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14 August 1989

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A conversation with Lord Fitt

Lord Fitt, the former SDLP politician, called to the Embassy on 11 August on a private matter. I had a brief discussion with him. In the main it consisted of raking over old coals, for example, in Lord Fitt's views on his former SDLP colleagues.

Lord Fitt declared himself pessimistic about the future in Northern Ireland. While he thought (and hoped) that it was possible there would be no fatalities on the twentieth anniversary of the troops going in, despite the media "hype", he saw no grounds for optimism and no sign that the two communities were beginning to come together. (He expressed sadness over the death of Seamus Duffy). He recalled his exchange with the then Home Secretary, James Callaghan, in 1969 in which Callaghan responded to his plea to send in the troops to the effect that "we can send in the troops allright Gerry, but it will take a devil of a job to get them out again."

Lord Fitt did not regard the Anglo-Irish Agreement as having helped to bring the two communities together or as having reduced violence. He recalled his first view of the twin texts of the Agreement and the many telephone calls of outrage he received from constituents at the time, observing that his election victories had been achieved with some non-nationalist support. He considered the Unionists to have been traumatized by firstly the abolition of Stormont and secondly the Anglo-Irish Agreement. He felt that the best hope for Northern Ireland lay in some form of revived power sharing administration à la Sunningdale. He observed that the Agreement now constituted in itself a barrier to progress in that neither Government was willing to repudiate it and admit they had been wrong. He felt that Dublin's approach was coloured by listening almost exclusively to John Hume.

Expanding on this, he spoke with some passion about the polarisation which had occurred in Northern Ireland since 1969. He observed that, if one lived in Derry or Crossmaglen or certain other areas, it was possible not to have to mix with or accommodate to Protestants/Unionists. This was not possible in Belfast where the two communities lived cheek by jowl; he cited his own case as an example of how one came to accommodate and to take into account views of members of the other community. He felt that in this regard John Hume had not had to accommodate to and did not basically understand the fears and feelings of Unionists. Hume had been able to insulate himself as a consequence of the enlargement of Northern Ireland representation at Westminster, which had carved out a safe seat for him without imposing on him the need to have regard to the views of Unionist constituents.

Lord Fitt was sceptical about the prospects for talks and political negotiation between Unionists and the SDLP. He observed that while there might be talks "each fellow would be manoeuvring to make sure that the other took the blame for the breakdown." Returning to the theme of some form of local assembly with power sharing, he saw little prospect that the current political leadership on either side wished to see this occurring. Currently both Hume and Paisley were sitting comfortably with a high profile and had a certain vested interest in maintaining the status quo. An assembly with 60 or 70 members would involve the election of "wild men" on either side who would say things neither leader wished to hear and who would be difficult to control. The current set-up suited both the various party leaders and the Westminster M.Ps. who enjoyed prestige and profile which would be diminished if a local assembly were recreated in Northern Ireland.

Lord Fitt saw the potential for a Beirut-style situation developing in Northern Ireland if British troops were withdrawn. Referring to Maxwell's editorial in Thursday's Daily Mirror, he was scornful of the "Troops Out" Movement and felt that the so-called "malign scenario" of Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien was a likely outcome were troops to be pulled out. As he put it "if there were to be a declaration of intent (by the British Government) the RUC and UDR would simply reach for their guns!". He said that, while he would like to be an optimist about the future, he was unable to see much grounds for optimism in the current situation.

In an aside on Austin Curry, Lord Fitt spoke highly of Mr. Curry's abilities. He felt and said that he had told John Hume accordingly, that Hume could have done more to keep Curry in Northern Ireland. He felt that, to some degree at least, Hume had regarded Curry as a potential rival and had not accommodated him. He observed, and quoted Paddy Devlin in support, that in the case of Austin Curry the North's loss was the South's gain. (In another, amusing, aside Lord Fitt recounted a telephone call he had received from Curry during the recent Dail election campaign in which Curry described campaigning in Dublin as a bit like campaigning in China in comparison with electioneering in Northern Ireland!).

Lord Fitt was under time pressure and did not remain in the Embassy for long. Departing, he said he would be happy to give his views at greater length at a more convenient time.

*Sean Farrell*

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