

Meeting between Mitchell McLaughlin and Japanese Embassy Official

The Political Officer at the Japanese Embassy called to brief me on a meeting that he had had recently with Mitchell McLaughlin. The key exchanges were as follows:

- McLaughlin was of the view that the future of the whole peace endeavour rests on the survival of the Hume/Adams initiative with the British Government. Sinn Féin are not, in any sense, waiting around for a change of Government in Britain. They would prefer an agreement to be reached under a Conservative Government because the Tories have 'the traditional authority to move forward; Labour are lacking such a tradition'.
- McLaughlin said that while divergences have emerged between the broadly Nationalist parties on the island, divergences also exist on the Unionist front, particularly between the UUP and the DUP. When going into the next election, he believes that Nationalists in Northern Ireland - through the SDLP and Sinn Féin - will be more united than Unionists. The possibility of an SDLP/Sinn Féin electoral pact of some sort is being examined at 'the top leadership levels of both parties'. Contact between the two parties is as close now as it ever has been.
- On the next General Election here, McLaughlin said that Sinn Féin intend to field candidates in every constituency but he believes that the prospects of getting any seat seem 'almost impossible'.
- When asked if Sinn Féin and the IRA still really believe that the British Government want to eventually abandon Northern Ireland, McLaughlin responded that 'the Sinn Féin analysis is Yes'. That belief is based on the secret meetings that took place with British Government representatives, which included members of the Intelligence services, in the early Nineties and in meetings that took place with the British Government after the August 1994 ceasefire announcement. The UUP in particular have always taken that British position seriously and therefore, 'there are no reasons for any concessions to the Unionist side at present'.
- When questioned about Sinn Féin's analysis on unification, McLaughlin responded that Sinn Féin will always base their policy around 'the objective of Irish unity' but they do not expect that to happen 'for about one generation'.

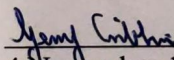
Therefore, the party's position on this issue is 'under consideration in the context of an EU framework along the lines espoused by John Hume'. He continued that Sinn Féin want to move more and more onto the exclusively democratic route 'but of course the party cannot cut off completely its links to the IRA'. Only Sinn Féin can eventually deliver the IRA away from the path of violence.

- When asked if Sinn Féin expect anything special from the US relationship in the context of a settlement, especially if Clinton is re-elected, McLaughlin's answer was 'No'. He explained that the Unionist parties, the Nationalist parties in Northern Ireland and the two Governments all have equal expectations of what the US Administration can do for them in terms of advancing their own political agendas.

Comment

Some of the above comments have not, to my knowledge, ever been represented, publicly or privately, as forming part of Sinn Féin's policy - particularly McLaughlin's comments on unification. These may be McLaughlin's own personal assessment of where the party ought to be heading or alternatively, they may indicate the conclusion/direction of an internal political debate within Sinn Féin. On the latter point, it is credible that individuals within the Sinn Féin leadership, if not the leadership as a whole, may have privately concluded that the most achievable settlement from a Nationalist perspective is one which is framed within the essence of Irish unity but which, at the same time, leaves open the option for eventual unity at some future point in time - a Joint Framework Document solution. Furthermore, there is, in my view, little prospect if any of Sinn Féin committing itself to a policy short of unity in advance of a final settlement. If they did that, two consequences would logically follow:

- the party's capacity to influence the IRA would be seriously if not terminally damaged;
- Sinn Féin would have to accept the principle of majority consent on Northern Ireland's constitutional status, thereby acting in the party's view as a delimiter on the extent of constitutional change that could be secured from the British Government in settlement negotiations.


4 November 1996