

PERSONALITY NOTES

ALDERMAN HUGH SMYTH

PROGRESSIVE UNIONIST PARTY

Background

Born in the Shankill area of Belfast in 1939. He was first elected to Belfast City Council in 1972, was Deputy Lord Mayor 1983-84 and 1993/94, before becoming Mayor the year 1994-95. He has long-standing (and acknowledged) links with the UVF. First became active in Loyalist politics in the 1970's. Has been strongly identified with unemployment and Loyalist prisoners' welfare, and community work through campaigns such as 'Save the Shankill' and his association with the Greater Shankill Development Agency. He is the only elected representative of the Progressive Unionist Party, but has a strong personal following in the Shankill area.

Personality and Political Views

An honest, working-class Loyalist. He is currently seeking to develop his political influence, with a view to making his Party a mouthpiece for the expression of Protestant working class views on a broader front. In private, he puts forward a political analysis which is surprisingly forward-looking, embracing a power-sharing Assembly, and meaningful North/South institutions; but to date he has not been prepared to go public with such sentiments.

As a person - particularly in chairing the proceedings of the City Council - he can come across as a rough diamond; but there is more subtlety behind his approach than is immediately apparent. He was involved in helping to broker the Loyalist ceasefire; and he worked behind the scenes in his capacity as Lord Mayor to bring together politicians who might have a mutual interest in promoting progress. Evidence of his new-found respectability can be found in his having been invited to dine with Prince Charles, and meetings with the Prime Minister.

Although his appointment as Lord Mayor (June 1994) was widely greeted as a public relations disaster, even his political opponents subsequently acknowledged that Smyth brought a flexible and even-handed approach to the conduct of business; and that in his public capacity, he displayed an unexpected ability to present a positive and forward-looking image of Belfast. The promotion of a Belfast Partnership, which would co-ordinate the efforts of the public, private and voluntary sectors in developing Belfast, remains a favoured ambition. His imprisonment for possession of explosives in 1974. He was released in 1980. In 1994, Ervine came to prominence. His position within the PUP is currently uncertain. Although he remains Leader, there are suggestions that the Party's attempts to weaken its links with Loyalist paramilitarism and broaden its appeal have left Smyth somewhat isolated, and in the shadow of more media-wise performers such as Ervine and Hutchinson. Rumours surface from time to time of his pronouncements earning the disapproval of Loyalist leaders suspicious of Ervine representing their interests with less enthusiasm than his own.

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