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Reference Code:	2017/10/9
Creation Dates:	31 March 1987
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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Meeting with Rev. John Dunlop,
Belfast, 31 March 1987

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I called on Rev. John Dunlop, a Presbyterian Minister who combines a liberal manner with traditional unionist views, at his home in North Belfast on 31 March.

Among the points which Dunlop made to me were the following:

The Anglo-Irish Agreement

Dunlop is opposed to the Agreement. He blames the British Government for having "thrown in the towel" too early in its efforts to find an internal settlement in Northern Ireland. Under mounting pressure, particularly from the US, Mrs. Thatcher decided that she would have to "do a deal" with the Irish Government. Dunlop feels that she compounded the "betrayal" of Unionists by her calculated failure to consult them in relation to the Agreement.

Moderate Unionists, he told me, feel quite discouraged by the present stalemate. They had hoped to see conciliatory gestures from one or the other Government which would "bring the Unionists in from the cold". The Unionist politicians are, of course, mainly responsible for the present impasse. (Indeed, it was for this reason that Dunlop refused to sign the recent Unionist petition against the Agreement - he did not want to do anything which might strengthen the OUP/DUP position). Dunlop believes, however, that it is primarily up to the two Governments to help the Unionists off the hook on which they have impaled themselves.

He mentioned (though with little enthusiasm and obvious doubts about his success) that he and a number of other Unionists (both lay and clerical) are in the process of taking soundings from the four main parties in the North on the possibility of inter-party talks aimed at producing an "internal agreement".

The aspect of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which "even moderates" like Dunlop cannot swallow is the role given to Dublin in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The "alternative" agreement which Dunlop and his associates would like to see would be one in which, in exchange for agreement between the parties on an acceptable form of devolved government, Dublin's role would be "reduced". Dunlop hopes that the prospect of achieving this would be enough of an incentive for the Unionists to agree to talks without (as stipulated hitherto) any suspension or interruption of the Conference. On the other hand, he is deeply sceptical about the SDLP's willingness to engage in talks at present. It is obvious to him that there is no incentive for the SDLP to enter into devolution talks "as long as they have the Conference doing their work for them". Furthermore, while individual SDLP members have privately said that they favour talks, Hume has at no stage gone beyond a vague and generalised expression of availability for talks. On this basis, Dunlop has already virtually written off the chances of his group's initiative.

Unionists

Dunlop returned to a favourite theme: his belief that the British have already quietly decided in favour of withdrawal and that the Agreement is the first stage in this process. Quite a number of his friends and colleagues have reached this view. More and more young people in his community are moving to Britain as soon as they are qualified, taking the view that "there is no future for them in Northern Ireland". Catholics are becoming more prominent in Northern Ireland life and Dunlop claimed that there is now a majority of Catholic students in several third-level educational institutions in the North. While "reasonable Protestants" recognise that their Catholic neighbours have been very seriously disadvantaged over the past seventy years, the same "reasonable Protestants" see a danger that the pendulum may swing back in the opposite direction. In addition, the imminent reductions in EEC agricultural subsidies will mean that the livelihood of small rural communities which

form the "heartland of Presbyterianism" in the North will be very seriously threatened or even destroyed. Dunlop referred to a sense among Unionists that the "tide has turned" with the Agreement - and "whether it is going out or coming in depends on whether you are a unionist or a nationalist".

Statement by General Board

Finally, Dunlop said that the General Board of the Presbyterian Church would be issuing a statement later in the week in which they would be calling on Unionist politicians to return to Westminster.

David Donoghue

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} April 1987

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