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Meeting with John Cushnahan, Alliance, 5 February 1986

I met John Cushnahan, Leader of the Alliance Party, in Belfast on 5 February. During our conversation the following emerged:

He was disappointed at not being briefed on the Agreement by Dublin despite prior assurances from the Taoiseach during the Government's meeting with the Alliance Party on 1 November 1985. He was even more annoyed at the British who only called him in for a briefing by the Northern Ireland Secretary at 5.30p.m. on the evening on which the Agreement was signed. He felt that as it was known that his Party was likely to support the Agreement it would have been in the interests of both Governments to give him some prior knowledge so that he could have aligned his party behind it immediately on its signature.

As it turned out, the initial reaction from the protestant members of the party was against the Agreement. When they finally decided to back it the Parliamentary party at first did not want to run in the by-elections. Only after John Cushnahan forced the issue and put his leadership at stake did they decide to go ahead, (I was first informed of this at the BIA Conference by Gordon Mawhinney, the party Chief Whip and a protestant, who admitted he was against the Agreement initially).

He felt that it would also have been wiser if the British Government had asked the Unionists for some counsel on the drawing up of the Agreement. He reasoned that if this had happened, the British inevitably would have been turned down by the Unionists but it would have allowed them to say to the moderate protestant community that when they tried to involve the Unionists they found them immovable on reform. Thus, they would have won over a sizable portion of the protestant community shortly after the Agreement was signed and the protestant reaction against it would have been greatly reduced.

He was not unhappy with the by-elections voting for the party. They dropped only 1% of their vote in an election which they felt they could have done quite badly. Because of the negative reaction by the protestant community to the Agreement they believed their vote would suffer. (The party estimates their overall support is 60% Protestant and 40% Catholic. In the five constituencies they chose to contest, East Antrim, South Belfast, North Belfast, East Belfast and North Down, protestants form an even higher proportion of their total support.)

Their big disappointment came in East Belfast where Sir Oliver Napier was expected to do well in possibly attracting some moderate protestants from the OUP whom they believed might find some difficulty in voting for the DUP's Peter Robinson. However, Sir Oliver, (whose title also gives him some status with the protestants) who made no secret of his reluctance in accepting the party's decision on giving the Agreement a chance, refused to campaign and so instead of the hoped for increase, dropped 3,456 votes from his figure in the 1983 General Election-9,373 to 5,917. John Cushnahan says he may be asked to stand down on the next election as a result.

The upshot of the elections is that the party has now re-confirmed its support for the Agreement and John Cushnahan's position as leader is unquestioned.

Their policy is now to push for devolution within the Anglo-Irish Agreement; to achieve this they intend putting pressure on:

1. the British Government to go ahead with devolution within the Assembly;
2. the Unionists to accept devolution as the way to minimise Dublin's control under the Anglo-Irish Agreement;
3. the SDLP to concede more to the Unionists such as support for the RUC; and
4. the Irish Government to persuade the SDLP to make concessions.

He believes the present offers by McCusker, Robinson and Molyneaux are only a ploy both to assuage moderate Unionists and in a desperate bid to persuade Mrs. Thatcher, whom they will be meeting soon, that they should be allowed to settle the problem themselves.

He believes the die-hard Unionists in the DUP will never voluntarily accept the Agreement and that it will take some months before the moderate Unionists will come forward to negotiate. In the meantime, he feels it is important to show the general public that the Agreement is going ahead and that both Governments are still totally committed to making it work.

The Loyalist paramilitaries are waiting for the politicians to come to an impasse before they make their move. This could happen after the forthcoming meeting with Mrs. Thatcher. He feels the beginning of their campaign will first manifest itself in two ways, targets in the Republic and attacks against Nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland (he said Seamus Mallon was a very likely target). The paramilitaries have plenty of weapons and they are reasonably well organised through the Ulster Clubs.

He believes the DUP is very close to the paramilitaries and indeed there is a cross-fertilisation between those organisations. He said that the UDA was invited by politicians to both demonstrations at Maryfield and named Peter Robinson and Harold McCusker as politicians who are involved with the paramilitaries.

Liam Canniffe

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10 February 1986