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Reference Code: 2021/97/29

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Confidential

Meeting with Reg Empey, 14 November 1995

1. I met Reg Empey, the former Lord Mayor of Belfast, who is Joint Honorary Secretary of the UUP, at City Hall. Our conversation centred almost exclusively on the current political situation.
2. Empey began by emphasising strongly - as he did at the meeting between the Tánaiste and David Trimble - the total absence of trust between unionists and Sinn Féin. He stressed that even common membership of Council committees did not mean that any kind of social or personal relationships existed between councillors. He went on to say that even leaving aside the question of decommissioning, there were ways in which the republican movement could build up some faith in its *bona fides*:
 - putting an end to punishment beatings;
 - ceasing the targeting of RUC men;
 - revealing the locations of the "disappeared"
 - lifting "exclusion orders"
 - making a "no first strike" commitment.
3. On decommissioning, he stressed that the British Government had taken up its position by itself. "They keep taking stands we advise against" - for example, on the "permanence" issue just after the cease-fire. This did not mean that unionists did not want disarmament: but the key question was how to build up a relationship of trust. Even if Sinn Féin were to meet the British formula unionists would not necessarily be satisfied.
4. Empey advanced the standard argument that paragraph 10 of the Joint Declaration envisaged a gradual process including disarmament: I contested this view, referring *inter alia* to the British clarification document, and emphasising the discipline and duration of the ceasefires.
5. Empey then remarked that the crucial point for unionists was that in any talks process Sinn Féin would inevitably use the existence of weaponry as a bargaining counter. In

essence republican guns counterbalanced unionist votes. At sticky moments the language of risk, if not of threat, would emerge. Moreover both the SDLP and the Irish Government would inevitably be affected by such language, and would urge the need for further compromise. I replied that once in talks it would be very difficult for Sinn Féin to use such tactics. Their credibility would be seriously damaged. Empey demurred: we might say this now (and even mean it) but the record was not convincing. I disagreed, and pointed to the determination of the Government to bring both communities on board the present process, despite the difficulties this might create in some nationalist circles.

Twin-track Approach

6. Empey strongly cautioned against any assumption that the UUP would necessarily feel obliged to participate in preparatory talks. They had grave difficulties about entry into a process on equal terms with Sinn Féin before sufficient trust had been built. They would be politically very vulnerable to attack by the DUP, whose strong opposition to the twin-track approach was on record. In addition, they had serious difficulties with the fact that it was apparently envisaged that the two Governments jointly were setting the agenda. This was a departure from 1991/2 and implied that we had a standing in regard to the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. I said that the two Governments were, politically, the joint sponsors, or managers, of the process. This did not mean that we would involve ourselves in substantive discussion of Strand I issues.
7. Repeating a point he has stressed in the past, Empey said it was a serious mistake to assume that the UUP was kept fully informed by the British Government. It was not: it got most of its information from newspapers. This was a consistent pattern dating back to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The British would sometimes fly kites and seek unionist views. But they were not consistent in so doing. In fact Irish officials were in his experience more honest and reliable: "you might have a different agenda, but you have never in my experience misled us". The consequence of this was that any confidence that the unionists would feel ownership of what emerged from present discussions, or that they would be "delivered" by the British, was misplaced.
8. Empey said that a further argument against the twin-track approach was that unionists

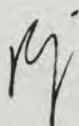
were very sceptical about the likelihood that substantive negotiations, if entered into, would result in agreement. The 1991/2 experience had been deeply discouraging and the entry of Sinn Féin into the equation complicated matters further. He agreed with me that there was a strong desire to underpin the peace through a political settlement: this did not mean that the wide gulf which existed between unionists and republicans could necessarily be bridged. I asked if it were not the case that the mood among the wider unionist community had changed. Could it be that the calculation that the risk to the UUP lay invariably to the right was now out of date? He disagreed. The public very much wanted the peace to be preserved and reinforced. But they were very nervous lest "democratic values" be set aside in the determination to keep Sinn Fein on board. Molyneaux's views on the folly of "high wire acts" had a lot of support. Nevertheless, he did admit that the UUP would remain in dialogue with the British Government about its ideas - this could be presented as a continuation of existing contacts, and not an entry into a new phase.

Assembly

9. Empey made the case for an Assembly. It would create a context in which the UUP could feel mandated to talk to Sinn Féin. It would emphasise the UUP's status as the largest party in northern Ireland. It would lock the DUP into discussions. It would "sort out" the question of the loyalists. In addition, an Assembly could offer the political parties research and logistical support in their dealings with the two Governments ("you forget how unequal the relationship is").
10. He went on to assert that the real issues to be resolved were those between the people of Northern Ireland. "Ballsbridge isn't at war with where I live". The central focus had to be on relationships in Northern Ireland. John Hume feared an Assembly because it would serve as a reminder of his party's minority status, and also because it would force him to deal in the open, and not in "the usual smoke-filled rooms".
11. I recalled that in 1991/2 there had been agreement on the three-stranded approach. He interjected that this approach had failed then and that unionists would not necessarily sign up to it now. I replied that the three-stranded approach had the great merit of not trying

to force either unionism or nationalism into conceding that the other side's preferred framework, whether Northern Ireland or the island of Ireland, had greater validity than its own. Séamus Mallon had spoken eloquently about this flaw in the Assembly idea at Trinity the previous Friday.

12. I asked Empey more than once how unionists thought they could advance the Assembly idea outside preparatory political talks. How otherwise could they bring the nationalist parties to engage with the idea? He replied that to accept the twin-track approach for this reason would be tantamount to accepting a process they didn't want in the hopes of gaining something they did. The party could continue advancing its ideas "in the normal way". I commented that this did not appear a very promising avenue.
13. As our discussion ended, Empey urged me to take seriously what he had said about the difficult relationship between the UUP and the British. Neither Government could take the unionists for granted. I agreed, and said that both Taoiseach and Tánaiste had been at pains to listen to Unionist concerns and to insist in the Dáil and elsewhere that there could be no serious negotiations without full unionist participation.



Rory Montgomery

16 November 1995