

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Discussion with Lord Rogan

Chairman, Ulster Unionist Party

I met with Lord Rogan, Chairman of the UUP in Ballymacarrett in East Belfast for a discussion on recent political matters. Rogan has been out canvassing in the South Antrim by-election. He was in his usual affable and forthright form.

South Antrim by-election

Rogan said that the UUP party workers were getting a poor response at the doors in South Antrim. People were continually raising the future of the RUC, flags and the loss of their British identity as issues of concern. Protestant voters claim that they had seen very few benefits from the Agreement. Even the establishment of peace is seen as being in danger from the on-going Loyalist feud.

Rogan said that he did not know if traditional loyalty to the UUP would be enough to see Burnside elected. In the absence of accurate polls, anyone who said they knew for certain the result in South Antrim was a either a clairvoyant or a liar. He himself felt that the result would be close. However, it was clear in conversation that Rogan does not personally like Burnside. He mentioned the controversy over Andrew Hunter as another example of "Burnside's character difficulties".

Rogan said that Burnside will have difficulty getting anti-Agreement votes. McCrea has been consistent in his opposition and Rogan added that if he personally was a No voter, he would opt for McCrea. There was also a danger that some pro-Agreement Unionists might vote for the Alliance Party or abstain. He has been told on the doorsteps by a small number of pro-Agreement Unionists that they would even prefer to vote SDLP than Burnside.

General Situation

When asked directly about the effects of a McCrea victory, Rogan

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replied that it would make life more difficult for Trimble but he doubted if it would be fatal. What was more threatening in the longer term was the loss of support for the Agreement among ordinary Protestants. He himself was in no doubt about the longer term benefits of the Agreement for all, but first the short and medium term pain for the Unionist community had to be gotten over.

The UUP needed to get the sensitive and symbolic issues out of the way, especially the Policing Bill and Flags. On policing, he felt that the two sides were not a million miles away from each other. The main concern for the Unionists was on the name issue. They needed something on this to overcome party dissent but accepted that, in reality, the police will be known as the Policing Service of Northern Ireland. They were very concerned about the "absolutist" position of the SDLP and Sinn Féin on this question.

On flags, Rogan said that this issue had gotten out of hand. I suggested to him that Unionists should try to make a differentiation between non-devolved and devolved institutions. They could argue that the non-devolved bodies, operating under the British Government, could fly the Union flag on a limited number of days, while the new institutions would adopt a neutral symbol. He replied that this was very reasonable but in the current situation even reasonable compromises were difficult to sell to either community.

Seamus Mallon

Rogan was in a very anti-Mallon mood accusing the SDLP deputy leader of making life impossible for Trimble. He claimed that Mallon was very partisan on the policing issue at the meeting with President Clinton, leaving Trimble very much on the back foot. Rogan said that Unionists were aghast at the hardline language used by Mallon in New York.

Rogan added that Mallon was a hate figure for Unionists for many years. Most Unionists thought at the time that Mallon had no time for Unionist sensitivities and loyalties. They could not envisage sharing power with him. In recent years, this view radically changed and Unionists began to respect and like Mallon's forthright condemnation of IRA violence and anti-democratic behaviour. Unfortunately, Mallon was returning to his old ways and making life very difficult for Trimble. If Mallon continued in the same vein, the present partnership arrangements would not

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continue.

Most Unionists wondered whether Mallon was being forced into this anti-Unionist line by pressure from his own Assembly party or alternatively from Sinn Féin. I answered that Mallon was very much his own man.

Sinn Féin in Government

Rogan admitted that there is general acceptance in the UUP that the party had chosen the wrong Ministries in the Executive. Sinn Féin was the clear winner in the share out of posts and are exploiting the prominent position that Education and Health gives them in Northern society. He added that the two Sinn Fein Ministers are performing very well but added that McGuinness in Education is a very sore point for Unionists. De Brún does not have the same bogey type image. He mentioned a rumour in Belfast that de Brún's father had been in the Black and Tans and her commitment to the Republican movement was part compensation for her father's sins. I told him that on an age basis alone her father could not have been in the Tans.

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Anglo-Irish Division
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