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Recent Northern Contacts

Mr. Glen Barr

1. I had a conversation recently with Mr. Glen Barr. Mr. Barr is now fully committed to the idea of negotiated independence for Northern Ireland as the only way forward and is devoting much of his energies to working on a draft constitution for an independent Northern Ireland. This is modelled very closely on the U.S. Constitution. The electorate would directly elect a Prime Minister and his Deputy. These would then appoint an executive, which would be independent of the legislature. There would also be a Supreme Court on U.S. lines. (Barr said he had discussed with Senator McGovern the possibility of a U.S. judge being appointed to the first court). The main difference with the U.S. system in his plan was that the Speaker would be elected by a two-thirds majority. This was to ensure that the executive would have to take account of both communities in its endeavours to have legislation passed. Barr envisaged as an essential element in the launching of his scheme a declaration of intent of British withdrawal and a simultaneous declaration from the Irish Government of acceptance of the will of the Northern Ireland electorate, probably associated with an amendment of Acts 2 and 3 of the Constitution.

The financial and moral assistance of the U.S. was also an important element in his "scenario". When he had finalised various details he would be trying to enlist the agreement of the three Governments to his plan.

2. I referred to various statements of the Taoiseach and Minister on the generally open-minded attitude of the Government to any approach which promised a way forward in Northern Ireland. At the same time the first aspect that any Government would consider was the degree of support such a plan could command among the electorate. There had been an obvious backing away from the idea of independence by former partisans such as Craig and Taylor.

3. Barr said that his idea, intended as a path of reconciliation, was very different from theirs, intended as a last ditch defence of Protestant supremacy. He accepted however that there was no very visible prospect of support for his idea from any major political force in Northern Ireland at present. (It is almost certain that Barr's own electoral power base is now dissipated). He mentioned however that this idea was now on the way to being adopted as political policy by the Loyalist paramilitaries.

4. Without discussing the merits of support from this particular source I probed Barr as far as I could on the point. (It appears that the close personal relationship he had with Tyrie, UDA "Commander" is now restored). I pointed out that the UDA had dissociated itself from the ULCCC-McKeague faction of Loyalist paramilitaries when the latter had pushed the independence idea in 1976. Barr said that Tyrie had always been concerned with the "respectability" of the UDA, its links with Loyalist politicians etc. as an instrument for cohesion and influence. He did not wish to compromise this by association with McKeague (whose psychopathic

record is common knowledge) and to accept the ULCCC umbrella on the issue would be "allowing their 200 to dictate to our 50,000." Tyrie was however personally an advocate of the idea, unhappy now with his reliance on Loyalist politicians and he was beginning a process of education within the UDA - successfully Barr thought - to bring them round to Barr's plan. ~~His~~ Tyrie's recent statements, all to the effect that reliance on the British was foolish as a long-term option and that the latter were contemplating withdrawal, were intended as part of this process. (Barr said Tyrie's remarks on federalism in the recent TV programme were taken out of context since Tyrie had been responding to a question putting the words in his mouth, rather than volunteering support for the idea).

5. I took advantage of the context to bring the conversation around to UDA reaction to the La Mon killings. Barr said there had been real pressure for a resumption of sectarian assassinations in the wake of this and particularly the 'Rag-Day' killing - the murdered girl had come from a particularly Loyalist area. Tyrie had countered this by ostensibly agreeing, throwing on the table before his hawkish 'brigadiers' a list of Provo members, insisting that all killings be confined to these and inviting any of them so inclined to take it up. According to Barr none of them did so.

6. We had some general discussion of Unionist politics. Barr appears somewhat disinclined to stand in the forthcoming Westminster election and said that if he did go forward, it would be on the independence issue. We had some interesting discussion on his departure from Vanguard. He had put as the key question to Craig and the other people involved whether the objective of the OUP was devolution or

maintenance of the British link. He was told that there was no doubt but that devolution would be sacrificed to maintaining the link, if need be even through integration.

Rev. W. Arlow

7. I had a conversation on 29 March with the Rev. W. Arlow. He spoke with warm approval of the Minister's Cloughjordan speech. He said that one should not underestimate the value of this kind of direct address to the Unionist community. He said the Minister should not be over-dismayed at the Unionist politicians' dismissals of the speech. The editorial in the Newsletter of 27 March, however faint we might think the praise, was more typical of the average reaction which was that a direct appeal to Unionists, whatever reservations they might have about the content and context, at least indicated to them that they were seen as people to be persuaded, and not a group to be disposed of at will by the British Government.

Canon Eric Elliott

8. I had lunch on 30 March with Canon Eric Elliott. He had been greatly impressed by the recent meeting which the delegation of the role of the Church Committee had with An Taoiseach and in particular the degree of understanding which he felt the Taoiseach had shown for their position. He expressed some initial reservations about the Minister's Cloughjordan speech, to the effect that saying "Protestant fears were groundless" was an unfortunate echo of a statement of the late Cardinal Conway which had been interpreted in Northern Ireland as meaning Protestant complaints were frivolous. When I gave him the full text and pointed out the context of the

remark he accepted that this was unfounded and he spoke very appreciatively of what he termed the "frontal approach" in the speech i.e. the manner in which it addressed itself directly to Northern Protestants rather than to London. He promised to study the full text in more detail and to let me have any other comments which occurred to him.

9. Most of our conversation was taken up with general topics. He emphasised that British withdrawal would spark off a Protestant reflex of self-defence and quoted in illustration of this mentality a remark he had heard recently in a Loyalist gathering that if the British withdrew they would have to do so in row-boats, as the dock workers would ensure that their military hard-ware stayed behind in Northern Ireland. He spoke of the migration of middle-class elements which was taking place in urban Belfast and was changing the demographic nature of the city centre (a small Catholic majority in Belfast school-going population at present). He also referred to the fears he had heard expressed about the aggressive potential of the Timoney armoured car - this is the bee-in-the-bonnet of former Convention member Michael Armstrong who is on the role of the Church Committee. I think he was sufficiently tickled by my awareness of the source of this particular idea to accept my analysis of how farcical and paranoiac it seemed to the man-in-the-street here.

Seán O Huiginn

Seán O hUiginn
30 March, 1978

PSM
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Mr Donlon
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