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Discussion with Alex Attwood

SDLP Assembly Member

11 January 2000

Alex Attwood is an SDLP Assembly Member for West Belfast. I met him in Belfast for a general discussion on current developments inside the SDLP. Attwood had just returned from a holiday in the sun and was in a reflective mood.

The following matters of interest arose in our discussions

1. [redacted]

2. Attwood was very down about his inability to take up the post, stating that he would have made a "damn good Minister". He wanted to get involved in matters relating to equality and human rights. He wants to see the undertakings on parity of esteem, contained in the Good Friday Agreement, translated into action. He has little confidence that his replacement, Denis Haughey, will have the drive and abrasive qualities necessary to push a conservative and reluctant civil service into action.

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3. The performance of the SDLP in Government is worrying Attwood. The new Ministers are all competent administrators but they lack a public profile. They are suffering in comparison to the high profile Sinn Féin Ministers. Attwood fears that Seamus Mallon is suffering from the after effects of the controversy over his "offer of resignation" and his subsequent reinstatement. Everybody knows that this was a fudge and Mallon, a very proud man, has been stung by "whispered" criticism within the party that he acted foolishly in resigning. Mallon has been unusually passive of late and reluctant to be assertive in his dealings with Trimble. The UUP leader is taking advantage of this and is trying to ignore Mallon and act as if he is in sole charge of the Government.

4. On several important issues before Christmas, Mallon refused to get involved stating that he had to protect the Office of the Deputy First Minister. This was in marked contrast to Mallon's behaviour before his resignation. Attwood is hopeful that Mallon will soon return to his old self. He has no doubt that Trimble will eventually overstep the mark once too often and there will be a vigorous response from Mallon.

5. There is widespread unease within the Assembly party over Mallon's advisors and, in particular, Hugh Logue, who is regarded as a disappointment. Colm Larkin is more competent but has little contact with the party in general. Brian Barrington is well liked and very helpful but lacking any political skills. Attwood thinks Mallon needs a strong chief of staff who has personal links with the party. The SDLP Assembly Members contrast the lack of a central figure in Mallon's office with Trimble's position. The UUP leader is very well served by his two main advisors, David Lavery and David Campbell.

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6. Mallon's passivity has coincided with the re-emergence of Hume in the Assembly party. Hume is constantly on the phone to party members and appears to be taking up a number of issues relating to the Derry area. Attwood is convinced that Hume will run again in the Foyle constituency. He thinks this is just as well, as the party would lose the seat in Hume's absence. Durkan will remain on in Stormont and is more interested in being Finance Minister than a Westminister MP.

7. Attwood feels the SDLP badly needs to reinvent itself. It will only stay ahead of Sinn Féin for one more election and is in danger of becoming irrelevant. The early policy goals of an inclusive power-sharing Executive and meaningful North/South institutional arrangements have been realized. It is time to move on with a new agenda and a new set of goals. It needs a new vision.

8. The Good Friday Agreement has changed the political landscape of Ireland. Sinn Féin is already an all-island party and the SDLP will have to look beyond the six counties. As the North-South Ministerial Council takes on more power and responsibility, parties will have to think in all-island terms.

9. The future of the SDLP may be as part of all-island social democratic party with a nationalist outlook. He said that the Labour party in the South had already made some tentative approaches to the SDLP about a more structured relationship between the parties. That would cause unease with most SDLP members (including Attwood) since the Labour party is viewed with suspicion on the national issue, especially since it now includes former members of the "stickies", who were very

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antagonistic to Northern Nationalists in the past.

10. On the issue of Decommissioning, Attwood was fairly confident that the IRA will make some gesture, almost certainly a "bang in the bog". He thinks it could take place sooner than people expect. He is convinced that they will do the absolute minimum, possibly not enough to satisfy Trimble. Attwood expects a further series of political confrontations between the Republicans and the UUP but in the end the Institutions will survive because both sides need them. He, like Billy Hutchinson, is confident that Trimble is doing very well politically within unionism.

11. He mentioned that there was a strong rumour in legal circles in the North that the current judicial review about the appointment of new QCs is causing severe headaches for the Chief Justice, Lord Carswell. The Chief Justice is rumoured to have misled the Lord Chancellor about the views of the Northern judiciary on the oath. This may lead to Carswell's resignation but at a minimum it will damage him and make his appointment to the House of Lords unlikely.

12. At the end of our discussions, we touched on the issue of the St. Partick's Day parade in Belfast. Attwood is a member of the City Council which has refused to fund the parade. The SDLP and Sinn Féin had proposed a compromise motion on funding but were outvoted by a combination of unionists and the Alliance Party. The organisers have now made approaches to Irish Government about funding but Attwood strongly opposes their application. He feels that the Council was wrong to refuse funding but it would cause huge controversy if the Irish Government stepped in and appeared to overrule the Council's decision.

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13. Attwood, on a political level, is delighted at the Alliance stand as he thinks it will kill off some of the declining Catholic support for that party, especially in the south of the city, with the SDLP the main winner. However, on a personal level, he felt that it would be a shame if Ireland's second largest city had no Saint Patrick's Day celebrations this year.

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Anglo-Irish Division
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