

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code:	2023/154/51
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

S's noted/filed

Copy (P2)

3 53, 25R, 9R

AN RÚNAÍOCHT IDIR-RIALTASACH NA BREATAINE-NA hEIREANN BÉAL FEIRSTE

BRITISH-IRISH INTERGOVERNMENTAL SECRETARIAT BELFAST

28 February 2000

1 MAR 2000

1 MAR 2000

Confidential

Ms Griffin
Passed on to the Taoiseach

cc PS:M, PS:M, Mr Taylor, Mr Pace, Mr Kelly, Mr L, Cassells, AI

Lunch with Monica McWilliams (NIWC)

1 3 2000

1. I had lunch today with the leader of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Monica McWilliams. She was in a somewhat sombre mood having spent the morning in Stormont which she described as akin to a ghost town. She had no shortage of ideas, however, for injecting new life into the peace process. In the course of the lunch, she frequently returned to the theme that the smaller parties had a vital role to play and must be included in a meaningful way in any future negotiations on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Assembly/Executive

2. McWilliams was critical of Peter Mandelson for his handling of the suspension of the Executive. She claimed that he had simply danced to a UUP tune and had ignored all other advice and proposals. She felt that, at the very least, he should have ensured that the Assembly Committee system was left in place. The Committees had been serving a very useful purpose during the ten short weeks leading up to 11 February and their continued functioning would have allowed ongoing practical interaction between all the parties - which she held to be of vital importance for the very survival of the peace process. They would also have provided work opportunities for Assembly Members who continued to receive their salaries and expenses but were now sitting around in their offices in Stormont wondering what they should do next. (Besides, she said, there was nothing that politicians liked better than having the opportunity to cross-examine Permanent Secretaries of Departments.) If the present impasse continued, there was a very real risk - particularly on the Unionist side - that several of the backbenchers would soon lose interest in the political process and would revert to type (and to their previous professional activities). She believed it was not too late to restore the Committees since Mandelson would have no difficulty in quickly steering whatever legislation might be necessary for this purpose through parliament in Westminster. Mandelson, however, did not appear to be in listening mode at the present time. At a recent meeting with the Women's Coalition he seemed to be aloof even from his own NIO advisers and merely repeated the Trimble line on all issues; his response to most questions was that "it (the suspension) was not my fault". She wondered if Dublin might be willing to recommend reinstatement of the Committees to Mandelson although she admitted that Sinn Fein - despite their demands for the return of the Good Friday institutions - might object to restoration of the Committees in isolation and might well refuse to participate at this juncture.

No

©TSCH/2023/154/51

3. She also referred to a longstanding Women's Coalition proposal for the establishment of a Committee on Implementation (of the Good Friday Agreement). In her view, such a committee would help to build up trust by allowing all parties to meet around the table - something which has not been happening since the suspension of the Executive - and would also give all parties the opportunity to exchange views and to be briefed on the many important issues which had not been devolved to the suspended Assembly.

Decommissioning

4. McWilliams indicated that she had not been surprised by the IRA's failure to decommission last month. She did not think that decommissioning as such would ever happen nor did she believe that the IRA would ever state that the war was over (unless the unionists were to admit that they, not the IRA, had started the war in the first place!). What was possible, however, was that IRA volunteers might be stood down and arms dumped - as had happened in the 1920s - but that this was unlikely to be completed until two years after whatever date the Good Friday institutions were restored. In a sense, she thought that this process could already be said to have commenced. What frightened her greatly was the emphasis being put on the 22nd May date by the Unionists, by General de Chastelain and by the British Government. She did not expect that there would be any further significant moves on decommissioning by that date and she feared that this could trigger the winding up of many of the remaining elements of the Good Friday Agreement (including her own Assembly salary - she has no other source of income at present).

Relations with other Parties

5. McWilliams asserted that the political party she felt closest to was the PUP. She had a particularly high regard for David Ervine who, she held, was the most articulate and fair-minded voice of moderate progressive unionism but who, ironically, was largely sidelined by mainstream unionist and nationalist politicians because of his former association with paramilitarism (class snobbery was undoubtedly an additional factor in this regard). She also was close to the Alliance Party and had a working relationship with Sinn Fein. She felt largely ignored, however, by the SDLP (with the exception of Mark Durkan) who seemed to have no interest in parties outside the Executive. She had thought that her own civil rights/nationalist background would have led to a close identity and, indeed, empathy with the SDLP but this had proved not to be the case. Furthermore, she was critical of Seamus Mallon's "schoolmasterly" approach to his own and to other parties. She believed that his harsh criticism of the IRA on the question of decommissioning would simply result in a significant transfer of votes to Sinn Fein if an election were to be held in the near future. She regretted in this regard that John Hume's illness had prevented him from participating to a greater extent in recent events. Her most scathing remarks, however, were reserved for David Trimble whom she regarded as ill-mannered and lacking in leadership qualities. He had refused to establish any relationship with the Women's Coalition over recent years and only this month had been openly abusive and offensive to one of her party colleagues who had merely stopped to wish him well for his American trip in the Members' coffee room at Stormont. On the other hand, she was happy to acknowledge that she had a warm relationship with certain UUP members such as Reg Empey and Dermot Nesbitt.

©TSCH/2023/154/51

Parades

6. She was gloomy about prospects for the forthcoming marching season. In her view, mediation and Orange/resident groups dialogue were - for all practical purposes - both non-starters. The former Parades Commission Chairman, Alastair Graham, had foolishly stated that the dialogue entered into by the Apprentice Boys had persuaded him to permit a march down the Ormeau Road on 14 August last - with predictable results. This was enough to ensure that no further dialogue would take place. She was supportive, however, of the 'fast-track' introduction of the Human Rights Act to cover this parade season. She did not believe that a court would do anything other than uphold the decisions of the Parades Commission. The loyalist community had at this stage lost all faith in the Parades Commission and deeply resented its deliberation; on the other hand, a ruling by a court of law was a completely different matter to a tradition-bound Orangeman. Furthermore, judicial proceedings were normally so time-consuming that this in itself often helped to defuse volatile situations.

Relationship with the Department

7. McWilliams said she would greatly welcome closer contact with the Department. She referred to the very useful and informative meetings she had had with Ray Bassett over the years. I assured her that these would continue and that the Belfast Secretariat was also ready to answer/transmit any queries she might have about Irish Government policy. She mentioned her particular interest in receiving briefings on such subjects as the soon-to-be-published Criminal Justice Review which, she said, came within her own area of professional competence. I filled her in on the efforts which Dublin had been making to ensure that the Review would contain appropriate recommendations in areas such as judicial appointments and the independence of the DPP. She expressed her appreciation in this regard and added that it was important for her to be aware of Dublin's position if she was to be effective in her own lobbying efforts on this and on many other issues.

8. She added that she was leaving for the United States shortly where she would participate in a number of engagements over the St Patrick's Day period. I agreed to keep in touch with her on her return.

Niall Holohan
Counsellor

©TSCH/2023/154/51