

From: Allen McVeigh
Political Affairs Division
3 September 1996

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mrs Collins - B
Mr T Smyth - B
Mr Lavery - B
HMA Dublin - B
Mr Whysall - B
Mrs Mapstone - B
Mr Carson - B

Mr Maccabe

SEAMUS CLOSE: "DON'T SPARE THE ROD"

At last night's reception for the Irish Summer Institute I sat alongside a pessimistic Seamus Close during supper. Incidentally, his mood was not an isolated one but was shared by others including some of the American visitors, who earlier in the day had a 'warts and all briefing' by the Housing Executive which touched on inter-community strife at the peacelines and which clearly had an effect. I expect Sir David Fell's rounded but optimistic introductory remarks and the congeniality of Hillsborough to have helped restore the balance with the visitors. The following points may be of interest.

2. He confirmed, when asked, that Alliance had no contact with the other parties last month and as far as he was aware, the same applied across the board. (It can't just be down to everyone recharging their batteries for September!). He mentioned Alliance's forthcoming meeting with Michael Ancram at the end of the week (as I recall he mentioned Thursday though I understand it has been arranged for early Friday morning: to avoid any mix-up this may

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require double checking when seeking details of their delegation, etc). He also indicated that an Alliance delegation will be meeting with the Taoiseach (almost immediately?) afterwards.

3. His pessimistic outlook was in similar vein to that adopted by Lord Alderdice when he met the Prime Minister back on 18 July, reflected in John Holmes' minute of the same date. (Drumcree will not easily slip from Seamus Close's - or anyone else's - memory). His residual scepticism that the Chief Constable, and he alone, had sole operational responsibility for Drumcree continues to itch (he also holds to the view that the outgoing Chief Constable should have resigned - or been sacked): at the same time he welcomed the 'correct appointment' of Ronnie Flanagan as Chief Constable-designate which we concurred meets with almost universal (even if qualified in some quarters) approval.

4. When I asked him what he thought was needed to kick-start the Talks, he said (not for the first time) that it was long past time for the Government to take a firm grip and, if necessary, 'apply the big stick': there was an unspoken admission that the parties (in the main, Unionist) needed someone else to take the hard decisions (and the blame!) for them, being incapable of doing so themselves. I suggested that the stakes were too high for such a high risk strategy and that collective responsibility and agreement had to be the way forward. Nevertheless, he thought a shift in direction was required. While stopping short of a free admission ticket for Sinn Fein (a restored ceasefire is a minimum requirement), he thought their entry to talks hurdle should be lowered somewhat; unfortunately I was unable to explore exactly what he envisaged. The Unionists would undoubtedly walk out, but in his view only for a while; he considered that it would be easier to get them back in than trying to persuade Sinn Fein to join. Against that he could not envisage the latter wanting admission, having no incentive to do so, in the foreseeable future, when by just sitting back others were throwing away potential winning hands.

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5. Regarding the Forum, he thought that others would continue to try and mould it to do what it was not intended to do, but gave no indication that Alliance were at a point (yet) of going down the same path as the SDLP. It was unfortunate, he said, that the Forum recommenced before the Talks which only played into the hands of 'the others' seeking to heighten the former's profile. Incidentally, he told me that he had given an interview (to RTE?) about the Forum starting back, in which the interviewer had concentrated on its (extravagant) cost and which he attempted to play down. He was very diplomate when the diner at his other elbow asked about John Gorman's position.

6. Even in the area of local government, Seamus was, to begin with, caught up with its bad rather than good points. He told me, perhaps not surprisingly for someone after twenty four years involvement, that he was already giving thought to whether or not to stand again in next year's LGE. He did however become more upbeat when talking about the many Lisburn BC projects which should start to bear fruit in the next couple of years. Also, while he was pleased for his leader on gaining his peerage there was a little whiff of jealousy. He told me that it was a safe bet that Peter Osborne (runner-up to John Alderdice at the last selection meeting) would in due course be picked as the Alliance flag bearer to contest the East Belfast parliamentary seat.

Comment

7. I expect Seamus Close reflects the downbeat mood of many, not just in Alliance but across the spectrum both in and outside politics. To get him and other Talks participants from the doldrums of their own making (of either dwelling on what has past or might have been or looking over their shoulders at the actions of erstwhile colleagues) will be no easy task. I don't, however, subscribe to the view that using the rod, tempting though it is to

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use it when patience has evaporated, would produce the desired effect and would instead only confirm that dialogue and reason had terminally failed. Some of the above might be more fully explored on Friday.

8. Those of us returned can only envy those just going off on holiday!

(Signed)

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Further to my note of 30 August, the Alliance Party have confirmed that their talks team will come to Stormont Castle on Friday 6 September at 8.30 am for a meeting with the Minister. Lord Alderdice's Office will let us know exactly who in the next couple of days.

(SIGNED)

ANGELA DULLAGHAN
PS/Michael Antram

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