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Conversation with Billy Hutchinson

I had dinner last night with Billy Hutchinson of the PUP who had travelled to Dublin to do a live interview with Eamon Dunphy on Radio Ireland's "Last Word" programme. Hutchinson was accompanied by three colleagues from the PUP. These included a community worker and a youth worker from East Belfast, both of who are involved in cross-border projects in Ballymun. The remaining member of the party appeared to be Hutchinson's "minder".

Conversation over dinner was relaxed and friendly. The following is a summary of the main points to arise during a wide-ranging discussion.

The prospects for an IRA ceasefire

Hutchinson was keen for any insight into the prospects for an IRA ceasefire. I cited the recent statement of Gerry Kelly as evidence that republicans accepted that the "armed struggle" had effectively run its course and that it seemed a matter of when rather than if, a ceasefire would be called. However, I noted that Mo Mowlam's recent suggestion that an early ceasefire could secure Sinn Féin's entry to the negotiations on 3 June, which could have provided the basis for an early ceasefire had the will been there on the republican side, seemed unlikely on its own to secure the desired response.

Hutchinson made no effort to obscure his wish to see an early ceasefire, but was emphatic that Sinn Féin had to come into the talks on the same basis as any other party and not on the back of special deals. (Presumably he was not referring, in this instance, to the question of decommissioning.) He expressed doubt that Sinn Féin would achieve any concessions from the Labour party as regards terms of entry, although we agreed that a change of Government in London could in itself give the perception of a fresh start.

Hutchinson also warned of the difficulties which would arise if the IRA declared a ceasefire immediately following a "spectacular".

Hutchinson and his colleagues asked about our reaction to the recent appearances of armed IRA personnel at republican ceremonies. I replied that while we condemned these incidents without reservation, we did not place enormous weight on them. Hutchinson was inclined to share what I admitted was the optimistic interpretation that such publicity stunts and the recent emphasis by Sinn Féin spokesmen on their attachment to the goal of a United Ireland could be designed to reassure the hardliners in preparation for a ceasefire.

We also agreed that the IRA's decision to break the ceasefire of August 1994 had been a disastrous mistake in terms of their own cause, undermining the external support which the republican movement had previously managed to build up. Hutchinson suggested that, on the evidence of his visits to the US, only a handful of influential people still had any sympathy for the Provos.

The loyalist ceasefire

Hutchinson admitted that the loyalist ceasefire was under strain and that this pressure would increase with every IRA action. The problem for the leadership of the loyalist paramilitaries was that they were trying to resist IRA efforts to get them to abandon their ceasefire while at the same time knowing that failure to respond to such provocation would lead extremists within their own ranks to look elsewhere for leadership.

Hutchinson noted that the recent placing of a bomb outside Sinn Féin's office in the New Lodge area had been widely acknowledged to be a "measured response" by the Red Hand Commandos to IRA actions in Wilmslow. He said that if this were the case it would mean that all elements of the CLMC had now been linked to recent military actions. However, he pointed out that, with the exception of the murder of John Slane ("which we still haven't got to the bottom of"), all these actions had been non-fatal. Hutchinson said that the PUP had spoken out against the "no claim, no blame" policy and would prefer that organisations responsible for violence should "come clean" so that the problem could be properly addressed.

I stressed how senseless it would be for the loyalist paramilitaries, having held the line for so long in the face of IRA violence, to weaken in their resolve at this late stage and surrender all the good that they had achieved for the standing of their cause both in Ireland and abroad. Hutchinson did not need to be persuaded on this point.

The LVF

I asked Hutchinson for his opinion of the threat posed by the so-called Loyalist Volunteer Force. He replied that the LVF had been around in one guise or another for some time now and, while they were not hugely significant, they certainly had military capacity which could be used for disruptive purposes. He suggested that the LVF were heavily influenced by elements within the DUP (which I took from his inference to include Willie McCrae). Hutchinson believes that he is himself a potential target for assassination by the LVF.

The INLA threat to loyalist community workers

Hutchinson said that it is his understanding that the INLA death threat against loyalist community workers entering nationalist areas is still in place. He pointed out that the INLA had deleted the crucial fifth paragraph from the statement which was supposed to have lifted the threat. Indeed, he said that he had been contacted the night before by a journalist who had been told by an INLA source that the threat was still in place.

Hutchinson said that the problem with the INLA/IRSP was that they actually wanted into the process, but that they were "headbangers" and even the Provos didn't want them involved.

The prospects for the multi-party negotiations

Hutchinson was anxious to know whether the negotiations would resume on 3 June. I replied that, pending unforeseen events, I was confident that they would, as there was simply no other way forward. Hutchinson suggested that if Sinn Féin were invited, the DUP and McCartney would not turn up on 3 June, but would rejoin the talks later. His feeling was that the UUP would probably be there, although he was not sure whether coming into the marching season, Trimble would have the courage to do business. Hutchinson's colleagues intervened to argue that while it would not be possible for the talks to make progress in the absence of the UUP, a boycott by the DUP and UKUP should not be a barrier to progress. However, Hutchinson warned that the LVF might be spurred into action in the event of a DUP boycott.

I agreed that the arrival of Sinn Féin would almost certainly lead to a degree of disruption following resumption of the talks and suggested that there may be some resultant delay in getting down to serious negotiations. I also pointed to the need to resolve the decommissioning issue, whether Sinn Féin were present or not.

I suggested to Hutchinson that if Sinn Féin had not entered the talks by 3 June, there would be pressure from some quarters to exclude them for the duration of the negotiations. Hutchinson described this as "madness". I assured him that we would not support such an approach, which we agreed would be interpreted by the IRA as an invitation to do their worst. Nevertheless, I stressed that the Irish Government would be seeking to secure agreement in the negotiations whether or not Sinn Féin were present, just as we had been since last June.

We agreed that once substantive negotiations got underway it ought not take inordinately long to reach agreement, since the broad parameters of any deal were already there and much of the work on Strand One had been done in 1992. Hutchinson hinted that this was a mixed blessing for his party, since they had the impression of coming into a process which was already half way to completion. He pointed out that this would be an even bigger problem for Sinn Féin, particularly since any agreement which might emerge would be some way short of their stated goals. I agreed, but suggested that even if Sinn Féin ultimately felt unable to support the outcome of the negotiations, we would have the right to expect that, once an agreement had been ratified in referenda North and South, republicans would accept the democratic will of the Irish people and work to amend the outcome by exclusively peaceful means.

David Trimble and the UUP

Hutchinson and his colleagues expressed concern as to whether David Trimble had the qualities required to lead unionism. There was a general consensus that he compared badly to Jim Molyneaux, despite the latter's lack of charisma. Hutchinson noted the lukewarm nature of Trimble's support within the UUP and speculated that only the imminence of the elections had prevented a challenge to Trimble's leadership. He did not exclude the possibility that Taylor might not seek to engineer a coup after the elections.

Hutchinson's colleagues from East Belfast agreed, reporting that people who they were

dealing with on the ground found Trimble difficult to read and were telling them that they would vote for Paisley, if only on the grounds that they knew where he stood.

Hutchinson questioned whether Trimble would have the courage to negotiate a political settlement. He thought that he had shown more positive signs of leadership following his visit to the loyalist prisoners who had given him the uncompromising message that "he had to have the guts to go for an agreement". I expressed concern that Trimble, unlike Molyneux and Taylor, has had little personal experience of nationalist culture in Northern Ireland or exposure to current attitudes in the Republic, but stressed that if Trimble did demonstrate the confidence to negotiate he would receive a ready response from both Northern nationalists and the Dublin Government. I pointed out that we had taken some encouragement from Trimble's recent speech to the Ulster Unionist Council in that, even if the ideas he outlined were some way short of those sketched out by the two Governments in the Framework Document, they at least revealed an awareness that an agreement was required. We also took it that, like the two Governments, Trimble had offered his ideas as a basis for negotiation, rather than as a rigid prescription.

We expressed a common concern at the attitude and behaviour of some of the younger representatives upon whom Trimble has relied to represent the UUP at the negotiations, noting that their performance to date inspires little hope of a more progressive approach. Hutchinson noted that the attitude to his own party had improved somewhat prior to the suspension of the talks after some of the elder statesmen in the UUP had pointed out to their younger colleagues that the PUP was serving to protect the UUP's flank from Paisley and McCartney. However, Hutchinson said that he believes that the hostility shown by the likes of Peter Weir and Peter and Stephen King arises from their accurate assessment that the PUP pose a long-term threat to the UUP.

Hutchinson and his colleagues spoke warmly of Reg Empey, who they claimed consulted them regularly on developments on the ground in East Belfast. However, they accepted my observation that, while Empey certainly has come across at the negotiations as a voice of moderation, when it has come to the crunch he has been unable to deliver his party.

Ian Paisley and the DUP

Hutchinson was scathing in his criticism of Ian Paisley, who he blames for inciting generations of young working class Protestants to commit acts of violence which resulted in them suffering imprisonment or worse. Hutchinson is convinced that Paisley is determined to destroy the PUP who he sees as successfully challenging his influence among working class Protestants.

Hutchinson also argued that, ironically, it was Paisley who had effectively brought down the Stormont regime by breaking the supremacy of the old unionist party and inciting the sectarian tension and violence which eventually led to the imposition of direct rule.

Hutchinson and his colleagues were more positive in their assessment of Peter Robinson but noted that, like Reg Empey, he is also unable to deliver his leader.

The PUP to field candidates in the General Election

During our discussion, Hutchinson revealed that the PUP would be contesting three constituencies in the forthcoming General Election, although he subsequently sought to suggest that no final decision had been made. In response to my enquiry, he confirmed that none of the constituencies targeted were ones where there was a danger that a split unionist vote could allow in a nationalist candidate.

Hutchinson was confident that the PUP would pick up a number of seats in the District Council elections, although he was concerned about their vote in constituencies where they would not be running candidates in the General Election.

The lack of working-class representatives on the boards of Northern Ireland Quangos

Hutchinson and his colleagues complained that the quangos established by the British Government in Northern Ireland are run largely by a small pool of comfortable middle-class people who have largely escaped the impact of the Troubles. They expressed the hope that more working-class people might be appointed to the boards of these quangos under a Labour Government. I agreed with this apparent failing and suggested, tongue in cheek, that it might be worthwhile for the PUP to ask the Irish Government to nominate some candidates on their behalf, only that the success rate of our nominees was so poor.

The rise of middle-class sectarianism

Hutchinson and his colleagues demonstrated a strong sense of class consciousness. They expressed the conviction that working class Protestants had for decades been exploited by a unionist elite which had sought to draw attention from economic deprivation by highlighting Protestant supremacy within Northern Ireland.

They expressed concern that their efforts to break down sectarianism in working class areas was not being matched by similar efforts among the middle classes. We agreed that sectarian tensions among the middle class, which had been partially suppressed during much of the recent Troubles, largely due to a shared fear of paramilitary violence, appeared to have come to the surface during the ceasefire. Hutchinson remarked that much of the support for the Spirit of Drumcree movement was drawn from the middle-classes. One of his colleagues noted that many unionist areas of Northern Ireland had been totally untouched by the Troubles, particularly the North Down area where people such as Bob McCartney reside, and that many people from these areas consequently saw no need for change. Another made the point that were it not for the education that many Protestant working class leaders had received in Long Kesh, they too would have been on the barricades at Drumcree.

Parades

Hutchinson and his colleagues expressed their support for the decision of the Apprentice Boys to avoid confrontation on the Ormeau Bridge last Monday, but stressed that it was

essential that this be followed by an appropriate response from the residents associations. They expressed the fear that if this was not forthcoming there would be a very negative reaction among the unionist community. I expressed the hope that flexibility would be shown on both sides and pointed to the willingness of the Dunloy residents to reach agreement on parades through their village.

I asked Hutchinson if Pauline Gilmore had the backing of the UDP for her opposition to the Apprentice Boys' conciliatory gesture in relation to the Ormeau Road parade. Hutchinson said that this was something that the UDP was going to have to "sort out". He mentioned that Gilmore had been "giving some of our people a hard time" over the issue.

The International Fund for Ireland

Hutchinson and his colleagues referred to the progress they had made in seeking to convince unionist politicians of the benefits offered by the IFI, citing Peter Robinson, in particular.


However, they expressed concern at what they saw as the tendency of different funding agencies, including the IFI, to hold back from funding decisions to see how much other agencies were prepared to give to a particular project. This, they claimed, led to a stalemate which could only be broken when one agency could be arm-twisted into making a firm commitment.

I sought to defend the IFI from much of the criticism which has been directed against it, but Hutchinson claimed that the IFI was partly to blame for being too defensive in dealing with such criticism.

Attitudes to the Irish Government

Hutchinson had acknowledged the evolution of attitudes in the Republic in his radio interview with Eamon Dunphy earlier in the evening. I questioned his well intentioned suggestion that we now lived in a "Coca-Cola culture", while conceding the essence of his point that attitudes here were increasingly detached from the type of nationalist culture to be found in West Belfast.

Finally, we agreed that one of the positive developments of the negotiations to date had been that the Irish Government and the PUP now recognised that neither posed a threat to the interests of the other and that both were genuinely motivated by the desire to achieve an agreement based on the principle of consent, even if for the Irish Government this offered the likelihood that Northern Ireland would remain as part of the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future. Hutchinson pointed out that any eventual agreement would almost certainly contain elements which the PUP would not like, but these would be worth putting up with in return for an agreement which would enable us "to get rid of the guns".


David Cooney
4 April 1997