

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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AN RÚNAÍOCHT IDIR-RIALTASACH
NA BREATAINE-NA hEIREANN
BÉAL FEIRSTE

BRITISH-IRISH
INTERGOVERNMENTAL SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

cc 27.7.00 GI. Dermot

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Confidential

Dinner with Sir John and Lady Semple (19 July 2000)

1. The Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Sir John Semple, his wife Maureen and his private secretary, David Crabbe, were invited to dinner in the Secretariat on 19th July in honour of his retirement - at the age of 60 - next month. Semple (who was knighted earlier this year) was for many years the Secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel before becoming head of the Civil Service in 1997. Since devolution, his main responsibility has been the provision of secretariat services to the new Stormont Executive and to the First and Deputy First Ministers.

2. Present at the dinner for the Irish side were the Joint Secretary, Paul Hickey, George Hegarty and the undersigned. The British side were represented by John Fisher and Jackie McGimpsey. The dinner was a relaxed social occasion; several issues of topical political interest were touched upon in the course of the evening but Semple seemed reluctant to engage in an in-depth analysis of current events.

3. The Joint Secretary commenced the evening by congratulating Semple on his many years of public service which had been so aptly rewarded by his recent knighthood. He praised in particular his firm commitment at all times to cross-border cooperation and to the International Fund. The groundwork laid by Semple and his colleagues had contributed greatly to the Good Friday Agreement and the ongoing peace process. While the peace process was currently making good progress, there were many pitfalls in its path. It was essential, for instance, that the Police Bill going through Westminster at present should be handled very carefully to ensure that nationalist

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requirements - as articulated in particular by Seamus Mallon - are adequately addressed. John Fisher offered similar words of welcome on behalf of the British side. Semple responded by expressing his gratitude for the invitation and stressing how he had been involved in cross-border work from as early as the Lemass-O'Neill meetings in the 1960s. He had always been convinced of the benefits which would accrue from this work and he was particularly enamoured of the International Fund and its continuing impact for good in the community. He indicated that he would be happy to offer his services to the Fund or to other bodies who might be able to benefit from his experience and expertise in future years.

4. Among the views expressed by Semple during the course of the evening were:

- He believed that the political advisers brought in by the new Executive members were for the most part playing a constructive role in the administration system - although clearly some were better than others. Generally speaking, there was little tension between them and the regular civil servants. He referred to the useful role played by David Lavery who was one of the few people trusted by David Trimble for whom he often acted as a sounding board. Lavery was, however, a career civil servant and his secondment to Trimble's office would have to end next year. Semple was unsure what might happen then.

- Trimble and Mallon had a difficult relationship. This had been particularly evident in recent weeks with the passage of the Police Bill through Westminister. (Semple indicated that Mallon had had to take on full responsibility on the nationalist side for this very detailed piece of legislation while Eddie McGrady went on his holidays.) The interests and lifestyles of the First and Deputy First Ministers were "like chalk and cheese" but, for the most part, they managed to work together quite effectively. Semple believed that Mallon would retire at the next Assembly election and that Mark Durkan might replace him if he continues to perform well in his current job as Minister for

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Finance and Personnel.

- Semple's fear was that either the UUP or the SDLP might cease to be the largest parties on the unionist and nationalist sides respectively after the next Assembly elections. If that were to happen, it would be difficult to see how the Good Friday institutions could survive. There was a very real chance therefore that the local elections - scheduled for next May - might be postponed in the context of a fundamental re-structuring of local government in Northern Ireland in the wake of the establishment of the new Assembly and institutions. This was not to say of course that the DUP was a monolithic party. There was in fact a great deal of evidence to suggest that Peter Robinson and his supporters wanted to see the current political process continue to function. Indeed, in Semple's view, there was no guarantee that the party would survive as a single entity after Paisley's departure. However, none of the party - especially his own son, Ian Paisley Jr. - would dare to take a stance against him while he remained alive and active.

- Semple spoke very highly of the Taoiseach's commitment to the peace process and to reconciliation. He said many people from the North had been greatly impressed by the evident emotional sincerity of the Taoiseach's response to the Omagh bombing two years ago.

- Semple also spoke highly of the cross-community Springvale educational initiative in West Belfast and of its chief executive, Gerry McKenna.

- With regard to the educational system in Northern Ireland, Semple indicated that the low standards of education among the working class youth was probably a major contributor to paramilitary membership and violence - particularly on the loyalist side. He was open to the idea that the abolition of the Eleven Plus - as advocated by Education Minister Martin McGuinness - might help to alleviate this widespread under-achievement but he reminded us

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of the very strong lobby which continues to exist in opposition to any change in the current system.

- He said he was pleased that the Northern Ireland budget had been allocated an additional £2 billion over the three years commencing in 2001 as a result of the £43 billion public spending package announced earlier in the week by Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. This was more than might have been expected to be allocated under the so-called 'Barnett formula' (it is understood, however, that half of the additional money will be used by the NIO for Government commitments arising out of the Good Friday Agreement, viz. RUC redundancy payments, criminal justice reforms etc.)

- In response to the Joint Secretary's query about the Peach Principles and the need to ensure the necessary cross-community balance in public appointments, Semple pointed out that the main problem in this regard was finding a sufficient number of qualified people from both sides of the community to make themselves available for such positions. If adequate numbers of appropriately qualified people were to apply, there would be no difficulty in achieving the desired cross-community balance - without breaching the Peach Principles.

Niall Holohan
21 July 2000

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