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Ambrose Lohan, Wexford; Thom. Dalton
Doran, Murray, Deane; Gordon A-1
Kilgallon

Meeting between Tánaiste and Progressive Unionist Party

Belfast, 23 October 1995

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Summary

The meeting focused principally upon the PUP's advocacy of a constitutional Convention or Assembly as a way of bringing all the political parties into dialogue in a situation where, as they saw it, the unionist parties would otherwise not be prepared to talk to Sinn Féin in the absence of greater progress on decommissioning than now seemed possible. They seemed confident that all of the major parties could be persuaded to enter such a body, while conceding that it was a gamble from their point of view. They discounted the risk that elections at this time would polarise attitudes, suggesting that there was now a real public desire for a fresh start.

Detail

1. The meeting, which lasted about 50 minutes, took place at the Europa Hotel. The Tánaiste was accompanied by Deputy Brian Fitzgerald, Deputy Derek McDowell, Senator Jan O'Sullivan, Senator Seán Maloney and Fergus Finlay. The Joint Secretary, David Cooney and Rory Montgomery were also present. The PUP delegation comprised Gusty Spence, Hugh Smyth, William Smith, Jack McDonnell and Joe Kinner.
2. Gusty Spence referred briefly to the previous day's march commemorating Thomas Begley, the IRA man killed planting the Shankill Road bomb exactly two years earlier. This "dancing on Unionist graves" was intended to embarrass the participants in this meeting.
3. Hugh Smyth began by emphasising that while the ceasefires were entirely a good thing, they were not enough in themselves. There was a need for a political

settlement if the full economic benefits of peace were to be realised. The Tánaiste agreed, emphasising the importance of underpinning the cessation of violence. He briefly outlined the work of the two Governments to find a basis for the twin-track approach, stressing the importance of full co-operation with an international body on the part of all those involved. Gusty Spence commented that Sinn Féin had to be "given a figleaf, not a full set of clothes." His party **wanted** to be in a position where they could talk to Sinn Féin, to point out that unionists were the real British presence in Northern Ireland.

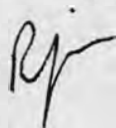
4. Hugh Smyth then urged the election of a Convention or Assembly as a means of "shaking up the situation". While all-party talks were the ideal, unionists would not participate unless the IRA were prepared to satisfy their needs on decommissioning. There was no sign of this happening. While the PUP had little time for the mainstream unionist parties, in particular the DUP, they were representative of the majority community. Smyth was thus afraid that the twin-track approach would not in fact lead to talks. The logjam had to be broken. He suggested that an Assembly might sit for 18 months, and would be consultative, with no powers. If no agreement were reached within a set period, the two Governments could reasonably move to impose a solution: nobody could then claim not to have been consulted. Neither the DUP nor the UUP could object to the creation of such an Assembly - indeed it would be in line with their own proposals. The idea would have to be fully explained to the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Potentially, however, there was something in the idea for everybody; everybody would be got off the hook. As at the Forum, other parties would have to deal with Sinn Féin, which would attract them. [The PUP did not spell out what advantages the SDLP could be led to see in the idea].
5. The Tánaiste asked what dynamic elections to an Assembly would create, and about the likely position Paisley would adopt. Hugh Smyth argued that people would be "delighted", as they were fed up with the absence of movement. Paisley had said he would have to sit with Sinn Féin in an Assembly. The new situation would offer a real test of whether bringing up old hatreds would work. Gusty

Spence later commented that this would be a great opportunity to see whether attitudes had changed, as he believed they had. [Smyth, who made a number of hostile references to Paisley, later commented "If the big man had been born a girl he'd have died a virgin, he's said "No" so often"].

6. Gusty Spence admitted that the PUP's mandate was at present very small. It should be tested. Hugh Smyth suggested that this demonstrated the PUP's sincerity. While hopeful in the long run of doing well as socio-economic issues came to the fore, they would choose a peaceful Ireland over electoral success.
7. The Tánaiste commented that he had not had the impression that Trimble's Assembly ideas were well thought out. Gusty Spence stressed that the PUP had no interest in a return to Stormont, which had done nothing for his people. Trimble should have fleshed his ideas out. Hugh Smyth said there would be shared responsibility at all levels. The Tánaiste suggested that the chemistry of an Assembly would be fraught with danger. Hugh Smyth replied that they imagined it would break up into four committees, the membership of which would rotate, perhaps considering the arms issue, prisoners, North/South relations and future internal structures. A measure of agreement was possible.
8. The arms question, and the nature of the IRA's intentions, were raised unsystematically during the meeting. Gusty Spence said that a senior party member had recently been "targeted" by the IRA. Jack McDonnell said that IRA members were also fraternising with INLA elements. The Irish Government had a responsibility to put pressure on Sinn Féin. He suggested that the IRA should reciprocate the CLMC statement. In response to Deputy Fitzgerald, Gusty Spence said that if loyalists disarmed first the IRA would refuse to do likewise, claiming that the British would simply re-arm the loyalists if need be. The Tánaiste stressed that we had tried very hard to get more movement on arms. Our best analysis was that actual disarmament was not now possible: the issue was to find a process by which it could begin. Gusty Spence said that although he had never before seen such a willingness to compromise among the loyalist paramilitaries,

the CLMC had told him that they had nothing more to give for now. Weapons would only be given up if everything else was in place.

9. Hugh Smyth insisted that there was no question of surrender or of treating the IRA as "small boys". Deputy McDowell asked if the PUP was yet ready to speak to Sinn Féin; Hugh Smyth said that they could not yet do so formally (though he could privately at City Hall). Gusty Spence said they'd be marginalised if they were to do so.
10. The question of prisoners was briefly discussed, with the Tánaiste agreeing that the issue was of much importance and outlining the points he had made at last week's meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference. Hugh Smyth wondered if the prisons issue could be dealt with in an Assembly. Gusty Spence said they were badly disappointed by the lack of progress.
11. Senator Maloney asked if the PUP could envisage coming to the Forum. Hugh Smyth said they had to approach it with circumspection. If there were an Assembly in place they certainly could.
12. As the meeting came to a conclusion, the Tánaiste emphasised that his view was that once the security barrier between the two parts of the island came down we could get on with our lives in a European context in which borders mattered less. He thanked the PUP for the meeting, and said he proposed to feed their ideas into the system. He and Hugh Smyth agreed that what was needed was a settlement with dignity.



Rory Montgomery

24 October 1995