

Confidential

(22)
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London & Washington,
Joint Secretary

Taoiseach
McGrady is normally a
very solid and
middle-of-the-road
person and representative
counsel for
moderation in the SDLP
Meeting with Eddie McGrady MP, 13 May 1996

I met McGrady in his constituency office in Downpatrick. While he was friendly and business-like throughout, an underlying sense of having been let down by the Government - a feeling which, however unjustified, is currently not uncommon within the SDLP - appeared to influence many of his remarks. The following is a brief account of the main points which arose in our conversation. *17.5.96*

The road to all-party negotiations

In response to my opening question about the general mood within the SDLP, McGrady replied, without rancour, that the perception was that the Dublin Government was bending over backwards to appease the unionists and ignoring the interests of nationalists. *my Nolan*
21.5.96

McGrady suggested that the Government had "sold-out" the SDLP by agreeing to the elections and the establishment of the forum. I denied that this was the case, pointing out that the Government had strenuously resisted both proposals. I emphasised that the Government had ultimately accepted the elections with the greatest reluctance and only then because it was necessary to achieve a fixed date for all-party talks. Indeed, it was only through great effort on the Government's part that the British had been persuaded to agree to a fixed date. As regards the forum, I stressed the fact that the Government had succeeded in exerting considerable influence on the nature of the forum and to deny it any role in the negotiations, despite the fact that the Prime Minister was personally committed to the idea and even though ~~that~~ the British considered the forum to be an internal matter.

McGrady said that even British MPs had told him that the fixed date for all-party talks had been conceded in response to the ending of the IRA ceasefire. I denied that this was the case, pointing out that the IRA's action had hindered rather than assisted the Government's efforts. While conceding that the Canary Wharf Bomb had, in a totally unacceptable way, served to focus minds in Westminster, I explained that the general outline of the February Communiqué was emerging before the ending of the IRA ceasefire and that the return of IRA violence had strengthened the British Governments's arguments on the need to reassure unionists. The Government had been obliged to fight very hard to secure the fixed date announced in the 28 February Communiqué.

McGrady also suggested that the Taoiseach had known in advance that the Prime Minister would come out in favour of elections when he addressed the House of

Commons in January, following the publication of the Mitchell report. He complained that he, John Hume and his colleagues had been totally taken by surprise. I explained that while the Taoiseach had been aware from the previous evening that a reference would be made to the International Body's views on the possible role of elections, he did not know until just before the Prime Minister spoke that he was going to present elections as the only alternative to prior decommissioning. I assured McGrady that the Taoiseach was as surprised as Hume at the line taken by the Prime Minister.

McGrady asked why, after the Government had decided to accept the elections option, the SDLP had been allowed to "go over the cliff" on it. I suggested that it should have been apparent to most that, once the Prime Minister had nailed his political credibility to the mast of elections, it would be highly unlikely that the British Government would abandon the idea. I recalled that efforts had been made to bring home to the SDLP that, notwithstanding the Government's efforts, the prospect of elections could not be easily avoided, but that the SDLP had been determined to hold its line.

McGrady asked if the time would come when the Irish Government would stand up to the British Government. I referred again to the significant progress achieved by the Government in fixing a date for all-party talks and suggested that the Government's priority was now to ensure that everyone would be at the table. I assured him that Government would be ready for hard bargaining in the negotiations.

The prospects of an IRA ceasefire

McGrady confessed that he had no idea of whether the IRA would declare a new ceasefire. He expressed the view that people were getting fed-up with the "phoney on-off ceasefire". He asked what the IRA were looking for, and if the Government had any informed view as to whether any forthcoming ceasefire would be genuine or simply tactical. I denied any special insight on the first point, but stressed that the Government would act in good faith in response to any future ceasefire. If a cessation of hostilities was presented as total, the Government would, in the absence of any contrary indications, respond accordingly. That said, I expressed the view that following the abandonment of the last ceasefire nobody could ever be totally sanguine as to the permanence of any future cessation.

McGrady said that the common view among ordinary people was that any further cessation would be purely tactical and that there would be no great euphoria if and when a new ceasefire was announced.

The elections

McGrady said that he would be campaigning energetically and would expect that the

SDLP would pick up three seats in South Down. (Margaret Ritchie, who runs McGrady's office and was a member of the SDLP's team at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, is running as the third SDLP candidate and is hopeful of taking a seat.) However, he pointed out that this was essentially a "new constituency", following the boundary changes, and that it was not possible to make any certain predictions. He pointed out that he picks up a good few "small u" unionist votes in Westminster elections which will probably go to unionist parties in this election.

I asked McGrady about the SDLP's chances in neighbouring Strangford. He speculated that they would have a chance, but did not appear confident. He said that he would be making a couple of sorties into Strangford and North Down where, he noted, the SDLP slate had been reinforced by candidates from South Down. He stressed that one had only to travel 8 miles from Downpatrick to enter a total "dessert" as far as the SDLP was concerned. He pointed out that people in the south of the county failed to realise just how hostile the northern districts were and the extent to which knocking on doors could be physically dangerous for an SDLP candidate. By way of example, he suggested that there would be hard to find be one single SDLP vote in Comber.

The Forum

McGrady stressed his absolute conviction that, whatever was decreed in the legislation, the unionists would attempt to use the forum as a vehicle for obtaining a role in the governance of Northern Ireland. He instanced a number of suggestions that had emerged during the Westminster debate on the legislation, including one by Paisley that the forum should take on a role in relation to planning.

McGrady emphasised that the positive comments in relation to SDLP participation in the forum which he made in London following the adoption of the legislation were prompted by a desire to avoid the appearance that the party were opposed to the type of activities carried out by the Dublin Forum. He noted that the party had now outlined *ex cathedra* a policy of conditional participation with which he was entirely happy.

Preparation for the negotiations

McGrady asked if the Government knew what it wanted from the negotiations. He suggested that the Government had no clear strategy in 1992 and that this lack of direction was compounded by the imminence of the collapse of the FF-PD coalition. I pointed out that while I was not in a position to comment on 1992, the present Government had, in the Framework Document, a very clear understanding of what it might hope to realise in the negotiations, and that planning and preparation for the negotiations were already underway. I also referred to the very strong Ministerial

team likely to be fielded by the Government.

McGrady sought assurances that there would be close liaison between the Government and the SDLP. I replied that I expected cooperation to be at least as close as last time. He proposed a meeting between the Government and the SDLP to coordinate an approach to the negotiations. He argued that this should not be "a meeting at which everybody simply repeated what they had said the day before", but a genuine and detailed discussion. I undertook to pass on this suggestion.

Contact regarding appointments and socio-economic issues

McGrady suggested that he might have more contact with the Department on socio-economic matters and public appointments on which, he reminded me, the Government was required under the Anglo-Irish agreement to represent the views of the nationalist community. I agreed to follow up with him on these matters, while pointing out that the Department was in regular touch with a range of contacts in the nationalist community on these issues and was in no way neglecting its obligations under the Agreement.

David Cooney

David Cooney
Anglo-Irish Division

16 May 1996