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Discussions with SDLP Councillors

I met with Councillor Patsy McGlone (Cookstown) at SDLP HQ in Belfast and I spoke to Councillor Tommy Gallagher (Fermanagh). We discussed current attitudes within the Nationalist community in the wake of the events surrounding Drumcree. The following points arose during those discussions

The SDLP's present Position

The SDLP is one of the biggest losers in the current state of unrest in Northern Ireland. The party is firmly constitutional and works within the system. The system clearly did not work over the 12 July period. The party loses credibility if the normal political process and the rule of law is overturned by events in the street.

The multi-party talks has added to the appearance of the SDLP being out of touch with the community. The Unionist spokespersons are unable and unwilling to engage in dialogue in any meaningful way. Every time Trimble, Taylor or Paisley appears on TV outside the talks and engages in bombastic and provocative "diatribes", the Nationalist community reacts and leans towards Sinn Féin. There is a serious questioning at party meetings about the desirability of continuing with the multi-party talks.

There is no clear idea of what the SDLP can do to help bring the situation under control. There is a natural desire to punish the Unionist community but any further deterioration in the situation will only assist Sinn Féin and make an eventual political settlement between the two communities more difficult to obtain. There is a need for a clear SDLP strategy which is quite distinct from Sinn Féin. However the party and the Nationalist community is being propelled by events and seems unable to grasp the initiative.

Sinn Fein

The Sinn Feiners are playing their cards very well. Having initially called for all-party talks and then have been excluded, they cannot be blamed for the "mess" at Castle buildings. Adams' profile and his status within the Nationalist community and even with traditional SDLP voters has risen enormously as the SDLP appear unable to deliver any sign of reasonableness from the Unionists. Unless SF scores a major "own goal" by ending the de facto cease-fire in the North then it will be difficult for the SDLP to resist further electoral advances by Sinn Fein.

It would be hard to find a SDLP supporter at present who is not in favour of agreed Nationalist candidates in Mid-Ulster, West Tyrone and Fermanagh South Tyrone at the forthcoming Westminster election. Even to publicly question the desirability of such candidates would be damaging electorally at present.

Relations with the UUP

There is widespread distaste for David Trimble who is probably damaged beyond repair with Catholics in Northern Ireland. Many people are again referring to his dubious past associations with Vanguard and his role in the formation of the Ulster Clubs. After his election as leader of the UUP, many Nationalists hoped that his past flirtation with ex-^{parliamentary} Parliamentary activities had ended. The events at Drumcree cast doubts over his position as a constitutional politician..

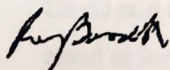
The SDLP have been at the forefront of moves to punish both UUP office holders, Richard Dallas (Derry) and Bertie Montgomery (Magherafelt) both of whom took part in road blockades over the 12 July period. There is a strong anti-UUP feeling in the party at present.

Catholic Sectarianism

Drumcree has lead to the rise of an unsavoury element of sectarianism among Catholics. Throughout the Troubles in the North, there was surprising little sectarianism on the Nationalist side. However in rural areas at present, Protestant families are being harassed and the boycotts of Protestant businesses have been very effective in some areas. In the Ardboe district, the Protestant minority, which is about 5% have been subjected to threats and many have had their windows broken. The SDLP and the local Catholic clergy have spoken out against this type of unacceptable behaviour.

The RUC

The RUC have suffered a severe blow to their position in the Nationalist community. Local RUC officers are trying to mend fences but so far without success. Some RUC people have admitted to Nationalist Councillors that what happened over the 12 July period was nothing short of disastrous for the police force.



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2 August 1996