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A conversation with Chris McGimpsey

I had a conversation with Chris McGimpsey (of the OUP) at a British Embassy reception last night.

One or two points of interest arose in relation to the talks process and its possible resumption.

McGimpsey understands that invitations to dinner have been extended by NIO Ministers and senior officials to "very senior people" in the two Unionist parties.

Within the OUP, efforts are being made to persuade Molyneaux that he should give an early public indication of where the party stands on a possible resumption of the process. McGimpsey would like to see a clear statement, couched in constructive terms, of the party's willingness to pursue the process. A paper prepared by Reg Empey and McGimpsey on this subject was sent to Molyneaux yesterday and they are hoping for a response from him within the next ten days. Specifically, they are suggesting a major speech by Molyneaux on Saturday 31 August (the "last Saturday" of the marching season and the occasion for final Orange Order celebrations). The value of this occasion, as McGimpsey sees it, is that (in contrast to the Twelfth) Paisley would have no involvement in it and Molyneaux would have the stage entirely to himself.

McGimpsey suspects, however, that the OUP leader will find some reason to reject this proposal. It is an open secret within the OUP that Molyneaux is happy with the way events turned out earlier in the summer and is in no hurry to see the initiative resumed. His instinct would be to say nothing further in public about the process and to sit tight until

the general election begins to cast its shadow.

The preference of McGimpsey - and, he indicated, that of Maginnis and others in the party - would be for an early resumption of the talks. He would personally be content with a fresh gap between two Conference meetings which would be no longer than that arranged earlier this year. He and Maginnis, who had the task of preparing the OUP's position on Articles Two and Three, were frustrated by the failure of the recent talks to reach the second strand. They were, he claimed, anxious to reach this stage as they had a certain "strategy" to propose to the Irish Government in relation to Articles Two and Three. They would very much like to see talks starting off again from the point at which they were broken off in early July. Should that happen, McGimpsey could imagine the second strand being reached quite quickly.

McGimpsey underlined at several points the need for the OUP to distance itself from Paisley in any future talks. He was dismissive of the DUP leader's recent negative remarks about the process. In rejecting Sir Ninian Stephen, for example, Paisley was reverting to the uncooperative and difficult attitude he had displayed throughout the chairmanship discussion. (While the OUP had accepted Sir Ninian Stephen more or less immediately, Paisley and Robinson had mounted an elaborate pretence that they had to consult supporters in Australia and could not give their consent until this exercise - entirely bogus in the OUP's view - had been completed). McGimpsey believes that Paisley was simply "trying to be difficult" and he is confident that, if talks ever resume and the second strand is reached, the DUP leader will find it possible to accept Sir Ninian Stephen after all.

McGimpsey said that, if talks do not resume, he and Maginnis

hope to pursue an "open dialogue" with the Irish Government on the subject of Articles Two and Three. He indicated that they are thinking in terms of a series of public speeches not only by Unionists but also by politicians in the South (with whom McGimpsey is in regular contact) who have called for the repeal of these Articles.

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