

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Confidential

Meetings with UUP, Belfast, 24-25 February 2000

1-3 2000

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1. I had meetings in Belfast at the end of of last week with **Jim Wilson** (the UUP Assembly Party Chief Whip) and with **Michael McGimpsey**. While McGimpsey and I were having coffee in Parliament Buildings, we were joined briefly by **David Trimble** and **Dermot Nesbitt**.

Encounter with Trimble

2. Without ceremony, Trimble said to me "I'm going to have to have a public argument with your Government about suspension." When I commented that discussions on the matter during the Mitchell Review had been based on the assumption of clearcut default - which we did not believe had been demonstrated in the current situation - he replied that "we all can manufacture explanations. It's a question of whether your word can ever be believed again".

3. Trimble was then distracted by an elderly woman - the guest of NIWC member Jane Morrice - who urged him to "make it work". He leaped to his feet and berated her strongly and at some length for ignoring the real source of the difficulty - republicanism's refusal to reciprocate his decision to jump first. He had done all he could.

4. Trimble departed after this embarrassing incident. But afterwards Nesbitt, in particular, and McGimpsey both told me that they shared his view of the Government's position on suspension: the strong feeling in the UUP was that we had in November promised to stand by them if they moved but, when push came to shove, we had chosen the easier course. Nesbitt said that, while he didn't "have as short a fuse as some people" he was genuinely angry and felt let down.

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5. McGimpsey said that his problem was less with the continued functioning of the North/South bodies - though this could present the UUP with difficulties if the DUP and McCartney chose to highlight it - than with the fact that by so strongly opposing suspension we had muddied the waters and let Sinn Féin off the hook. Between 31 January and 11 February the IRA had moved to some degree on decommissioning, under pressure from the two Governments, the SDLP and the US: but the clear division of views on suspension had lifted this pressure and had allowed Sinn Féin to persuade nationalist opinion that, as ever, it was the British and the unionists who were really to blame.

6. In reply, I pointed to the legal/constitutional difficulties on our side and, more generally, the fact that we had felt that the second de Chastelain report offered a very good basis for further progress, which we felt it would be counter-productive to throw back in the IRA's face. But I also acknowledged the particularly exposed circumstances in which the UUP had found itself.

Reactions to Current Situation

7. Both Wilson and McGimpsey seemed genuinely upset and disappointed by the suspension. They recognised the huge difficulties of the present situation and the unpredictability of future events if the stalemate continued. Neither appeared inclined to play it long, or to be complacent. McGimpsey expressly rejected the John Taylor view that unionists could be happy with having secured the amendment of Articles 2 and 3 and the replacement. Both he and Wilson believed that the Agreement overall offered unionists a fair deal. Moreover, the liberal wing of unionism, like the SDLP, depended on engagement between the two communities: a return to war - even a cold war - played into the hands of UUP right-wingers and the DUP. "The moral high ground is a cold place to be."

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8. Wilson, recalling his early days in Vanguard, acknowledged that he personally, and many others, had come a long way - indeed, even since we first met in 1995. He now valued the developing North/South relationship, as well as the fact that the South was now more comfortable in an East/West context. He didn't like the thought of returning to "a 100% British situation."

9. Both Wilson and McGimpsey registered unionist dislike of Sinn Féin's "in your face" style while in the Executive, citing the decisions to cease flying the Union Jack at the Departments of Health and Education and to centralise maternity services at the RVH. McGimpsey conceded that he had not realised just quite how legally autonomous (of both the Executive and of the Committee system) individual Ministers were. But, broadly speaking, the institutions had been functioning well.

10. [**Comment:** Both McGimpsey and Wilson have, personally, quite an amount to lose from the failure of the institutions. But their unhappiness with the present situation seemed authentic.]

The Future

11. Neither Wilson nor McGimpsey was optimistic about a quick resolution to the present difficulties. They had genuinely expected a start to decommissioning by the end of January (McGimpsey had assumed that the IRA would make use of the symbolic opportunity offered by the Millennium). It now seemed that it was a long way off. Opinion within unionism had not changed: decommissioning was essential if the UUP was to sustain its participation in the Executive. Relations between Sinn Féin and the UUP had deteriorated, as it became clear that the former had never had any intention of fulfilling the expectations generated during the Mitchell Review.

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12. McGimpsey did say, unprompted, that if there were other ways to build confidence the UUP would have to look at them, and Wilson said something similar. But neither was clear as to what those other ways might be. Even a clear statement that the war was over would be dismissed by many as mere words - and the question of arms would not go away. McGimpsey, however, accepted that arms did not necessarily have to be destroyed to be "beyond use": Wilson, on the other hand, felt that anything short of some destruction would be unsatisfactory.

13. McGimpsey felt that, if a breakthrough were to be achieved, it would have to come this side of Easter but after the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council. This made it important that the two Governments quickly move to put in place a credible process of consultation. But he warned against thinking that it would be politically possible for Trimble to bypass the UUC before re-entering the Executive.

14. Both Wilson and McGimpsey mentioned the significance of the May 22 date to the unionist community at large. A failure to make progress by then would undoubtedly cause further disillusionment. But neither seemed to be seriously contemplating the notion of an SDLP/UUP coalition, rhetorically useful though the prospect might be from time to time.

Overall Comment

15. I took away from my two meetings a strong sense that the more liberal and constructive elements within the UUP are genuinely unhappy at the present situation, and are to some extent open to creative thinking. At the same time, it would be wrong in any way to underestimate the difficulty the UUP would have in moving away from its current stance, or to suggest that unionists would

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in any circumstances be prepared to allow the issue of disarmament to fade into the background. There is also, as there is on the republican/nationalist side, an abundance of emotion, mixed with fatigue and depression, all of which would seem to make constructive dialogue harder to achieve. Trimble's eruption of bad temper, while not uncharacteristic, would seem to indicate that he is less relaxed than he has endeavoured to convey.

Rory Montgomery
28 February 2000

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