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Meeting with the PUP

20 June 1996

1. We had a bilateral meeting yesterday afternoon with the PUP (David Ervine and Gusty Spence).
2. Ervine saw some merit in Peter Robinson's proposal for a composite document covering both the ground-rules and the rules of procedure. He recognised the strength of the SDLP's opposition to any departure from the former.
3. OhUiginn noted the serious political difficulties posed for the SDLP if Trimble emerged from the present discussions claiming victory not just in terms of diluting the Governments' proposals of 6 June but also of overturning the ground-rules. A problem about the Robinson approach was that it would open up the prospect of prolonged efforts to amend the ground-rules (with consequent risk to the fundamental principles required to keep a number of the parties at the table).

Ervine said that the PUP could live with the ground-rules (even though he and his colleagues came from "a harder constituency" than the other Unionist parties). However, unless Trimble was given some assistance, there was a danger of the talks collapsing.

4. OhUiginn advanced the proposal he had made earlier to Michael Ancram. He related this to the need to reconcile three requirements: the two Governments must be able to say that the ground-rules remain intact, the Unionists need to be able to show that they have not formally accepted them and the Chairmen need clarity on the basis for their own operation. He suggested that a distinction could be made between the ground-rules and the rules of procedure on the lines of that between the outer structure of a house and its interior. Only a small number of procedural points of relevance to the situation "inside" would be transferred from the ground-rules. The transposition of any material of wider significance would be strongly resisted by the SDLP.
5. Ervine said that the PUP favoured whatever would work. He described our suggestion as "probably the only shot available" and he hoped that Trimble could be brought to accept it.
6. On decommissioning, OhUiginn observed that the Unionists were in a quandary of their own making (though the British Government had helped).

Ervine said that the UUP intended to ask the Loyalist parties to sign up to "markers" in principle (in relation to decommissioning). "Hypocrites that they are", they will allow the Loyalist paramilitaries to retain weapons for as long as the IRA remain armed. McCartney, on the other hand, is taking a more moralistic approach.



If the Loyalist parties could get past the opening Plenary and into a sub-committee, their problems would be solved. The Loyalist ceasefire would probably continue for as long as they were at the talks. However, if they were to be expelled by the Unionists, "war will resume". This was an important card which the Loyalist parties could play with the Unionists.

Spence recalled the "pike in the thatch" syndrome which is rooted in the Irish psyche. He believed that "you won't get a button from anywhere". Distrust is the basic problem. The Loyalist parties want decommissioning to happen, however.

7. O hUiginn underlined the importance of getting a new IRA ceasefire and Sinn Féin into the talks. This was jeopardised by efforts on the part of the UUP to create a "decommissioning cage" for Sinn Féin which would include a requirement for a sub-committee to report before the substantive talks begin.

Ervine agreed that the door must be left open for Sinn Féin. The PUP were opposed to Trimble's approach, which would guarantee that Sinn Féin never came in and would also guarantee the exclusion of the Loyalist parties. He strongly supported Spence's view that there will be no Loyalist decommissioning.

He suggested that the current battle among the Unionists could not be sustained. The Loyalist parties would try to defuse it ("we've got to silence Paisley and McCartney").

Once into the opening Plenary, the issue of decommissioning might lose some of its momentum. While the Loyalist parties would have to "go through the pain of discussing it" in Plenary, the agenda suggested by the UUP yesterday was "a recipe for war".

8. O hUiginn asked whether the Unionists could be privately persuaded to agree to the setting up of the sub-committee along with the other strands. Ervine replied that the hands of the Loyalist parties, and of everyone else, were tied by the Manchester bomb. He reiterated, however, that the Unionists would not want to bear the responsibility of a collapse of the Loyalist ceasefire caused by the expulsion of the Loyalist parties. The PUP would not go along with the "bench-marks" which the UUP were proposing (though they would indicate a willingness to consider the idea in the sub-committee).
9. Ervine said that, while everything that could be done to maintain the Loyalist ceasefire would be done, there might come a time when the Loyalist parties would have absolutely no influence.
10. He was critical, on the other hand, of the Chief Constable's public remarks yesterday about the possibility of a resumption of Loyalist violence.

*David Donoghue*

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