

## Discussion with James McMullan

### Independent Nationalist Councillor

#### Ards Borough Council

James McMullan is the sole nationalist councillor on the Ards Borough Council. He represents the Portaferry area which is at the southern tip of the Ards peninsula. McMullan is a man in his late fifties who has been active in local politics for more than twenty years. He is from a farming background and was raised about three miles north of Portaferry. The area between Portaferry and Kircubbin is the only Catholic district in the Council area. The Ards Council is overwhelmingly Unionist. In the 1991 census, Ards had one of the lowest % of Catholics in Northern Ireland (11.3%). The Department has had little contact with local representatives from the area over the years. I spoke with McMullan in Portaferry and the following are some of the points he mentioned.

#### **1. McMullan's position on the Council.**

As the only nationalist on a strongly unionist Council, McMullan believes that he has been relatively well treated. He said that he has built up good personal relations with the unionists and, in particular, with the DUP. The Council has its "share of bigotry" and he mentioned former UUP Councillor, David McNarry, as the main culprit in this regard. However, McMullan feels that in terms of seats on Committees and trips abroad, he has been given his fair share. He said that he has bad relations with the Alliance party who have traditionally taken the bulk of Catholics votes in the Ards area. The Alliance party see the growth of nationalist sentiment in Catholic areas as a threat to their electoral position and are much more antagonistic to him than are the unionists. The Alliance have watched their electoral support, in places like South Belfast and South Antrim, crumble with the growth of the SDLP and are fearful of a similar development in parts of North Down such as the Ards peninsula.

## 2. The Cross-community relations in the area

Catholics and Protestants have traditionally tended to get on well together in the lower Ards area. There is a very sharp geographical border between the two communities and there are few mixed areas. Therefore, there is little friction on a day-to-day basis and in contrast with much of Northern Ireland, there has been little overt sectarianism.

In conversation, McMullan struck me as more of a Catholic than a nationalist politician thought he stressed his nationalist credentials on several occasions. He believes that there is a strong drift towards nationalism, especially among the young, in Portaferry. In the Forum elections, the SDLP out-pollled the Alliance in the area for the first time. This growth of nationalism among Catholics may affect community relations as unionists have tended to regard local Catholics as more "loyal" than their counterparts throughout the North. There is even a small pocket of Sinn Féin support that has emerged recently.

The lower Ards was surprisingly quiet during the Drumcree events. There were no road blockades near Portaferry. The Orangemen did block the road at Greyabbey, 18 miles to the north, but there was very little activity around Loyalist strongholds such as Portavogie. This may have reflected the lack of Loyalist paramilitary involvement in the protests. However, the local Catholics, (Alliance and Nationalist supporters alike) regarded Drumcree as a humiliating experience and the effects are still working their way through the community.

There is growing demand locally for Portaferry to be taken out of the Ards Borough Council area and moved to the Down District Council. Downpatrick is only 10 miles away, via the ferry, while Newtownards is 25 miles away to the north. McMullan pointed out that Rathfriland had been removed from Newry and Mourne and placed in the Banbridge Council area because of its "greater affinity" with unionist Banbridge than with nationalist Newry. He believes that Portaferry would prefer to look towards South Down rather than to unionist North Down. McMullan is also leading a campaign to have a bridge built to replace the present ferry service to Strangford.



### 3. The GAA in Portaferry

The strongest force binding the Catholic community together is the GAA which has more than 300 members in its Portaferry club. The lower Ards is the centre of the game of hurling in County Down. Hurling is the main sporting activity in the locality. There was considerable controversy when the local GAA clubhouse was burnt down in a Loyalist arson attack and the club honoured an RUC man for his attempts to put out the fire. When the club was criticised for this, the President of Portaferry GAA club attacked some of his County Antrim GAA colleagues over their connections with terrorists. However, his remarks went down badly in Portaferry and the President has been removed from his position and replaced by a more Nationalist leaning man. The club has mended its fences with the County Antrim Board (Portaferry teams play in County Antrim leagues). The change in the GAA reflects the overall "greening" of the local Catholic population.

McMullan persuaded the Ards Council to give a grant of £7,500 towards the rebuilding of the clubhouse. This was not an easy task given the Unionist majority on the Council. However, the new regime in the GAA club is reluctant to accept any conditions on the grant and McMullan feels that it might be lost and that this cross-community cooperation gesture by the Council will be rebuffed.

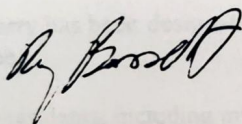
### 4. Relations with the SDLP

McMullan believes that the SDLP will become the main political force in the lower Ards in the future. The Forum elections showed that there is a reasonably strong Nationalist vote in the area. He has applied to SDLP HQ for admission to the party and wants to establish an SDLP branch in the town. The SDLP at present has no members or organisation in the Strangford constituency. His efforts to date have been turned down by SDLP HQ who have refused to give him sanction to establish a local branch. (I understand from SDLP sources that there is bad blood between McMullan and South

Down MP Eddie McGrady.) However, McMullan knows the SDLP will eventually organise in the area and he wants to be part of that development.

## 5. The International Fund for Ireland (IFI)

McMullan criticised the IFI's activities in Portaferry. He was more critical of a local group which he claimed have hijacked the IFI in the town than the IFI itself. He said that Portaferry people woke up one day to find that there was a committee in existence which had applied, on the community's behalf, for IFI funding. He believes that the IFI money which has been allocated under the Crisp scheme to Portaferry has not been well spent. He said that there was a self-perpetuating group in the town who had little local support but always managed to get control of initiatives in the area. These people believed that they were "born to rule" over the locals. He handed me a short note he has written on Portaferry which included his views on the Fund - see attached.



Ray Bassett

Anglo-Irish Division

18 October 1996