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Discussion with Billy Hutchinson

PUP Assembly Member

12 January 2000

I called to see Billy Hutchinson at the City Hall in Belfast. It has been a very difficult week for the PUP with two members of the party murdered, one in Antrim and the other in Portadown. However, despite these recent events he was in very good spirits.

In the course of our conversation the following matters of interest arose.

UVF matters/Decommissioning

1. Hutchinson said that the Jameson murder in Portadown was carried out by criminal elements associated with the Loyalist Volunteer Force. They were motivated by greed and not by ideology. They were interested only in maintaining their hold of the local drug trade. The PUP in Portadown will continue to fight LVF drug activities and there is likely to be further incidents. He himself has called for no retaliation for the Jameson murder but there are people within the UVF who will no doubt want revenge.

2. On the issue of IRA decommissioning, Hutchinson was quite optimistic. He claimed that he had been told by a senior Republican figure that the IRA will make a gesture in order to save the new Institutions. He added that only a fool believed that there would be total decommissioning by the May deadline. The best that could be obtained on decommissioning will be

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something symbolic.

The Political Process

3. While decommissioning has the potential to derail the process, Hutchinson thinks that it is inconceivable that devolution will fail at this point. In fact, he believes that there is a growing normalisation of politics in the North. Trimble is in a very strong position in the Unionist community and according to Hutchinson would comfortably win a majority of unionist voters if there was an election tomorrow.

4. The support of the Loyalist paramilitaries has been crucial to the process by ensuring that there has been no deterioration in the position on the ground in Protestant areas. While admiring Trimble's achievements, Hutchinson, on a personal level, dislikes Trimble whom he described as an ignorant and a thoroughly unappealing character.

5. According to Hutchinson, the DUP are quietly enjoying their participation in the new Institutions. They have no serious intention of trying to bring the process down. They would like to supplant Trimble and the UUP as the leaders of unionism. However, they have not transmitted their growing acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement to their supporters on the streets.

The Implementation Bodies

6. There is strong discontent and opposition within the smaller parties in the Assembly on the issue of Northern appointments to the Implementation Bodies. According to Hutchinson, the new Board members are all party figures and many do not have the appropriate qualifications for the job. Hutchinson said he has written to the Secretary of State asking that such appointments, in the future, be made under the new Nolan

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guidelines for State Boards. He feels that wholesale party cronyism could affect the credibility of the Implementation Bodies.

Other issues

7. Hutchinson said that his party and the Loyalist paramilitaries have been the subject of sustained attack in the press from Eoghan Harris whom he described as a having a very bad influence within Unionism. He has tried to be conciliatory to Harris but he believes that Harris is erratic and only interested in self promotion. Hutchinson thinks that the UUP tactic of publicly attacking the Loyalist paramilitaries last year was prompted by advice from Harris.

8. There is some concern within Loyalist areas in Portadown that the Irish Government is planning to spend millions on the economic regeneration of the Garvaghy Road area. Local Loyalists are concerned that their areas might be discriminated against since the British Government seem reluctant to spend money in the town until the present impasse over Drumcree is settled. I took the opportunity to state that the Irish Government has no intention of paying for a major project in Portadown. I also suggested that Loyalists in the town simply make direct contact with the Irish Government in the future if they need clarification on any issue.

9. There is a difficult industrial situation at a Smurfit factory in Ballygomartin in Belfast. The factory is facing a possible close down due to fall off in demand for cigarette cartons. The workforce is almost entirely Protestant and many are PUP supporters. Hutchinson has been making representations to Smurfit headquarters in Dublin and was grateful for the assistance he has received from the Tánaiste's office in establishing contact with Smurfit senior management. He will

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keep the Department informed of developments.

10. Hutchinson also mentioned the Department's recent grant to the Jeannie Johnston project in County Kerry (£100,000). There are quite a number of young people from Protestant areas in Belfast in Tralee working on the ship. He was strongly supportive of Minister Andrews' decision to provide the funding.

11. He also mentioned that he would be in Limerick next week for several days and asked if I could make the local Guards aware of his presence. I said I would pass on his itinerary to the Department of Justice.

12. During our conversation, Hutchinson made several warm and supportive comments about the Taoiseach.

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