

Conversation with John Fee, 22 March 1996

1. John Fee, SDLP Councillor, Executive Member and assistant to Séamus Mallon, rang this afternoon. After some brief discussion of security issues of interest to him locally, which had arisen at yesterday's Stocktake meeting, he turned to the British announcement yesterday. He strongly criticised the plans for an election and forum as a "complete and utter disaster". He said that while "our people are in virtual isolation", these plans present no significant problem for non-nationalist parties.
2. On elections, Fee pointed to very strong feeling against them within the SDLP. Parties would have to arrange a "beauty pageant" in each of eighteen constituencies and there would be the additional problem of ensuring that their key negotiators were in fact among the 110 members of the Forum. General and local elections were in any case not far off and there was very little inclination within the party to fight a campaign now.
3. There is a "unanimous view" in the party not to go near the Forum. But Fee added that they would have the problem of the "benign comparisons" which are being made with the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation which ignore the fact that the latter did not succeed (i.e. SF declined to sign up to the Principles document). Unionists would put the emphasis on people being elected to a Forum rather than for negotiations.
4. Fee suggested that Séamus Mallon had been quite moderate in his remarks in various interviews last night criticising the Irish Government for allegedly not keeping the SDLP informed. He said that the SDLP feel "completely and utterly let down". When I responded that there had been a very recent full scale meeting between the Government and the SDLP and daily contact in other formats, he stated that "communication implies that there is some understanding". He went on to express the view that the Irish Government had "not understood how deep the objection to elections is".
5. Fee also criticised the way in which he claimed that decommissioning as a

precondition in all party negotiations would now be legislated for in the elections Bill. He said that the broader nationalist community, including both the SDLP and Sinn Féin, now faced the potential of a grass roots revolt. It would be exceptionally difficult to sell participation in elections. The decision would be "very finely balanced".

6. Fee mentioned that Séamus Mallon had met with Philip McDonagh this morning in London and that both Mallon and John Hume are expected back in the North this afternoon. No notice of an Executive meeting had been yet been issued for tomorrow but Fee expects that the Executive and the General Council will meet either tomorrow or early next week.
7. I responded appropriately to the points made by Fee including by pointing to the need to keep clearly in focus the main objective of moving to all-party negotiations on 10 June. The British announcement yesterday needed to be considered in the context of the entire contents of the package which included the ground rules paper as well as the other papers given to the parties by the British. I highlighted the limitations on the Forum. I asked Fee what he himself would advise in the Executive/Council. He responded that he would "probably, very reluctantly" argue for participation in the elections as a means of moving to all-party negotiations on 10 June but he stressed that he had not made up his mind yet.



Colm Ó Floinn
23 March 1996

cc Secretary Ó hUiginn
Counsellors AI
Ambassador London
Joint Secretary