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Meeting with Councillor Seamus Doyle

I met with SDLP Councillor Seamus Doyle in Belfast. Doyle is a member of the Banbridge Council and is close to Eddie McGrady in the party. He has served for seven years on the local Council which has a UUP majority. There are only four Nationalist seats in the seventeen member Council. The following issues arose in our discussions.

Drumcree and its aftermath

Doyle said it hard to even put into words the sense of betrayal and anger that exists in the wider Catholic community about the events surrounding Drumcree. Even in middle class Banbridge, there is scarcely a Catholic (even among Alliance supporters) who has not been shocked by the turn of events. In the Banbridge area there was widespread "collusion" between the Orange Order and the RUC at roadblocks. Doyle rang the RUC to complain about a particular roadblock where a small number of Orangemen had blocked the road. He told the RUC that one police patrol could clear the blockade. The RUC just fobbed him off and the road block remained in place for several days despite his repeated calls to the police to clear the road.

Doyle said there is no Sinn Fein electoral support in Banbridge, Sinn Fein does not even stand at local elections. However, even in this area there is a unanimous view in the SDLP that the RUC is unreformable. He has severed his relations with the police and believes that Sinn Fein has been proved right on the policing issue. The local RUC commander called to him to try and re-establish contact but he replied that he could not, in conscience, speak to the police at this time.

The Future of the SDLP

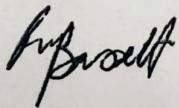
He believes that the events at Drumcree have placed the SDLP in an impossible position. It is not an option to go back to the pre-Drumcree position. The SDLP have decided not bring people unto the streets during a troubled period because it will only lead to further sectarian disturbances. While he agrees with that position, he said that the SDLP would

have to become more proactive in other areas. They should lead the attack on the inequality of treatment of Nationalists in the North or the party will eventually lose its relevance. He said that the SDLP profile on issues such as fair employment was far too low and they would have to stop soft-peddalling on contentious issue like parades.

Attitude to the Unionist Community

There has been severe damage done to cross community relations in Banbridge. The Chairman of the Council William McCracken (UUP) was seen wearing a sash and driving through the town in a JCB helping to block off roads. The Council had enjoyed reasonable Nationalist/Unionist relations in recent years, although the Unionist majority gave the Nationalist independents preference over the SDLP when it came to sharing out posts.

There is now probably a greater Protestant/Catholic split in the town than for many years. Many local businesses are owned by Orangemen and are being boycotted by the Catholic community. One local Orangeman who owns a milk round has seen his business fall by 50% since the boycott began. It will take a long time before cross-community relations recover from the effects of the Drumcree march.



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