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Meeting with John Hume

1. I had a long meeting with John Hume in Derry at the weekend.
2. I found him in a bitter and difficult mood. He was also in bad shape personally, and concerned about his health problems, well above and beyond the usual measure.
3. He elaborated his views on why the elective approach was profoundly mistaken. He instanced Trimble's intemperate weekend speech as a sample of what was now in store. "Head bangers" such as McAliskey would be elected because of the constituency basis, and would make the negotiating process unworkable. It would end in "farce and tragedy".
4. He instanced Joe Joyce's article in the Sunday Tribune (which suggests the unionists are now taking ownership of the peace process) as a typical southern failure to understand what was happening in Northern Ireland. The unionist agenda was to undermine the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Prime Minister Major had made clear that his notion of "broad acceptability" meant over-riding the wishes of the whole nationalist community in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government had been sucked into this dangerous agenda and was irresolute and inconsistent in its response to it.
5. Hume stressed the depth of opposition in his party to the proposed measures. He had in no way prompted Mallon's reaction in the House of Commons, but it had expressed the party's feelings.

6. Hume said he had been working on proposals with Adams which, he had hoped, could restore the ceasefire in ten days. The British decisions had now thrown that into disarray. Restoring the ceasefire was the key objective. He would continue to work on it. However, his disillusionment with the Irish Government was now such that he did not propose to share his thinking with us on this point. He would be meeting Gerry Adams within the next couple of days and they would resume their discussion.
7. As to the likely SDLP decision on the election and forum, he said this would be for the party's new management to decide. He was a little vague on when this might be convened or decisions taken. He emphasised however the centrality of a meaningful process of negotiations, and seemed to endorse Mallon's view that a decision should be taken only when the entire picture became clear.
8. He mentioned also that the referendum proposal had been ignored. I said that both Governments were still open to this, and we were in fact doing some internal preparatory work. However, I said it should be handled carefully. It would be unlikely the referendum could be put in precisely the terms he had in mind, the unionists were already climbing aboard with suggestions of their own and he should be aware also of the potentially disruptive effect of a referendum campaign in our jurisdiction which, particularly in the absence of a ceasefire, could have a polarising effect. He did not seem to insist on this point.
9. I spent much of the time taking him through the thinking and tactics of the Irish Government. I said we had done all we could to stress the dangers inherent in the elective process, and the opposition of nationalists in Northern Ireland to it and especially to any forum. We had however, rightly or

wrongly, taken the tactical decision that when given sight of a British paper intended for the parties, to sanitise it as much as possible in several important respects (e.g. no link with negotiations, co-terminous with the negotiating process, consensus, etc.). I went into considerable detail on how we thought the system might work. I suggested there were ways the safeguards might be increased, e.g. the forum to meet only sometime after the negotiations had got into their stride. Hume thought that any such timelag would simply be used by the unionists not to engage seriously in negotiations.

10. I stressed also the dangers of a boycott situation, which would both offer an alibi to the unionists and enable the British to point the finger at nationalists as the ones who undermined negotiations. I suggested the desirability of an early meeting with the Irish Government. Hume agreed abstractly, but without much sense that it was an urgent priority for him. I asked if he had any intention to meet the British at political level. He took a resigned "what's the point?" view of this.
11. I asked him about his contacts with Tony Lake. He said Lake had been in contact with him several times essentially to persuade him to participate. He said he had given Lake "a very strong message".

Comment

12. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from a long but somewhat disjointed and difficult conversation. I would distill the following impressions:

- Even allowing for the palpable physical strains on him, Hume's hard line on the Irish Government is worrying. His resentment seems based

on a belief that the Irish Government is "distancing" the Northern nationalists and failing to understand the dangers of the present unionist agenda to roll back Dublin's role. He is genuinely dismayed and believes the present programme will prove disastrous in practice, and it seems his unquestioned assumption, as it is Mallon's, that sufficiently resolute action by the Irish Government could have staved this off.

- Hume is characteristically keeping his options open, and is waiting for his meeting with Adams to crystallise his tactics.
- The restoration of the ceasefire is his key priority, and he maintains, rightly or wrongly, that the British decision has plunged this into doubt. He sees no merit in any non-inclusive approach.
- He is sufficiently aware of the downside of boycott to make it likely that the SDLP will contest the elections. However, he sees little point in undergoing that ordeal if the negotiations (and hence the forum also) is foredoomed because of unionist attitudes, and the British tendency to buy into their agenda.
- Even with reassurances on that score, the question of SDLP participation in the forum is more problematic. However a successful launch of genuine negotiations might boost that prospect.

Sean Ó hUiginn

25 March 1996