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Meeting with Eddie McGrady

PA Talks.

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I met Eddie McGrady in Belfast on 9 December. Among the points which arose in our conversation were:

Political situation

- McGrady feels strongly that the present political vacuum is facilitating integrationism by stealth. He is critical of what he sees as a failure within his own party to perceive the extent of the integrationist threat. The prevailing view in the SDLP is that, while the lack of progress may be regrettable, the status quo - with the Anglo-Irish Agreement in place - is not unsatisfactory. This analysis fails to take account of the slow but steady progress, masterminded by Molyneaux, towards institutionalisation of direct rule.
- McGrady is particularly concerned by current moves towards the enlargement of District Council powers. This initiative can be presented in a superficially attractive way as encouraging input at local level; even some SDLP Councilors - particularly in those areas where the SDLP has a Council majority - are seduced by the idea. McGrady is convinced that it would be utterly mistaken for the SDLP to acquiesce in any moves in this direction; any new powers for District Councils should only be considered as part of a package which would include a devolved, power-sharing, administration.
- He remains highly sceptical that any elements within Unionism are genuinely prepared to accept power-sharing (or any arrangements which would deliver the substance of power-sharing) as the price to be paid for devolution. He acknowledges the positive noises being made by Robinson and Wilson but questions (a) how genuine Robinson is and (b) how much he can deliver? Molyneaux, he feels, is totally uninterested in devolution; he runs the OUP on a tight rein and nothing will emerge from the Party without Molyneaux's stamp of approval.

A Gap in Conference meetings?

- Despite his pessimism about prospects for reaching agreement on new political arrangements, McGrady appears anxious that an attempt be made to create the circumstances in which some progress might be possible. He talked of a gap of six weeks or so in Conference meetings, accompanied by some formula in relation to the Secretariat which would provide a face-saving device for Unionists without conceding anything of substance. He felt this gap should be used for "talks about talks" - it should be made absolutely clear in advance that there was no expectation of these preliminary talks leading to any agreement on "solutions".
- McGrady is keenly aware of the risks involved in such a scenario - in particular, the likelihood that the Unionists would begin to show flexibility towards the end of the six week period in an effort to pressurise both governments into a postponement of the next Conference meeting. He feels that a six week gap would be a realistic timeframe only if there was prior agreement that the talks would focus exclusively on an analysis of the problem rather than on attempting to find solutions. (Presumably, if these preliminary talks went well, there would be a desire to build on any progress made; McGrady does not appear, so far at least, to have given much thought to possible follow-up).

Meeting with Peter Brooke

- The three SDLP MPs had met Brooke on Friday, 8th December. (Brooke met the Unionist leaders on the 7th). McGrady found him likeable and open, but said the Secretary of State seemed depressed following his earlier meeting with the Unionist leaders. When Brooke raised the question of enhanced powers for District Councils, McGrady had marshalled the arguments against movement in this direction; he felt the Secretary of State was reasonably receptive to the points made.

- When the question of a gap in Conference meetings was broached, Brooke had turned to McGrady and commented that "your committee could do the groundwork here". (McGrady chairs an SDLP committee on political issues set up some months ago; in fact the committee seems to have been more or less moribund from the outset. The reference to it by the Secretary of State would suggest that the NIO is consciously seeking to encourage McGrady into taking a role in trying to get talks going).
- On security issues, McGrady said that Brooke had gently suggested to them that the SDLP should not feel obliged to use the Irish government as a conduit for channeling complaints on security matters; they would be served just as well by coming direct to the Northern Ireland authorities (McGrady emphasised that this remark was lightly made and not followed up).
- In relation to local police liaison committees (on which the RUC and local interests are represented) the SDLP members had explained to Brooke that there was no way they would discuss sensitive security-related issues in a frank manner in such a formal setting. McGrady was surprised at Brooke's apparent acceptance of this point.

Ireland's EC Presidency

- McGrady wondered if the Taoiseach's invitation to Northern Ireland MEPs would lead anywhere. (We talked at some length about the context and purpose of the Taoiseach's invitation). He feels that, even if Nicholson accepted the invitation, Molyneaux would be prepared to distance himself from Nicholson at any time that seemed politically advantageous.
- McGrady also made the point that perhaps there could be some SDLP involvement in our Presidency "in a way that would be mutually advantageous". [He threw this out as a general

idea rather than making any specific suggestions).

Harassment

- McGrady is very concerned about recent UDR deployment in Downpatrick (the UDR has not been deployed there previously) and an increased level of harassment in the area generally. He said that anyone who is a member of the extended family of someone under suspicion becomes a target for continuous harassment. The degree and type of questioning to which people are subjected is causing serious irritation; (he described a recent incident when his daughter was delayed for forty-five minutes while being questioned and having her car searched).
- On making representations about harassment, he is told this heightened level of security force activity is necessary because of enhanced threat. He has tried to make the argument that the tactics being used are counter-productive from a security viewpoint because of risk factors associated with an alienated population; he says however that this argument is simply brushed aside.

International Fund

- McGrady has a number of concerns in relation to the International Fund, principally
 - the need for a Development Officer in South Down
 - the fact that the Fund's designation of disadvantaged areas excludes some very badly off areas in his constituency.

He is meeting the new Fund Chairman shortly and will discuss these issues with him, as well as with the Joint Director General on the southern side.

Sellafield

- McGrady, who is a strong anti-Sellafield campaigner, expressed some concern at what he regards as overly reassuring comments made in the Dáil last week by the Minister for Energy (he referred to the attached Irish Times report of 8 December).

Meeting with the Taoiseach

- He is looking forward to meeting with the Taoiseach on the 11th for what he carefully described as "an informal, social, chat". There is continuing tension between McGrady and Hume (as indeed between McGrady and Mallon) on a number of issues; McGrady seems apprehensive that Hume would react negatively if he felt McGrady were having a substantive, policy-oriented discussion with the Taoiseach. While clearly hoping to cover a lot of ground with the Taoiseach, McGrady is anxious to emphasise the informal and social nature of the meeting so as not to provoke a hostile reaction from Hume.

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