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13 February 1997

Tairiagh
This is a quite significant report, on a number of issues

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

hkh
17/2/97

COPY TO:
PST
PSS
MR. P TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T DALTON

Dear Secretary,

Conversation with John Taylor MP

John Taylor was my guest to lunch today at Bibendum, the restaurant in the converted Michelin Tyre depot on the Fulham Road.

The general election in Northern Ireland

Taylor spoke with zest about the forthcoming election campaign in Northern Ireland.

There are prospects, he believes, of two UUP gains. In North Down, Bob McCartney has alienated both the Loyalists and the important group of Unionist voters who could be described as moderate and well to do. Although the UUP candidate Alan McFarland is low key - he would be too quiet and decent, Taylor said, to call McCartney "Paisley's poodle", as Taylor himself has done - the UUP has a real chance of taking the seat.

Peter Robinson is in difficulty in East Belfast. He too has lost the Loyalist vote. This has gone largely to the PUP, with slogans appearing on walls to the effect

that "Paisley is no Carson". The Alliance Party has chosen a Catholic candidate, Joe Hendron's brother Jim. Taylor said that he knew I would not misunderstand him if he were to say that this is a tactical mistake by Alliance in a heavily Presbyterian constituency. The likely UUP candidate Reg Empey, a local resident with strong church connections and a former mayor of Belfast, has a real chance of taking the seat.

Taylor himself is standing against Peter Robinson's wife Iris and is confident of winning, although part of his constituency has been attached to Martin Smyth's in the recent redrawing of constituency boundaries.

On the Nationalist side, Taylor is hopeful that Joe Byrne will win West Tyrone for the SDLP. On the other hand Adams is likely to win in West Belfast and Martin McGuinness may win mid Ulster from Rev. William McCrea.

Taylor said that an eleven-strong UUP team at Westminster would be a boost for the talks process after the election.

The talks

Taylor said that it is essential to preserve the Stormont talks. To the degree that the talks process is undermined, the Loyalist ceasefire is under threat. If the two governments act over the heads of the participants, there is a danger that street politics will take over on the Unionist side.

Taylor stated that the UUP has moved decisively to save the talks at three critical junctures: the appointment of Mitchell, the adoption of rules of procedure, and the adoption of the agenda for the opening plenary. This is proof of UUP commitment.

Taylor acknowledged that there are suggestions that a further step might now be taken in advance of the general election, to do with an agreement on the substantive agenda and on the mandates for the subcommittee on decommissioning and the independent commission. But Taylor said that he will strongly urge David Trimble not to agree to any further breakthrough in advance of the general election. It is the wrong time. The UUP is under pressure from "unreasonable people" in the shape of Paisley and McCartney. It has not received much credit from "reasonable people", like Alderdice and Mallon, for the steps it has been willing to take in the past.

The talks in the post-election period

Taylor said that in the post-election period, with secure mandates for the following five years, political leaders should be able to make progress in the talks. Correcting himself, Taylor said that he was not implying that it will take five years to reach an agreement. The UUP and the SDLP, and the UUP and the Irish government, would have to meet far more frequently, perhaps away from Stormont, to work up proposals which could then be pursued inside the talks with a view to obtaining a formal imprimatur.

As Taylor was not focussing on the details of the talks themselves, I asked him if he was implying that the Stormont Talks, in their official form, will move onto the substantive agenda in May or June. Taylor agreed with this, but underlined the potential for fruitful contacts outside the strict framework of the talks.

Overall, Taylor described himself as hopeful. The great strength of moderate leaders is that they will have the people behind them both North and South of the border. The IRA can in due course be isolated.

Decommissioning

I asked Taylor how in practice that talks would make the transition from the opening plenary to the three-stranded negotiations. In particular I wondered how point 2(b) regarding the parties' commitment to decommissioning, could best be handled.

Taylor's first line of approach was to doubt whether Sinn Fein will come into the negotiating process.

I said that whatever the likelihood of Sinn Fein entry, it is a delicate matter of political judgement for the SDLP and for the Irish government to determine how wide open the door should be against the day that the Republicans have a change of heart. I said that if Sinn Fein contrives to give signals that a ceasefire is imminent, there will be particular pressure on Nationalists not to close the door. In saying this, I acknowledged that some of my interlocutors at Westminster would argue that to maintain a wide open door indefinitely is not the way to concentrate minds in the Republican movement.

I asked Taylor for his response to the concepts that (i) the Mitchell Report should be the basis for the handling of decommissioning and (ii) the structure of the negotiations, with each committee subordinate to plenary, implies a regular opportunity to review progress.

Taylor showed some non-committal interest in the latter point, mentioning cryptically that there could be a review after eight weeks, or every eight weeks, of progress on decommissioning. Taylor then embarked on an exposition of his own views on decommissioning.

Taylor said that he himself is one of the Unionist politicians who argued that the 1994 ceasefire could be genuine. In the light of subsequent events, the view of the Unionist voters is that the ceasefire was not genuine. Taylor will suffer some loss of support as a result.

Against this background, it is a mistake to use terminology such as "a renewal of the ceasefire". What is needed from the Unionist point of view is a "new ceasefire". The Republican movement must be willing to do something to symbolise that this time things will be different.

Although he is not a member of the Executive Committee of the Unionist Party, Taylor was invited to attend the meeting of the Executive Committee at the end of September at which the decommissioning issue was discussed. He did so as the representative of the Parliamentary Party. Towards one o'clock, the participants were driven in limousines to an hotel at a previously unannounced location in south Antrim for a lunch which lasted from 1 pm to 9 pm. This lunch Taylor described as "one of the few Unionist functions I have enjoyed in my life". It was this gathering which produced the document on decommissioning which Trimble launched at a press conference on the last Monday of September.

Taylor acknowledged that the document is complicated. He argued, however, that the essential message, on which he personally had a strong influence, is as follows:

- * Sinn Fein can enter the talks process, that is, attend the conference plenary, on the basis of a ceasefire. Presumably they will use the occasion of attending plenary to accept the Mitchell principles
- * before the Unionists will engage in actual negotiations with Sinn Fein, there must be some hand-over of weapons by both the IRA and the Loyalists. Taylor described this as a "gesture" which will make it psychologically

possible for Unionist voters and politically possible for Unionist politicians to accept the reality of the ceasefire.

Taylor was adamant that the "gesture" he has in mind could be the decommissioning of a few hundred revolvers on each side. He knows, as (he said) the IRA knows, that this will have no effect on the capacity of the IRA, both because of the quantities of material they possess and because a few hundred revolvers are easily replaced. The whole issue should be understood in terms of psychology. The significance of the Unionist paper is that at bottom it implies a readiness to include Sinn Fein in negotiations, and to do it quickly, and at a price which ought to be payable by them.

Taylor went on to describe a manoeuvre at the Forum in November in which Peter Robinson was involved and which had the result of distancing the DUP from its previous demand, that all weapons should be handed over before Unionists negotiate with the IRA.

The role of the Irish government

I asked Taylor whether the UUP is coming to recognise the positive role of the Irish government as the facilitator of an agreement in the talks. Taylor said that this is an idea which it may prove possible to develop in contacts with the UUP after the general election.

Taylor spoke with evident warmth of the Taoiseach, but added that it might have been better - although it is too late to change now - for the Taoiseach's visit to Northern Ireland to happen after rather than before the general election.

The British general election

Taylor volunteered that he "doubts if the government will fall" as a result of Labour's censure motion against the Minister for Agriculture Douglas Hogg next Monday 17 February.

Taylor also expressed some doubt about the much talked about scenario under which Mr. Major would call a general election next week in order to avoid humiliation in the Wirral South by-election. In Taylor's view to fight shy of the by-election would in itself be a blow to the Conservatives' election prospects.

Taylor is cautiously of the view that the general election will be on 1st May.

The marching season

Taylor expressed very deep concern about the forthcoming marching season. He has himself encountered some revealing examples of moderate Unionists and former supporters of the Alliance Party saying that "enough is enough" and that "if I've got to choose, I am a Unionist". There is every scope for a wholesale mobilisation of Protestants. There is talk, for example, of a "rally" in Dunloy which could bring 20,000 people to a village which is "only a crossroads". It would not take much to bring 100,000 people to Drumcree.

Taylor said that this mood is something he personally regrets. He described himself as "not much of a Drumcree man" and added that he lost the leadership of the UUP over Drumcree.

Without pressing Taylor or going into detail about potential routes, I asked him how he sees the situation in Drumcree being resolved this year. Taylor emphasised first of all the need for mediation. The prominence of McKenna in the residents' group means that the mediation will have to be indirect. The Quakers may have a role to play. Taylor believes an Orange march will have to pass down the Garvaghy Road. He did not see much advantage in suggestions floated last year that the march could be presented as something other than an Orange march. One idea in which he did seem interested was that the march could be held well in advance of the 12th July and could therefore be presented as something different to a repetition of last year or the year before.

Taylor believes that the UUP has behaved creditably over Harryville and that it may make gains in the local elections in Ballymena as a result. Ian Paisley junior played a role in developing the protest at Harryville and at other locations and is in Taylor's estimation little better than a thug. Paisley senior has intervened for political reasons. Taylor remarked more light-heartedly that Ian Paisley senior is completely at odds with Presbyterian traditions in the manner in which he retains the leadership of the Free Presbyterians from year to year - an arrangement which seems to have been borrowed directly from the Vatican!

Taylor down-played the significance of boycotts of Protestant businesses. He believes that other than in Pomeroy and Castledearg the disruption has been limited and that matters are now improving again.

There
is a
my understanding
here - it is
not a
July
march
at all.

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Taylor sees the new Grand Master of the Orange Order, Robert Saulters, as a genuine but limited man. Saulters has made a tactical error in not visiting the Dunloy lodge.

IRA killing in Bessbrook

Taylor with much regret tends to the view that the IRA killing of a soldier in Bessbrook must be seen as part of a strategy rather than as an isolated attack by a faction hostile to Adams. Taylor detects a geographical pattern in IRA activity whereby actions are gradually being carried out across the whole area of Northern Ireland.

With an absence of bitterness, Taylor said that incidents like that in Bessbrook will erode the sympathy of an incoming Labour government for bringing Sinn Fein into negotiations.

Arrests in Markethill

Taylor was deeply concerned that three UVF men were arrested in Markethill last Monday. According to rumour they had a firearm. The place of their arrest was such that they cannot have been en route to Newry or to the South. The fear must be that there is a connection with Seamus Mallon's residency in the area.

Comment: as it happens I had dinner with Seamus Mallon on Monday. Seamus had just been speaking to a junior RUC man who was unable at that point to give a definite read-out on the three arrested men. There was a suspicion in Seamus's mind that the three were associates of Billy Wright. As I was depositing him at the Tara Hotel, Seamus remarked; "If you read that I've been shot this evening, you'll know it's not true."

EMU

Taylor expressed concern that in the early phase of EMU, the participating currencies will lose ground against Sterling and the Dollar, making it more difficult for exporters in Northern Ireland to develop business with the South. However, in the course of conversation it became clear that Taylor has a very modest vision of the potential for North-South trade, describing it as at best a

"nice bonus" for firms in the North.

Conclusions

I would draw the following main conclusions from my conversation with Taylor:

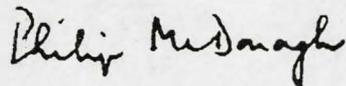
- * there is little or no likelihood that the UUP will facilitate a further breakthrough in the talks in Belfast before the general election
- * on the other hand, there may be a considerable readiness to do so after the election, and to back this up by contact with ourselves outside the framework of the talks, provided the decommissioning issue can be solved
- * it was difficult to judge whether Taylor's position on decommissioning should be understood as a bid to close the door on Sinn Fein or as a means of allowing Sinn Fein into the negotiations under conditions "psychologically" acceptable to Unionists. In either case, the gap between the SDLP and the UUP in this area remains wide
- * Taylor's interpretation of the Unionist position is that Sinn Fein can be brought rapidly into the talks on the basis of a "new ceasefire" and a readiness to accept the Mitchell principles. On my understanding, any subsequent delay in embarking on substantive negotiations will involve a stand-off *within the talks* between Sinn Fein and the Unionists until such time as the paramilitaries make a gesture on decommissioning - or the UUP revises its approach. This seems to me to weaken the British argument that a "fixed date" for Sinn Fein entry into the talks would cause the Unionists to walk out
- * as far as Taylor is concerned, the Irish government could under certain circumstances become a welcome and positive ingredient in the talks process from a UUP point of view. One of the pleasant quirks in Taylor's character is his immense severity in private about Paisley and Paisleyism. His willingness to tackle McCartney at a press conference this week shows that this is more than just Dublin-directed tact
- * Taylor believes that an Orange march down the Garvaghy Road is essential, but is ready to explore the aspects of timing and conditions. (On Monday evening, Seamus Mallon, who seemed open to the case for a Nationalist

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gesture in Dunloy, was very fearful of the consequences of allowing an Orange march on the Garvaghy Road. For his part he was interested in the option of altering the route so that only the first part of the Garvaghy Road would be utilised by the marchers.)

- * I felt that Taylor was giving me a palpable signal that the Unionists will not bring down the government on Monday. From Mo Mowlam's office I know that this corresponds with the expectations of the Labour Party. As to the longer term, I felt I was getting a weak and provisional signal, but a signal nonetheless, that the Unionists may facilitate John Major if he intends to hold out for an election on 1 May.

Yours sincerely,



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor