

Conversation with SDLP Cllr Annie Courtney

Derry 11 September 1996

1. Ms. Courtney described the Dallas case as a source of embarrassment to the nationalist camp on Derry City Council. Mr. Dallas' candidature for Mayor had been supported by the SDLP because it was the official Unionist Party's turn to hold that office - now there is a sense that they have been hosted by their own petard. Ms. Courtney felt that his relegation to the sidelines of the official functions during the Clinton visit had made Mr. Dallas more hardline than he had been at the beginning. She was not hopeful that the Council would come up with some face-saving response in the event of Mr. Dallas offering to back down. If the judicial case goes ahead there is a strong possibility that, with appeals, it will drag on until next year. In the meantime, invitations to the Mayor to attend functions have begun to dry-up. The Mayor, however, still chairs the special committee meetings of the Council (Mark Durkan, whom I met briefly later on, said that since the initial legal action had been taken by the Council, the SDLP could not be seen to be responsible for any push or back down. He expressed confidence in the Council's legal Counsel, Michael Lavery, who he described as the leading Counsel in Northern Ireland. He also mentioned that fulfilling engagements will not be a problem as invitations to the Mayor have fallen off considerably).
2. One of the main concerns for the Council at the moment is the proposed closure of the WELB. Ms. Courtney described the circumstances of the decision as quite ironic; they had rowed in to support colleagues who were protesting against the decision to close the SEELB. Mr. Ancram agreed to look at the situation again but on further review had decided that the WELB and the SEELB should both be disbanded.
3. Ms Courtney spoke generally about the local elections next May. While not being overly confident of the outcome for the SDLP, particularly since the recent elections, she would not see individual SDLP councillors as being willing to share the election platform with Sinn Féin.
4. In the wake of Drumcree Ms. Courtney described relations on the ground between the two communities as the most negative they have been in the last twenty five years. When the call for support came from Drumcree, mothers blocked the exits around the New Buildings area with their prams; when people asked the police to intervene they were told that they would have to talk to the women themselves. One of Ms. Courtney's colleagues at work had been prevented from travelling to Limavady by other mutual colleagues who had rallied in support of Drumcree. Ms. Courtney wondered how long it would take people to forget incidents like these and return to some sort of normal footing.

SH.

D. Hayes

Anglo-Irish

19 September, 1996

c.c. Secretary O hUiginn
Joint Secretary
Mr. Ó Fainín
Mr. Bassett