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Mr. O. Reilly
PA SDLP file
21.3.87

Conversation with Mr E. McGrady, SDLP

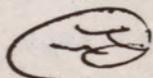
1. The Minister met E. McGrady privately at his request after a meeting on 8 March with the East Border Region Committee. Mr McGrady expressed concern at the delay in the Southern response to the SDLP proposal for a Council for a New Ireland. His concern arose from the imminence of a British election and the SDLP's vulnerability to Sinn Féin if they did not have something positive to sell for the election. He said that his information (received from David Mitchell, Parliamentary Under-Secretary NIO) was that the British election would be held on 10 or 16 June and that as a result only 10 weeks remained to set up the Council. Even if there was only one meeting of the Council or a statement agreeing to its establishment before the election, this would be of immeasurable help to the SDLP. On the other hand if, as was rumoured, the Council or other body was not to be established the SDLP would need to be told this immediately in order to prepare the ground as best they could for a very difficult situation. The Minister said that there was no delay on the Government's part. A meeting had been held with Mr MacGiolla and Mr Haughey's letter had been replied to. He appreciated the urgency of this situation and expressed his desire to help sustain the SDLP. The alternative was to allow the Provos to take over the mantle of leadership of the minority.

2. Mr McGrady enquired whether it was the Government's intention to invite the Unionists to attend the Council. The Minister said that it was important to try and involve all sections of opinion in the process. The Unionists had a right to have a say and should be invited to what would amount to a conference on the future of the whole island. Mr McGrady felt that there was a risk involved in inviting the OUP and DUP. Paisley in particular was extremely skilful in wrecking institutions and might find some way of doing so, perhaps through some form of token attendance. The Minister repeated his point of view and said that he would be willing to take any risk involved if there was even a chance of getting Unionist attendance at such a conference.

3. The Minister also repeated his concern over the SDLP's position and his willingness to help and enquired what could be done in that regard. Mr McGrady referred to the concentration of young unemployed Catholics in areas such as West Belfast and Derry which provided plentiful manpower for Sinn Féin, which in addition had the money to run a very effective constituency service and plentiful advice centres. The SDLP did not have these resources and was composed of part-time politicians. Money was a major obstacle combined with the lack of any platform, hence the proposal to set up a Council. They needed something positive to sell if they were to survive. On the one hand people like David Mitchell with whom he was friendly said that they wished to be helpful in private but in public cut the feet from under the SDLP with their public statements saying the Assembly would continue even after the next election. Mr McGrady suspected that Prior may have set out to "decimate" the SDLP with the Assembly proposal. Prior was an intelligent man and knew before he launched his initiative the effect it would have in producing support for Sinn Féin. Prior may have decided that it would be better in the longer term to draw the gunmen into the political arena and deal with them rather than the more moderate elements on the Catholic side.

4. The Minister enquired about the Assembly and its prospects. Mr McGrady felt that it was perceived even on the Unionist side as a talking shop. It had no decision-taking power and was becoming an increasingly frustrating affair for all concerned. It was also damaging the Alliance Party in terms of electoral support as they were sounding more like Unionists every day. He felt that it was on a short time fuse and that it could collapse at any time.

5. The meeting ended with the Minister saying again that he would welcome any indications from the SDLP of ways in which they could be helped.



Martin Burke

9 March 1983

c.c. PSM, PSS, Ms Hennessy, Mr Ó Ceallaigh