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Councillors A-I, Section.
Messrs Teahon, Donlon &
Dalton, Ambassadors
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Secretary

approach

Interesting local
and regional
sidelights here.

Meeting with Councillor Joe Byrne

Ms Nolan
hwh

SDLP Member of Omagh Council

8/10/96

SEEN BY
TADISEACH

(Handwritten mark)

hwh
4-10-96

I met with Joe Byrne, who is the leading SDLP figure in the new West Tyrone constituency. He held the party's pole position at the recent Forum election where the SDLP secured two of the five seats. He has served for four years on the local District Council. SDLP sources describe him as being on the "Catholic" wing of the party. The Omagh branch is regarded as conservative on social issues and more like the old Nationalist party than other branches of the SDLP. An examination of recent election results in the area shows that there is a strong possibility that Byrne will be the constituency's first Westminster MP after the next election. The following issues arose during our meeting.

1. The Boycott

Byrne said that reports of a large-scale boycott of Protestant shops in the west of Northern Ireland were greatly exaggerated. The Unionist community, stung by the public relations disaster over Drumcree, were desperately trying to regain the high moral ground and hence were playing up reports of boycotts. While the situation is not as bad as it was outlined by the Newsletter or the Belfast Telegraph, some Protestant businesses are the subject of a boycott by the Catholic community. He outlined the history of events stating that Protestants began the first boycott when Catholic shops in Roslea were targeted after a Black Preceptory march was blocked from passing through the village last year. That boycott has lasted over 12 months but given the population breakdown in the area, (it is overwhelmingly Catholic), it has had very little effect.

Castlederg

The present Catholic boycott began in Castlederg. Byrne is originally from the town and claims that it has the worst cross-community relations in the North. A local Catholic woman, who is a diabetic, was stopped at a roadblock during the events leading up to

Drumcree while trying to pick up her supply of insulin. Her chemist, a Mr Johnston, was present at the roadblock and was reported to have verbally abused the woman and ordered her home despite her pleas that she needed her medicine badly. Despite persistent attempts, she was refused entry to the town and had to make alternative arrangements to get her insulin. A report of the incident was printed in the local Ulster Herald and subsequently Catholics began to boycott Johnston's shop. There are two Catholic chemists in the town so it was easy to switch their custom. The boycott of Johnston's shop is still ongoing. Byrne said there is hardly a Catholic in the area who does not support that boycott and this includes moderate SDLP supporters.

I suggested to Byrne that boycotting can be a crude weapon and that the Protestant community could regard it as a sectarian attack on them. I suggested that there must be alternative avenues open to the aggrieved woman if she wished to take action against the chemist. He agreed the boycott was unfortunate and contributing to a hardening of attitudes in the locality. Nevertheless, it would be virtually impossible to get Catholics to go back to Johnston's shop. The woman at the centre of the controversy has now written to Johnston's professional body demanding they take action against him.

N.B. [He said that while the boycott of Johnston's chemist shop in Castleterg is voluntary a more sinister element has recently crept in. A local Unionist businessman called Finlay has a supermarket in the town. Finlay was not involved in the blockade of the town but his store is being boycotted. Byrne is aware of several local people who have been visited in their homes and warned not to shop in Finlay's supermarket.

Pomeroy

Byrne said that there was a boycott underway of Ramsey's petrol company in Pomeroy. Ramsey was involved in the blockades and at the time was abusive to many local Catholics. The local parish priest has changed his oil account from Ramsey to a local Catholic oil merchant, as have ^{ve} most of his parishioners. Some Catholic firms also dropped Ramsey as their oil supplier. Local Protestant businessmen, led by Andersons (a large supplier of bricks for the building trade) have toured those Catholic firms and threatened

a counter boycott unless the lost accounts are returned to Ramsey. This threat has had some effect and Ramsey has managed to get back most of the commercial business he lost but is still suffering from a Catholic consumer boycott.

The SDLP Approach

Byrne said that it was important that the SDLP came out strongly against the concept of boycotting. He believes that the Unionist business people now realise the extent of their dependence on Catholic custom and are unlikely to repeat their involvement in road blockades. However, there are a limited number of boycott cases where the moral situation is less than clear cut.

2. Local SDLP relations with Unionists

Local cross-community relations in the Omagh area have been severely damaged by Drumcree. Byrne believes that Drumcree resulted from the poor Unionist performance at the Forum elections. He said that the Ulster Unionist party was demoralised by the result, taking only 24% of the Northern Ireland vote. There was an air of bitter disappointment in its aftermath. Trimble was severely constrained by his poor electoral performance and to compensate sought to establish a pan-Unionist grouping led by the UUP. Since the election, he has managed to re-invigorate the Orange Order, brought the rural elements of the UVF (the UDA don't exist in rural areas) within his sphere of influence and probably taken some wavering supporters from the DUP. Within Unionism, Trimble has strengthened his position but at a terrible cost to the community at large and relations with the Nationalist community. While there are some grumblings among the more liberal Unionists, Trimble can feel that his position is more secure.

The local Nationalists literally "hate" Trimble and feel that they cannot deal with such a difficult and unstable character. There are constant references to Trimble's involvement with the sinister Ulster Clubs and his association with Bill Craig and Vanguard. It is hard to see political accommodation between the UUP and SDLP with

Trimble in charge of the UUP.

3. The Western Education and Library Board (WELB)

Byrne was aware of the visit of the chief executive of the WELB, Joe Martin, to Dublin to discuss the reorganisation of the North's Education and Library Boards with the Department. He said that Martin was very encouraged by his visit and grateful for Irish Government support. Byrne said that he had met with the Cardinal on the issue and was confident that the clergy were fully behind efforts to retain the Board.

Byrne is puzzled by the British Government proposals and finds the official explanations completely unconvincing. He wondered whether the changes were connected to the possible loss of EU Objective One status for Northern Ireland. As is the case with the South, the North's GDP per head has risen above the threshold level for qualification for Objective One status. This will mean that there will be a need to stop treating Northern Ireland as a single region. If any new sub regions follow the present Library and Educational Boards divisions, the Western area would be entitled to the lion's share of funding. If, however, parts of the West were included with the Northern and Southern regions, this would allow places like Ballymena and Banbridge to be entitled for EU Objective One funding on the "backs of western disadvantage".

I briefed him on our approaches to the British on the issue through the Secretariat in Belfast.

4. The Next Westminster Election

The new seat of West Tyrone has a large Nationalist majority. At the last local and Forum elections, the Nationalist vote was close to two thirds of the total. Byrne calculated that the Nationalist vote at the next general election will be approx. 27,500. The Unionist population is very disciplined and manages to get out almost 90% of their vote on each occasion. Even with their extraordinary turnout, the Unionist vote will be

*Joe Martin
is an
excellent
and very
progressive
official,
on the
evidence of his
presentation
to the
Forum and
discussions
with him
on the
Forum's
"education
day".*

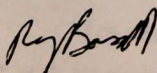
in the region of 14,500. It is still possible that in a tight contest on the Nationalist side, a Unionist could manage to slip through and take the seat.

Byrne is strongly in favour of a pact with Sinn Fein which would allow the SDLP (meaning himself) a clear run in Mid Tyrone and also in Mid-Ulster while giving Sinn Fein a clear go at Fermanagh/South Tyrone. He doubts whether the SDLP in Fermanagh/South Tyrone has the "stomach" for a tough contest. However, even if there is no pact, he feels that the SDLP would be able to take the West Tyrone seat.

Byrne said that he had a slight nagging doubt that might upset his predictions, namely there will be a sympathy vote for Sinn Fein at the election. The British keep treating Sinn Fein badly and this causes resentment among Catholics. However, the abstention policy will cause Sinn Fein trouble as local people expect their MP to fight hard for their interests in areas like inward investment, infrastructural projects. John Hume's success in Derry in this respect should help the SDLP in West Tyrone.

5. The Strabane District Council

Byrne said that the continued Unionist domination of Strabane Council was a matter of resentment among SDLP supporters in the West Tyrone constituency. The 1991 census showed that Catholics made up over 62% of the local population but there has traditionally been a very low turnout among Catholics in the area. The SDLP is making a big effort to get the vote out for the May local elections and is confident that Nationalists will capture the extra seat they need to take control. He mentioned the Glenelly electoral area as the source of the extra Nationalist seat.



Ray Bassett

Anglo-Irish Division

1 October 1996