist Party. He is originally from the Isle of Wight where he recalled how he joined his local Tory party at the age of 15. After graduating in law from Essex University he served with the Royal Irish Regiment for some years. He then took a job as a civil servant with the Police Authority of Northern Ireland some eight years ago. He was elected as a member of the Assembly for the Newtownabbey area of South Antrim/ North Belfast in 1998. He said his hat was still in the ring for the forthcoming South Antrim by-election which he expected would be a bruising contest, initially between the pro- and anti-Agreement elements within the Ulster Unionist Party and then against the already nominated DUP candidate, William McCrea. To my surprise, he indicated that he had no family connections whatsoever with any part of Ireland.

Stormont Assembly

2. The conversation naturally focused on the prospects for the restored Assembly which is due to meet again on Monday of next week. He said his first worry was that the DUP would probably manage to secure the thirty votes required to table an exclusion motion against Sinn Féin. This would present the UUP - following a debate in which they would be the main target of the DUP's invective - with the dilemma of voting either for or against the motion (the

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motion would fail in any event since it would clearly not attract cross-community support). He believed the best option for his party would be to abstain on the motion although there would undoubtedly be some hardliners who might be tempted to support the DUP position. He admitted that opposing the motion would be the politically correct line to adopt but that this would probably be too much for most of his party colleagues to swallow.

UUP/SDLP Relations

3. I raised the question of why the perception existed that the two mainstream parties in the Assembly - the UUP and SDLP - had so far been less than successful in stamping their authority on the Assembly and on ensuring that their own agenda, and not that of the smaller parties, predominated. He suggested that a lot of this could be blamed on the poor relations between the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. He recognised that David Trimble could at times be a crusty character who found no difficulty in making acerbic comments at the most unfortunate moments. Nevertheless, Trimble was basically an honourable and sincere individual who could be relied upon to act in an honest manner. He felt that Seamus Mallon would simply have to work on building up a more trusting relationship with the First Minister. [On the other hand, he indicated that things would have been a lot worse if John Hume had been appointed as Deputy First Minister. He said that nationalists seemed to have no idea how much of a "hate figure" John Hume was to the unionist community. Indeed he blamed Ian Paisley's huge 200,000 vote at the last European Parliament election on the desire of even moderate unionists to ensure that John Hume did not top the poll at that election.] He revealed that one method that had been proposed for creating closer coordination between the two parties was for a backbencher committee to meet on a regular basis to discuss and coordinate on all items coming before the Assembly (with the exception of anything touching on the constitutional issue). For some reason this proposal had been rejected by John Hume earlier in the year but he understood that the SDLP leader's objections had now been withdrawn.

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Policing and Flags Issues

4. Shipley-Dalton recognised that the policing issue would dominate the thoughts of most politicians in the coming weeks and could play a major role in Assembly debates - even though, strictly speaking, the matter was one for the Westminster Parliament to resolve. I referred to the strong line being taken by the SDLP, not to mention Sinn Féin, to the effect that the Patten Report should be implemented in full without the significant deviations which had recently been introduced to it by the Secretary of State. He appeared not to have strong views on the matter himself but pointed out that David Trimble had to have something to show to his supporters in order to prove that all his recent efforts had not been in vain. With regard to the RUC title, he felt that it would be sufficient so long as the RUC name was incorporated in some way into the new police Bill. He regarded the question of the new police force symbols as "basically a lot of guff" but he added that most UUP members did not treat the matter so lightly. His main personal concern with regard to the new Bill was in relation to the reduced powers being accorded to the proposed new policing board; the current legislation appeared to give excess power to the Chief Constable at the expense of the new Policing Board and the Secretary of State. The flying of flags from Government buildings was another issue which was likely to dominate Assembly affairs in the coming weeks. Since the Executive was unlikely to arrive at any agreed decision on this issue, he felt that the matter would probably have to continue to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis.

Decommissioning

5. Shipley-Dalton was pleased that Trimble's motion to return to the Assembly had survived the recent UUC meeting without any conditions being attached. This had clearly strengthened the hand of the leadership and allowed for far greater flexibility in future manoeuvring within the Assembly. This was not to say, however, that the UUP could be expected to remain indefinitely in government if the IRA were not to fulfil their commitments. He could

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understand the IRA's reluctance to surrender any of their arms but it was nevertheless essential from a unionist perspective that at least some of their weapons should be "put beyond use" as had been agreed in the context of the Hillsborough package. If, on the other hand, it became clear that the IRA representative was "merely drinking coffee with de Chastelain", then the UUP would feel it would have no option but to withdraw once more from the Assembly and its associated institutions. He indicated that such a withdrawal would become inevitable in about twelve months' time (he stressed that some of his colleagues are in fact arguing for a six months' time limit to be imposed). He added that, in such an eventuality, the UUP would clearly prefer to have the Assembly suspended by the Secretary of State as had happened on 11 February last. Such a withdrawal might also possibly be coordinated in some manner with the SDLP so that Assembly elections could immediately ensue. In any event, in whatever way it might be done, it was important for republicans to understand that, in the absence of meaningful movement on their part, it would certainly happen.

Future Direction of the UUP

6. Shipley-Dalton looked forward to the day when there would be a basic realignment in Ulster politics. There was some comfort in the present situation whereby the sectarian DUP under Ian Paisley would never pose a threat to the UUP's position as the largest unionist party. In his view, the hardline UUP voters which his party had lost following the Good Friday Agreement had simply "stayed at home" rather than go out and vote for Paisley's party. He quoted various electoral statistics to support his viewpoint. However, if Peter Robinson were to take over when Paisley finally relinquishes the leadership, he could envisage the DUP picking up many extra votes from hardline UUP supporters. On the other hand, Shipley-Dalton saw Alliance Party supporters as being basically liberal unionists who would return to the UUP fold once the Trimble agenda had proved to be successful. He held out no long-term future for the Alliance Party which he saw as lacking both in leadership and in a

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meaningful sense of political direction. He hoped that such a realignment could, for example, win back for the UUP the East Belfast Westminister seat where Sir Reg Empey and the Alliance candidate had together outpolled Peter Robinson at the last general election.

7. Other points which Shipley-Dalton made in the course of our meeting were:

- Peter Mandelson is still trusted and admired by David Trimble and by most unionists. He agreed, however, that this might not be unconnected to the fact that the Secretary of State's standing with the SDLP and with most nationalists had reached an all-time low. He realised that Mandelson would in all likelihood return to Westminster prior to the next British general election but he hoped that his stay in Northern Ireland could be prolonged for as long as possible.

- He is currently engaged in a major campaign to have UVF/UFF flags removed from lamp posts in his own constituency in the Newtownabbey area. He is, however, receiving little or no support from the local police who assert that under current legislation they cannot interfere with flags or symbols unless a breach of the peace is likely to arise.

Comment

8. In anything other than the Ulster context, Shipley-Dalton would be unlikely to have a profile as a liberal politician. Had he remained in England, he would probably have become a Thatcherite Conservative with the Eurosceptic, pro-business views that one would expect in such quarters. Nevertheless, to outside observers of the Ulster Unionist Party, he appears as a beacon of modernism, tolerance and anti-sectarianism at a time when such qualities are still in short supply in unionist circles. He and those like him who are close to Trimble (such and Reg Empey and Dermot Nesbitt) probably offer the UUP and

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mainstream unionism the best opportunity for the foreseeable future of developing a moderate, forward-looking political party in the context of the new dispensation in Northern Ireland. He indicated that - although party policy would have prohibited him from meeting me prior to the signing of the British Irish Agreement last December - he was now happy to maintain regular contact. I would see him accordingly as being a very useful source of information for the future on developments within the UUP. He struck me as an individual who is willing to talk without inhibition and whose honesty and reliability I would have no reason to doubt.

Niall Holohan
31 May 2000

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