



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Meeting with Mr. Edward Turner, UUP, Chairman Strabane
District Council, 22 March 1990.

1. Mr. Turner has been Chairman of Strabane District Council since last June. A retired businessman in his mid-sixties (he had extensive interests in the agri-sector - he was a consultant to the Unilever Group - and in catering), he is regarded as the senior UUP figure in the Mid-Ulster constituency (the Westminster seat is held by the DUP). He is currently a member of the Executive Council of the UUP and served for six years - 1982 to 1988 - on the Police Authority. Last January, he visited the Department to convey the concern of the Unionist community in the Castlederg area about the level of cross-border security co-operation (in the wake of the killing in the town on 9 January of an off-duty UDR man). He was seen by Mr. M. Collins, Mr. Dillon and myself. I undertook to remain in contact with him and my call on him this week was by way of follow-up to that meeting. He expressed his appreciation of the January meeting and was glad of this opportunity of a further discussion.
2. Mr. Turner spoke frankly about the current situation within Unionism. From the outset, he said, he had disapproved of the tactics employed by the party to fight the Agreement. He had made clear from the beginning that he did not intend to abide by the boycott of Ministers etc and got the backing of his Constituency organisation for his stance. He said that he had also told James Molyneaux directly of this; in response the latter had said "on your head be it", but had not demurred. Mr. Turner said that he has worked hard behind the scenes within the party over the last few years to achieve a reversal of the boycott policy and takes considerable satisfaction from last month's decision of the Executive Council to lift the boycott. He took particular note, he said, of the fact that the decision was supported at the meeting by Martin Smyth and Willie Ross.

3. While he likes Molyneaux personally, he said that he doubts if he is the man to lead the party through a serious talks process. Molyneaux, he feels, is to too great an extent a prisoner of the negative tactics of the last five years and it would be too much to expect - particularly given his own integrationist learnings - that he should have the capacity to "turn around" and negotiate Unionists through a process which would involve dialogue and compromise. A new face, unencumbered by the "baggage" of the anti-Agreement campaign, would be required for that task, Mr. Turner felt. He added that this was a view which was gaining increasing currency within the UUP.
4. As regards a successor, he felt that John Taylor was the "man most likely". He said that Ken Maginnis ("a very nice man - but he will never be leader of the party") had only marginal support and that a stronger figure was needed. He believed that it was time for the UUP to "take on" the DUP and that that would require a strong leader who would be able to stand up to Paisley. While Taylor had his detractors within the party, there was no doubting his toughness and independence of mind and these would be crucial factors in his favour, Mr. Turner felt, in deciding on a successor to James Molyneaux.
5. As regards the present Brooke "initiative", Mr. Turner used surprisingly SDLP-like terminology, suggesting that the first priority was that "we need to start talking about the problems". The gap separating people's perceptions of the problems was extremely wide and could only be bridged, he believed, by dialogue at the widest possible level. This included talking to Dublin. In that context he welcomed Ken Maginnis' proposal to seek a meeting with the Taoiseach on the issue of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. His own feeling was that such a meeting might be viewed by Unionists as a test of whether wider and more comprehensive dialogue

with Dublin was now worth serious consideration. (Interestingly, however, he was dismissive of the Constitution as a "real" issue at present in the eyes of rank-and-file Unionists and felt that much of the recent furore in the wake of the McGimpsey judgement was "media hype". The significance of any meeting between the Taoiseach and Maginnis, therefore, lay not in its subject matter but in the fact that it was taking place at all).

6. I asked him which he regarded as the stronger impulse within Unionism - the desire for talks or the desire for concessions on their preconditions (regarding the Agreement). He replied that "it is about fifty-fifty". He went on to argue the case for some movement towards the Unionist position on suspension. I put it to him that the reality was that that was a "loaded call" - if Unionists wished to impose preconditions, surely Nationalists were equally entitled to introduce their own etc - and that, in his own words, what was needed was a dialogue about the problems, without preconditions. Moreover, if Unionists were so wedded to the need for movement on their preconditions, that surely raised question marks about how serious they were in their desire for talks in the first place. Mr. Turner accepted that this was not an unreasonable line of argument and my impression was that his own heart is not in the suspension campaign - although there is no doubting his opposition to the Agreement itself.

Comment

7. Mr. Turner makes a positive impression. In subsequent meetings the same day with Mr. John Keanie, the Chief Executive of Strabane District Council, and with the three SDLP Councillors on the Council, there was unanimous praise for the manner in which he has chaired the Council since taking office last June. Mr. Keanie said that he is a "maverick but an influential one" within the UUP. He said

that he accompanied him to a recent meeting of ALANI (the Association of Local Authorities which has traditionally been controlled, autocratically, by Unionists and from which most Nationalist Councillors have withdrawn). Mr. Keanie said that Mr. Turner launched a strong attack on ALANI's past policies. He told the meeting that the days of "Unionists retaining all power to ourselves are long gone", adding "how can we expect John Hume to support the return of SDLP Councillors (to ALANI) if we don't get our act together"? Mr. Keanie said that a number of Unionists present walked out in protest at his remarks, but that, overall, he received considerable support for his stance and that in the interim ALANI have amended their constitution to give it a less political orientation.

8. Mr. Turner is keen to continue the contact with us. I made fully clear that my call was purely in a local, Strabane, context (and in follow-up to the January meeting in Dublin) and had no wider connotations; he understood this fully and his desire for continuing contact is very much a personal matter. While his sphere of influence is primarily Mid-Ulster based, his role on the Executive Council of the UUP clearly takes him into wider fields and he could be a useful contact as a barometer of rank-and-file Unionist thinking.

JSC
T. O' Connor

23 March, 1990.

cc'd Mr. Gallagher
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