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PAB/4896/DP

FROM: J E McCONNELL, PAB
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MINISTERIAL CONTACTS WITH UNIONISTS

The purpose of this paper is to draw together the various contacts Ministers have had with unionists, over the past year or so, and to identify patterns and trends. The paper also looks to the future and seeks to analyse how the situation might be improved further.

Present situation

2. There is little doubt that a number of contacts take place between Ministers and unionist MPs where there is a guarantee of total confidentiality. The greatest opportunity for such exchanges is within the privacy of the House of Commons and most MPs have taken the opportunity at some point or another to have a word with at least one Minister on matters concerned specifically with constituency issues or to pursue discussions on a broader base. Amongst those who have contacts of this type are Cecil Walker, Martin Smyth, Roy Beggs and Ken Maginnis and they most frequently would meet Dr Mawhinney and Mr Needham. However such contact is not restricted to the OUP and Robinson, McCrea and to a lesser extent Paisley have all taken opportunity to pursue individual cases. It is apparent also that Molyneaux is increasingly finding it possible to discuss matters with the Secretary of State and also to allow this to be known in senior unionist party circles.

3. However all is not sweetness and light and at least two, John Taylor and Harold McCusker, refuse to make contact and on occasions

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have been offensive. An example of this attitude was Taylor's boorish behaviour towards Dr Mawhinney at the recent Cambridge Union Debate.

4. There are also some indications that some of the MPs are prepared to take this contact beyond the total privacy of the House or indeed the relative security of conferences such as BIA. We have therefore circumstances where Cecil Walker writes relatively freely to both Dr Mawhinney and Mr Needham, and also the Reverend McCrea wrote recently to Mr Needham and Rev Martin Smyth to Dr Mawhinney on a constituency matter. Further we have had examples where some MPs have gone so far as to meet Ministers without any attempt at secrecy. The most public example of course being the recent deputation which met with the Secretary of State (and later the Prime Minister) to discuss Harland and Wolff but we have also had examples where the Reverend Martin Smyth has been to see Mr Viggers (albeit on behalf of the Orange Order on fair employment) and to visit Dr Mawhinney on education business. It is also interesting that, to some extent, Unionist MPs generally know what others are doing and we have the recent example of the Secretary of State's invitation to the political leaders to come and speak to him about security which Molyneaux declined but offered Ken Maginnis instead.

5. There is however a transition in attitude when we move from the Westminster scene to the local scene and also come down from MPs to others lower in the political strata. A few local politicians have been prepared to meet the Secretary of State and other Ministers in public or semi-public meetings. The obvious ones that spring to mind are Billy Bleakes (Mayor of Lisburn) who was photographed with the Secretary of State and Tom Benson (Chairman of Ards District Council) who had lunch with the Secretary of State in Greyabbey. Junior Ministers have met with quite a number of local councillors and we publicly had Alderman Dixie Gilmore (at the time Lord Mayor of Belfast) photographed with Mr Needham at CastleCourt and Jack Allen, Mayor of Antrim, at a Sports Council lunch for Ulster athletes going to the Seoul Olympic Games. These are but a few of numerous examples but it should not be forgotten that very often a

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political price is attached to these meetings. Thus Benson in Newtownards remains under censure, and still under threat, in his area because of his attendance at a private lunch. Gilmore in Belfast was forced into the situation where he could not accept an invitation if it was known in advance that a Minister would attend but he simply said he would not walk out if he and a Minister arrived at the same point unintentionally though he later co-hosted, with Dr Mawhinney, a Community Relations function in Stormont. Bleakes is also under fire from his local constituency group.

6. It should not be forgotten that many unionist-controlled councils still have embargoes against Ministers being invited onto council property. Thus this applies in Belfast in relation to the City Hall, Belfast Castle and the Ulster Hall; nor should it be forgotten that Mr Needham was recently turned away from a conference on abused children because the conference was being held on Craigavon Council property. It is clear therefore that even in those areas where individual councillors on individual occasions feel it appropriate to meet with Ministers either privately or in a small group there are few who have sufficient courage to do so openly and publicly and none prepared to go against council policy of barring Ministers from Council property.

Analysis of patterns

7. There seems to be a fairly well developed pattern that most MPs from both wings of unionism have sufficient confidence in their own position, and the backing of their leader, to use their privilege and position in the House of Commons to maintain some channels of communication with Ministers especially where they feel a need on constituency matters. This same level of confidence does not extend within Northern Ireland nor further down the political structure and it is only a few senior unionist councillors, who have unassailable local positions who feel able to go against the tide. Nonetheless given the opportunity of attending a private dinner or some other closed function many will certainly take the opportunity to buttonhole a Minister. There is fairly strong evidence that this would be much more on the Ulster Unionist side than the DUP although

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within recent months, as the elections approach, there are some signs of a hardening of attitude even within the UUP. This is almost inevitable given that they will be in competition and neither would wish to be seen to be the one who weakened. It may also be that more junior councillors are really unaware of the contact in Westminster and believe they are carrying out the wishes of the leadership.

8. The most interesting aspect of all this is the geographical and hierarchical differences. The closer to the centre, in both senses, the greater the apparent freedom of movement. Thus in Westminster there is more contact than in Belfast and in Belfast there is more contact than west of the Bann. Similarly MPs will more readily break the boycott than unionist councillors in Belfast who will do so more readily than others in the extremes of the Province. Mayors and Chairmen feel freer than individual councillors. There remain a few unionists on the fringes of politics, in the sense of not holding elected office, who also apparently feel bounded by the policies of their party. There are a few notable exceptions, mainly members of the CDP, who nonetheless are prepared to meet with Ministers only in the circumstances of strictest confidentiality.

Future developments

9. To all intents and purposes therefore the absolute policy of boycott lies in tatters. On grounds of expediency and of necessity contacts are occurring at all levels allowing a free exchange of information. There will be a temporary diminution in this as the May and June elections approach but there seems every prospect that in the aftermath of those elections contacts will continue and indeed develop further. What is not clear is whether there will actually be a formal revocation of the boycott policy. This seems unlikely given the declaration by numerous unionists that they are bound by their manifesto policy. On the other hand it has been put to many senior unionists that the manifesto commitment is of their own making. In other words they drew up the manifesto, had they not included this proviso in it, they would have been elected anyway. It remains for them therefore to withdraw what many of them

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privately declare to be a wasteful and counterproductive bar to political dialogue.

10. In the absence of a reversal of this policy it seems unlikely that for the immediate future Ministers will be granted access to unionist controlled council property nor will we see unionist-led delegations coming to see Ministers on matters of local concern. There is however a political price for unionists to pay because of this. Many people at grassroots level are aware that frequent contacts "must take place" and therefore the strict adherence of their councils to the boycott policy is operating to their local detriment. There have been some indications therefore that a number of local groups are prepared to take initiatives of their own seeking to approach Ministers on issues which would normally be the prerogative of councillors. This may not in the event translate itself into a withdrawal of electoral support from unionist councillors but cannot go unnoticed in local areas. It could be therefore that as matters progress later this year councillors may be forced by local pressures (in the same way that the leaders were forced over Harland and Wolff) to come forward to discuss with Ministers matters of local importance.

Ministerial options

11. The question arises therefore as to how the current situation could be improved and whether Ministers could exploit to advantage the existence of current contacts to develop new ones. There is no doubt that many people in the community suspect, even if they don't know, that many contacts already exist. Therefore to make some allusion to them would do little to alter the current position of those who are steadfastly sticking to the boycott to come forward. However they might be pushed into a different position by their grassroot supporters, if it could be clearly demonstrated that their intransigence was localised and detrimental to their community. However to do so Ministers would need to be reasonably specific about circumstances in which others had broken the boycott to the benefit of those they represented. For a number of reasons this would carry certain penalties and act to discourage those with whom

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links already existed . First it would be a breach of confidence because many of those who come forward do so only on the assurance that no public capital will be made of it. Second, it would provide ready ammunition for political opponents to accuse those who had made contact of treachery and complicity with HMG. And third, it would cause resentment and ill will within the individual parties and could easily squeeze some of the most moderate elements out of unionism to be replaced by more hardline characters. On balance therefore in the continuing climate of a gradual erosion of the boycott there seems little advantage in any public pronouncements other than in making as much capital as possible out of the public meetings which have already taken place. In private, however, Ministers, without breaching confidences, should make it quite clear what is happening so that pressure can be exerted where possible. Ministers could also publicly ask for consultation with politicians about local decisions on major expenditure matters eg roads, hospitals, schools etc and then make it clear to the general public that the decisions have been reached on reasonable grounds but without the involvement of unionist representatives. This might also help to achieve some pressure on politicians to return to normal dialogue.

12. The aftermath of the May elections will be an interesting period. There may be a further relaxation as new councillors enter the scene who do not feel themselves constrained by the rhetoric of the past 3 years. On the other hand it could easily be as has been predicted, many moderates either decide not to stand or are not elected, and some unionist-controlled councils may go back on the progress that has been made. This would create a different picture and in these circumstances it might be entirely appropriate for the Secretary of State or other Ministers to point out the political realities of life, in very direct terms, to those seeking to enforce a boycott policy. This may well involve giving fairly specific examples but the impact on those involved might be lessened because if councils had taken a significant lurch away from moderation many of those currently concerned may no longer be playing the game. This will need to be the subject of analysis later in the year.

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Conclusion

13. In conclusion the main points are that

- (i) there are contacts at varying levels, and to varying degrees, with unionists;
- (ii) we should seek to maintain and develop such contacts.
- (iii) we should avoid making reference to any specific encounters which might be counterproductive to developing these contacts, but
- (iv) we should demonstrate to the unionist public that decisions are being made on their future without the help of their elected representatives - one man's road problem is another man's Harland & Wolff.
- (v) if the situation deteriorated we could identify how useful such contacts have been to unionists in the recent past.

[Signed]

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