



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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1 July 1997

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MR BROSNAN

MR FAY

MR CALLAGHAN

MS. DANKIN

Dear Secretary

**Conversation with John Taylor MP**

John Taylor was my guest to dinner last night, the latest of several meetings over the past two years and more.

Taylor came directly from the debate in Parliament on the renewal of direct rule. He said that Seamus Mallon, Bob McCartney, and other Northern Ireland MPs were unable to be present for that debate because all flights from Belfast yesterday were booked up. According to Taylor, this was because of the Irish Derby.

Taylor said that in the course of a very busy day, he had mislaid the piece of paper with the name of the restaurant. He found his way to our meeting only because he remembered a remark by his "Catholic secretary", that the name of the restaurant, "L'Oranger", is the French for Orangeman!

**A time of decision**

In recent years, Taylor has taken a holiday in Northern Cyprus in the weeks following the Twelfth of July. This year he has decided to postpone this trip until early October. He considers that July, August, and September will be a time of decision in the politics of Northern Ireland.

Taylor said that in this period we may see the end of the IRA campaign. But if that fails to happen, there should in any case be a fresh basis for cooperation within the talks process. **Comment:** In this, Taylor was repeating back to me the assessment I had given him at a brief meeting in the House of Commons following Prime Minister Blair's speech last Wednesday.

In a parenthetic remark, Taylor expressed anxiety that under the British Government's initiative, violent actions may continue for the time being without denying Sinn Fein the option of entering talks in mid-September on the basis of a ceasefire at the end of July.

### **Decommissioning**

I outlined our position on decommissioning, emphasising the Mitchell Report, and making it clear as tactfully as possible that Ken Maginnis, in demanding a start to decommissioning on day one of the substantive negotiations, is over-interpreting the joint British/Irish proposal. I said that the two Governments will need to avoid amendments to their joint paper which would alter its thrust and provide an excuse for prevarication on the part of the republican movement.

Taylor did not challenge my presentation. He said that Unionist opinion has been quiescent since David Trimble's response to Blair in the House of Commons on 25 June. Taylor personally has "not received a single telephone call" on decommissioning since last Wednesday.

I asked whether a decision to adopt the paper by sufficient consensus might prove possible by the end of July. Taylor was very hopeful that this would be the case.

Taylor went on to say that David Trimble, sitting beside him earlier in the evening in the House of Commons, mentioned that further legislation is required in the Irish jurisdiction to enable the International Verification Commission to come into existence.

I said that this was not my understanding.

Taylor asked that we bear in mind the pressure on the UUP from McCartney and Paisley. To ease that pressure, we might try to make early public announcements

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on the establishment of the International Verification Commission. The UUP position could be undermined if the idea gains ground that decommissioning will be technically impossible for some time after the substantive negotiations begin.

**Comment:** I found Taylor's line on decommissioning conciliatory. But at the end of the evening, as we stood on the pavement outside the restaurant, he said as a parting shot, "I hope parallel decommissioning means what it says". I took this as a statement for the record, possibly to fulfil a promise made to party colleagues. The thrust of Taylor's position in the course of a lengthy discussion over dinner was (a) a willingness to work with the joint British/Irish paper and (b) acceptance that the paper is designed to bring about a political situation in which it will be impossible to predict the exact timing of a start to decommissioning.

### **The marching season**

Taylor asked me about "the Irish Government's perception" of the marching season. He volunteered that he himself does not share his colleague Martin Smyth's optimism about the "good nature of the Ulster people". In Taylor's view, serious trouble is possible over Drumcree. If Nationalists feel affronted, there may be outbreaks of violence in Derry ("Londonderry") and West Belfast. If Unionists are seen to be the losers on the Garvaghy Road, trouble can be expected in the centre of Portadown, Antrim, and parts of Belfast. Catholic families could be at risk. In Fermanagh and Tyrone, and in country areas generally, there is a caution and a mutual awareness which is absent in cities and in areas in which one community or other is clearly dominant.

I said that the Irish Government is looking for a compromise between the Orange Order and the residents. We have avoided taking public positions which could damage efforts to bring about a compromise. We have recognised that ultimate responsibility rests with the British Government.

Taylor said that as far as he is concerned, the central issue is the Orange Order's right of access to a main road. Some sort of Orange march on the Garvaghy is essential. If the Orange Order offers a reduced march early in the morning of 6 July, or a march up instead of down the road, the British Government should "grab this offer with both hands". Taylor spoke very unfavourably of Brendan Mac Cionnaith's influence on the position of the Garvaghy residents.

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I adverted to the Irish News/Newsletter proposal and to options for re-routing the march. Taylor did not seem interested. He criticised the Irish News for its headline yesterday, "RUC set to force march on Garvaghy".

**Comment:** I did not feel that Taylor, in insisting on a march along the Garvaghy Road, was speaking out of a sense of assurance that a decision to permit the march has already been taken. I was of course not aware as we spoke of Taylor's hardline comments on Drumcree which are reported on the front page of today's Irish News.

### **Not forcing a solution**

Our discussion on Drumcree led Taylor to reflect on his experience of Northern Ireland politics over the past twenty-five years. He argued that the net effect of direct rule from London has been to intensify sectarian attitudes, which have spread from the poorer members of society to the middle-classes.

Taylor described by way of illustrating this problem his own experience with his seven year old daughter. Taylor said that he has gone to great lengths at home to make his young daughter as unaware as possible of Catholic/Protestant differences. His daughter's best friend is a small Catholic boy. But a few months ago his daughter's school was taken by bus to a forest park with pupils from a nearby Catholic school. Following this trip, his daughter used the word "Catholic" with disdain. It emerged that some of the Protestant children on the bus - "little DUP supporters" - created bad blood between the Protestant and Catholic children, and passed on attitudes to the Taylor girl which her parents have been trying to correct ever since.

Taylor tended to see the school outing as reflecting in microcosm what some people would wish to see happening in Northern Ireland as a whole - a forcing of the pace of reconciliation.

In this context, I asked Taylor whether he sees the Labour Government's May deadline for a conclusion of negotiations as unrealistic. His reply was non-committal. He said that the negotiations can only continue beyond May if the Forum also continues. As to what Blair may have in mind if the negotiations are

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not progressing, it is either to produce a joint British-Irish proposal or to "do his own thing". It would be a mistake under any circumstances to try to impose a solution on the Unionist population. The determination of Unionists to hold out against an imposed solution is in Taylor's experience frightening.

**Comment:** On this as on other occasions, Taylor spoke of Unionist and Orange opinion with detachment, as though it were a force of nature to which he as a political leader must accommodate himself. Taylor has mentioned to me before that his failure to become enthusiastically involved in Drumcree in 1995 cost him the leadership of the Unionist Party.

### **The SDLP and the Forum**

Taylor said that the SDLP should join the Northern Ireland Forum. Recent remarks by Eddie McGrady imply that this option is not ruled out.

I asked Taylor whether there would be any assurance under those circumstances that the SDLP would not be outvoted.

Taylor said that the role of the Chairman should offer some reassurance to the SDLP. But a party with 23% of the vote could not expect to constitute a blocking minority.

I pointed out that in the talks process there is a sufficient consensus rule. Presumably in any future arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, the position of the Nationalist community will be safeguarded.

### **The nature of a solution**

I briefed Taylor on the Fianna Fail/PD Joint Paper. Taylor was appreciative of the use of the term "negotiating position" and of the identification of a number of main headings under which it is aimed to bring about a new political dispensation.

Although Taylor could see a degree of overlap between the Joint Paper and the positions of the UUP, he expressed personal reservations about any proposal to make a devolved assembly a core element in a settlement. Taylor admitted that on this subject he is "on his own" in the UUP Parliamentary Party. His fear is that in a Northern Ireland-wide Assembly it will be almost impossible to bring about

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a UUP/SDLP coalition. Paisley on the one hand and Sinn Fein on the other will enjoy too strong a platform to allow this to happen. On the other hand, if the existing local councils could be brought together in three to four regional areas it might be possible to reproduce SDLP/ UUP coalitions of the kind which in some instances already exist at local level.

### **The role of the churches**

As in previous conversations, Taylor spoke freely about the importance of the churches.

On the Catholic side, Taylor considers Archbishop Brady to be an unknown quantity. He hopes, however, that Brady will have the instincts of a Cahal Daly. Taylor joked that at a recent function he asked the former Archbishop, who is living in retirement on the Ormeau Road, whether he lives in the Upper or Lower Ormeau, to which Daly responded, with a twinkle, "the Upper"!

Taylor believes that the structure of the Church of Ireland is such that southern congregations have too much influence relevant to population. In the Presbyterian Church, to which he himself belongs, the southern congregations are allowed too little influence. Taylor fears that in both cases church unity is under strain. He suggested that more attention should be paid by all traditions to the voice of northern Presbyterians, although not all moderators of the church would meet with his personal endorsement.

As he was driving to the airport yesterday, Taylor heard the Parish Priest of Drumcree talking about the resurrection of the dead. Taylor found this a somewhat over-confident prediction. Taylor, "as a Northern Ireland politician", is "not counting on rising after three days". He is disposed rather to realism and caution.

### **Conclusion**

Taylor's remarks on the resurrection, part fun, part sorrow, part hope, struck what seemed to be his typical note.

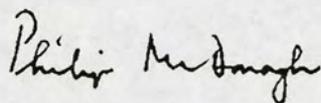
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On a number of occasions over dinner, he touched his chin with his napkin, explaining that since the gun attack he has lost feeling in his jaw and must use a napkin repeatedly in case of dribbling.

"I will be fading out in a couple of years," was one of his remarks. Another was, "I have spent my life in politics and didn't expect it to turn out like this."

My impression is that Taylor wants to justify his political career by helping to bring about a settlement. He spoke more than once with approval of "the kind of Catholic you meet in Bangor". His vision of a settlement seems based on mutual respect between that kind of Catholic and Protestants in his own mould, translating itself into SDLP/UUP cooperation on day-to-day political issues. Although Taylor did not seem hostile to including Sinn Fein in negotiations, he offered no recipe for accommodating the republican position. There are elements in the Framework Document on which John Taylor would drive a hard bargain.

Yours sincerely



**Philip McDonagh**  
Counsellor