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File -
NA Parades '96

Events at Ormeau Bridge on Easter Monday, 8 April, 1996.

1. In advance of yesterday's planned parade, it was unclear how the Apprentice Boys would react to the RUC's decision last week to re-route the parade away from the nationalist Lower Ormeau Road. Stanley Geddis, a DUP Councillor and leader of the Ballynafeigh Walkers Club whose parade it was, was quoted in the media as saying that the Club would register its protest at the banning of the route, but did not wish to see trouble or confrontation. In the event there was a lengthy stand-off followed by an ugly confrontation with the police. A brief chronology of the day's events is as follows:

08.00am c.60 members of Walkers Club, with a band, march to RUC cordon at Ormeau Bridge. Cllr. Geddis hands a letter of protest to police and reads out a statement asking the police to allow them to pass or else they would make a stand against "this blatant denial of our God-given civil and religious liberties". Stand-off begins.

10.00am Minor scuffles with police as protesters refuse to move off the road to allow 2 fire engines through. Some fireworks thrown at police. Numbers increase as morning progresses.

Mediation efforts continue through mid-afternoon.

3.00pm Dr. Paisley arrives, speaks to police, then briefly to Loyalist protesters, and leaves. Bands returning from main Apprentice Boys march in Portadown arrive in support of protesters.

5.00pm A barrage of bottles and stones are thrown at police. Some petrol bombs follow whereupon police in riot gear move in and push crowd (now swelled to c.500) 100 yards back along Upper Ormeau Road. Police fire plastic bullets. Uneasy calm is restored.

11.00pm on Police move in to disperse crowd of about 200.

12 rioters were arrested of which 7 appeared in Court on 9 April charged with riotous behaviour. The RUC report 7 injured policemen and 9 injured civilians.

2. During the day I was in regular contact with the Alan and Janet Quilley of the Quakers Group, who were present at the bridge for most of the day, and with Gerard Rice and John Gormley of the Lower Ormeau Concerned Community (LOCC). I was also in regular contact with colleagues in the Secretariat. In the early afternoon, I asked that the Secretariat register our concern with the other side at the potential for confrontation and provocation of local residents if, as expected, large numbers of marchers from Portadown travelled on to Belfast. I spoke again this morning (9 April) with contacts to get their assessment of yesterday's events.

3. **Gerard Rice (LOCC)** confirmed that all was quiet on the Lower Ormeau Road this morning and that there had been no trouble last night after the Loyalists were dispersed. The LOCC were concerned at the potential for difficulty when the pubs would close and had some of their people monitor the area until 3 o'clock in the morning. There were no incidents.

4. I complimented Rice on LOCC's role yesterday in encouraging nationalists to keep away from the Ormeau Bridge to avoid provocation with the other side. He said that while there was some fear in the community that events would get out of hand, the locals were satisfied that the police would contain the problem. LOCC were in contact with the RUC during the day and were encouraged to continue to advise local people to stay away. According to Rice, the feeling locally was that the RUC were policing the parade and not policing the community. (Last year LOCC complained vociferously that the local community was under curfew during parades). This morning the area is very quiet and there is a feeling of relief.

5. LOCC had a meeting this morning with RUC Deputy Chief Constable Ronnie

Flanagan who directed yesterday's police operation. They are hoping to have a further meeting with him next week. Rice's own view is that last night's disturbances "have blown it for the Orange Order's chances of marching along the road". Rice also had a meeting with Davy Ervine this morning. He has agreed to sit down with them privately in the near future to see what can be done to avoid future difficulties this marching season. LOCC are appreciative of the public statements by both Ervine and Gary McMichael. While these statements indirectly criticised LOCC's stance, they have also been critical of the hardline position taken by their own community.

6. **Alan and Janet Quilley** were at the Ormeau Bridge from early in the morning until 7.30pm to observe proceedings. It was clear to them that the people arriving from Portadown were intent on causing trouble, and from once they arrived events took an inevitable course. They agree with the RUC assessment that alcohol was a major contributory factor. They were critical of the absence of marshalling of the parade on the part of the Apprentice Boys. Sandy Geddis went away for much of the afternoon (see para. 9 on this) and during this time it was clear that there was no one in control and no one the police could talk to. In the lead-up to the outbreak of trouble on the arrival of a band from Carrickfergus, they observed one of the officers of the Walker's Club who is known to them. He made no effort to intervene. They were not clear on Dr. Paisley's role, but believe from others that it was not a very constructive one. After speaking to police he briefly spoke to the protesters before departing. He was overheard to have said to the Loyalist protesters "you stick to it".

7. **Brendan McAllister (Mediation Network)** was invited to the scene by the RUC and spent 14 hours there trying to mediate between the RUC and the Apprentice Boys. McAllister singled out Sandy Geddis as the villain of the piece. The RUC understood that the protesters would make their stand at the bridge and withdraw around lunchtime. Geddis, however, dragged things out until they were joined by groups returning from Portadown. He saw yesterday as his hour of glory and the Apprentice Boys' version of the Siege of Drumcree.

8. McAllister said it is quite clear that the Walker's Club had no intention of travelling

on to Portadown. Moreover it is believed that he sought to have all the other Apprentice Boys Clubs in Belfast join them at the stand-off in the morning. Geddis and others told McAllister that they were not blaming the police for the parade ban. The saw the ban as a direction from the N.I.O. designed to appease nationalists.

9. As the afternoon progressed, with no end to the stand-off in sight, mediation efforts centred on a proposal that the police would withdraw the front line of its defence thereby enabling the Apprentice Boys the space to do a U-turn on the bridge and return the route they came. Geddis was very indecisive and appeared unable to gather his people around him. Geddis agreed to go to the local Orange Hall to discuss this proposal. Other people there included U.U.P. Councillors, Chris and Michael McGimpsey and Jim Clarke. Local Orange Order leaders were there also. After a very lengthy discussion Geddis agreed to go back to his people to recommend this. Geddis took so long to return, stopping on the way on many occasions to talk to people, that by the time he got back (c.5.00pm) the situation had got out of hand and the RUC were pushing them back. The RUC told McAllister that they do not believe Geddis was prepared to go through with putting the proposal to his people.

10. McAllister understands that Dr. Paisley met with Ronnie Flanagan 3 times yesterday. His arrival at the scene did not help matters. Although he only stayed for about 20 minutes the situation began to erupt shortly after he left. McAllister believes that Paisley felt that this was not the march on which he should do battle; it would suffice to come along and rattle the bars a little.

11. McAllister overheard Noel Lygott, the local Orange Order leader, criticising the Apprentice Boys for spoiling the pitch for the rest of the marching season. He added that it was not as easy for the A.B's to get a crowd out and that "the only people who could do that were the Orange Order and with paramilitary backing". On the latter point, McAllister understands that Ervine and McMichael sent the word out that their people should not get involved in any confrontation. At the end of the day the reality was that they did become involved. Known UDA and UFF people were recognised.

Future parades on Ormeau Road

12. The next parade, an Orange Order church parade, is scheduled for 28 April. At this point we also know of parades scheduled for 16 June, 30 June, 12 July, 10 August, 25 August, 31 August and 27 October, 1996. Ronnie Flanagan is quoted this morning as saying that organisers of parades must have a responsibility for the potential outcome of the parades. He blamed yesterday's disturbances on a gang of drunken louts from outside. (Note: All 7 people charged this morning in connection with the events had Belfast or Lisburn addresses). He said that contacts at local level must be facilitated and that more must be done to arrive at consent. He hoped that by each side giving a little accommodation could be reached.

13. The Mediation Network is working with local U.U.P. Councillors on a proposal involving a code of conduct for marchers and a "principled detour" away from the Lower Ormeau Road. They are hoping to involve the SDLP (Durkan and Attwood) in this initiative. McAllister told me that the "principled detour" involves crossing the Ormeau Bridge, but then turning left away from the Lower Ormeau Road. I pointed out that crossing the bridge would be invested with a great deal of symbolism on the nationalist side, even more so after yesterday's rioting.

J. McIntyre

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Anglo-Irish Division

9 April 1996

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Box

cc'd 10/4