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Reference Code: 2021/50/113

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Strictly Confidential

Lower Ormeau Road - Meeting with LOCC

Belfast, 2 July 1996

1. I met with a number of the members of the Lower Ormeau Concerned Community to discuss the routing of the Orange Order parade on 12 July next. Much of the discussion was led by John Gormly and Gerry Rice. The meeting had gone on for about 30 minutes before they revealed (though I had intimations that something was afoot from other sources) that they were in contact with Deputy Chief Ronnie Flanagan and that he had offered them a deal on the parade issue. Flanagan had began his offer by asking what it would take for the LOCC to agree to a parade this year. In strictest confidence, they told me that the proposed deal, outlined to them verbally by Flanagan, included the following:
 - a deal in writing that would be signed by the LOCC, the RUC (Flanagan with Chief Constable Annesley's backing) and the local Orange lodge (Ballynafeigh).
 - the deal would agree that all future parades by the three loyalist groups (Orange, Black and Apprentice) down the Lower Ormeau would only be permitted with the consent of the residents of the area and that this would become RUC policy.
 - in return, the Twelfth parade this year by the Ballynafeigh Lodge and the Royal Black Perceptory parade in August would be allowed to proceed down the Lower Ormeau.
 - that the RUC would stand over this deal in years to come even as and when Flanagan moves on.
 - that failure by the Ballynafeigh Lodge to sign the deal would mean that they forfeited the right to march this year.
 - that the LOCC would be able to call in whomever they wished to witness the deal to help ensure that those parties to it (essentially the RUC) would be held to it.
 - that the deal would be accompanied by a joint LOCC/RUC/Orange Order press release.
 - that the RUC could impose any conditions they wished on the nature of the Orange parade (e.g. that it would involve only local Lodge members and would be silent as it passed along the Lower Ormeau, that there would be no hangers-on)
2. The LOCC were in considerable mental agony about this offer. In particular they were concerned that:
 - Flanagan was resistant to the idea that they could propose the deal to a public meeting;

he was insisting that they had to have the power to sign such a deal as the committee representing the community. They were concerned that if they signed a deal which soured, they would lose the confidence of the local community, a point reinforced by the public meeting on the Garvaghy which they had attended last week (see report). (Gormly wryly spoke of feeling that he was in the Collins' dilemma; sign without referral back and bedamned or refuse to sign and bedamned.)

- they could not trust Flanagan who was doing this simply to get the Orange Order what they wanted through guile.
- if they refused to agree to the deal and the matter became public, that they would lose public sympathy, including that of the Government.
- if they signed prior to this weekend and publicly agree to a Twelfth march, they would put pressure on the Garvaghy Road residents to agree to the mini-Twelfth parade on Sunday next.
- despite Flanagan's assurances, the RUC would not stand over this deal in the long term and would revert to their normal interpretation of the public order legislation (i.e. a numbers game).
- the local Orange lodge would never sign (particularly in light of para.6 below), that if they did, they did so only to get through this year and then disown the agreement, saying that no officer or lodge could have the power to commit the Order to such a deal (as has been said in the past).
- they may have won their case in any case and that there would not be any further parades down the Lower Ormeau and that agreement this year was unnecessary.
- they may be pressured to agree before the Garvaghy Road decision, a decision which would significantly colour their view of the RUC's *bona fides*.
- they had not seen any text.

3. At the same time, the deal offered immense benefits if adhered to;

- they could effectively stand down, safe in the knowledge that consent, as least in terms of the Lower Ormeau, was accepted by the RUC and possibly the local Orange Lodge.
- that this deal would set a helpful precedent for other areas like the Garvaghy and Dunloy.

4. In the course of a long discussion in which we teased out the various aspects of the deal, I made the following points;

- that the RUC were genuinely attempting to reconstruct their image to present themselves

as a balanced and impartial police force, that the parade issue did the greatest damage to that effort, and that senior figures in the RUC were genuinely interested in removing themselves, to some extent at least, from the no-win situation which the parade issue presented.

- that Flanagan was to the fore in this debate and that he had been exploring the legal possibilities to hand under existing public order legislation and was therefore probably speaking with some confidence when he said that he could interpret the public order legislation to mean that lack of local consent would likely lead to a breach of the peace and thus allow the RUC to reroute in the absence of consent.
 - that it would be very difficult to see the RUC renege on a deal at a later stage if constituted as outlined by Flanagan, particularly if it explicitly linked the consent to a new interpretation of the public order legislation.
 - that the Lower Ormeau was easily policed compared to the Garvaghy Road in that the bridge served as a natural break and which could be effectively blocked by a small number of RUC vehicles.
 - that if the price of getting the RUC to commit to the principle of consent for the Lower Ormeau was a small (about forty members), local and silent Orange Parade along the road (and a Royal Black Perceptory parade in August) that that, if acceptable to the community, may be a small price to pay.
 - that such a precedent was a very valuable one in attempting to defuse other areas of tension, particularly if the Orange Lodge signed on.
 - the decision was one for the LOCC alone.
 - that they should clearly fully explore the full potential of Flanagan's offer.
 - irrespective of whether they signed or not, the Government's position remained that the parades should be governed by the principle of consent and that they should not occur in the area or along a route they are unwelcome.
5. They had prepared a response to Flanagan (copy attached) and were due to meet him again to discuss the issue further. While we agreed to stay in touch, they said that they would not discuss the matter in any detail over the phone.
 6. In the course of the meeting, reference was made to the painting of the curb stones at the weekend (Saturday night) above the bridge. (I had driven there on Saturday morning and was struck by the handsome and prosperous aspect of the street above the bridge as opposed to the slightly run-down look of the Lower Ormeau on the city side. Prior to the meeting on Tuesday, I again toured the area and the dramatic impact of the garish ribbon of red, white and blue paint for some 400-500 yards on both sides along the road is remarkable and takes considerably from the appearance of the area.) According to the

LOCC, the painting was organised by Pauline Gilmore of the Right to March group. They claim that a white van came from East Belfast with a crew of men (none younger than 18) to do the job. Ms Glimore, who has been to the forefront of opposition to the LOCC, lives in East Belfast and is alleged to be close to the UDA there. The LOCC further said that Noel Liggett of the Ballynafeigh Lodge was developing contact with the UDP rather than the more pragmatic and conciliatory Hutchinson of the PUP.

7. Finally, they gave me a copy of the results of the Coopers and Lybrand opinion poll as reported in the *Irish Times* on Tuesday last (attached). The survey showed that 92% of residents of the Lower Ormeau should not be allowed 'pass through areas where the opposite tradition are in the majority'. The survey also showed that 80% favoured rerouting, only around 16% favoured banning and that 61% believed that the Orange Order should voluntarily reroute. The survey also bears out an earlier assessment that Alasdair McDonnell received only about 25% of the 30 May vote in the area; in the survey 23% said they favoured a limited number of parades, the position hitherto advocated by McDonnell as representing the view of the majority of residents.

Comment

8. If the LOCC account of the meeting is accurate (bearing in mind what happened in Portadown last year, the potential for 'miscommunication' remains immense), then Flanagan was apparently offering to deliver a major change in RUC policy by endorsing the principle of consent for future years in the Lower Ormeau. To do this without the agreement of the local Orange Lodge would be quite a risky venture which would put the RUC directly at odds with loyalist organisations both in the area and beyond. Frankly, I cannot see the Orange Order agreeing to such a deal. It would be certainly a test of RUC resolve to proceed without agreement on both sides. Clearly the course of future meetings between Flanagan, the LOCC and the Orange Order will be critical to whether or not a deal as outlined above will develop to the point of agreement.



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4 July 1996

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