



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meetings in Co. Antrim

On 29 October, 1986 I met, as instructed, a group of SDLP party activists in Crumlin, Co. Antrim. The meeting was arranged by Donovan McClelland who is a member of the SDLP in Antrim town and a lecturer in agricultural economics in the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. Members of the party from the Antrim and Lagan Valley Assembly constituencies were present including a number of District Councillors. The meeting took the form of an exposition of Government policy and current thinking on the Anglo-Irish Agreement by the undersigned in response to questions from the SDLP members. They expressed appreciation for this visit to an area without an SDLP Constituency representative or policy spokesperson as they did for an earlier visit by Mr. Scannell in March of this year. The questions were wideranging but among matters which caused particular concern were:-

- The perception that political developments in the State could affect the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Concern was expressed at the slow rate of delivery, indeed non-delivery, on many matters but the feeling "that it is all we (in the SDLP) have got" was also strong among those present.
- RTE's coverage of Northern events and particularly programmes made in the North by the "Today Tonight" team. In particular, the SDLP members saw no justification for interviewing the likes of John McMichael of the UDA, who they believe is involved in murder, when Provisional IRA/Sinn Fein members are banned.
- Intimidation of Catholic families in their area.

In a separate conversation with Donovan McClelland before the meeting he told me that Oliver Kearney of the Fair Employment Trust had resigned from the SDLP in a dispute over the handling of a motion on the MacBride Principles at the SDLP conference. This motion is apparently now to be taken after one on fair employment which McClelland himself and Sean Farren have been involved with. McClelland says that he is personally friendly with Kearney but gave the impression that he considered the latter to be idealistic and unrealistic. However, McClelland feels that Sean Farren's welcome for the recent British proposals on fair employment was too warm and, in particular, that the provision for withdrawal of Government grants is not strong enough nor are small firms with under 25 employees adequately covered.

Before we went to the meeting with the larger group McClelland told me that although many Catholics live in Antrim and most of the town's pubs and hotels are owned by Catholics, the local SDLP cannot find a meeting place there because of a reluctance on the part of proprietors. They have to use a less convenient hotel in Crumlin.

On 30 October I met P. J. McAvoy, the sole SDLP representative on Ballymena District Council. McAvoy who like his colleagues in South Antrim was glad to have contact, is the only nationalist on Ballymena council, comprised of himself, 16 DUP members, 5 OUP and an independent unionist. He is the local representative for Guinness and first became involved in politics at the time of the District Council elections in June 1985. Although Ballymena is one of the heartlands of extreme loyalism SDLP representation, says McAvoy, is poor when one considers that, of the 40,000 people in the greater Ballymena area, 8,000 are Catholic.

He is personally popular, however, and topped the poll in June 1985. As this was McAvoy's first meeting with us much of the time was taken up with a predictable overview of the

Government's approach to the Agreement which is not reported in detail here. On local matters, he expressed concern about ongoing intimidation of Catholic families particularly in the Ballykeel estate. (An Irish News front page report the day we met is attached for ease of reference). Five families had been threatened in that estate in the last few weeks and four had already moved. (The Irish Times of 4 November 1986 reported that another Catholic family in Ballymena had been forced to move the previous day).

Further north in Co. Antrim, I recently met Malachy McSparran of the SDLP in Carnlough who was re-elected chairman of Moyle District Council in June this year (previous report of 19 May 1986 refers). McSparran raised the threat to local hospitals in Ballycastle and Cushendall. He had written to Chris Patten, whom he knew from the latter's NIO days, on this matter and received a reply from Needham saying his views would be taken into account. The Northern Health and Social Services Board will consider the proposed hospital closures this month. Needham has indicated that it is very unusual for a Minister to overrule a Board decision. The Cushendall facility has about twenty beds and Ballycastle has forty. A major new hospital is being built at Antrim town serving more immediately the more unionist part of Co. Antrim. McSparran sees part of the problem as being that there is only one member on the Northern Board from the Glens area.

Raising again the possibility of International Fund assistance for the recently-opened Giant's Causeway interpretative centre, McSparran said that Moyle Council would have to charge for admission next year. Another project for possible funding being submitted through Sean Farren is a proposed ferry between Redbay in Co. Antrim and Scotland. Moyle Council's engineer says that such a service would necessitate the dredging of Redbay harbour. Scottish backers of the proposal visited Redbay recently.

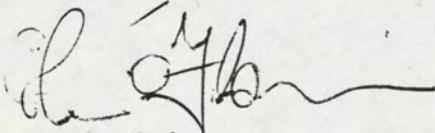
McSparran spoke about his unhappiness with recent developments in the Irish News of which he is a Board member. He would not agree to Jim FitzPatrick's (editor and Board member of the Irish News) proposal that the paper buy the Fountain shopping and office centre in Belfast. FitzPatrick has been trying to persuade McSparran to acquiesce in the purchase over the past few months. Failing to do so he has recently, according to McSparran, bought out the minority shareholdings of two cousins in the McSparran family and created a new Board member (a cousin of his) thus outvoting McSparran two to one on the Board. McSparran's objection arises from the fact that it is FitzPatrick, according to him, who developed the Fountain centre which has not been very successful to date. Additionally, McSparran is not convinced that a newspaper should be involved in property anyway. The funds for the Fountain purchase (at £2.6 million) are coming from the disposal by the Irish News of its Reuters shares.

McSparran is considering whether to opt out of the Irish News (his shares would yield £30,000) but is disinclined to leave the paper under the sole control of FitzPatrick. He has apparently had differences with the latter too over the paper's attitude to the Provisionals. McSparran told me that FitzPatrick had recently received Gerry Adams in his office. There were problems, as far as he McSparran was concerned, with some of the newspaper's staff who had Provo sympathies. This was resulting, in his view, in excessive coverage of the Provisionals. Some time ago, he recalled, a campaign had been proposed to expand sales in Derry. A reception was planned to launch this campaign. FitzPatrick invited Martin McGuinness and when McSparran objected he cancelled the reception.

The Irish News circulation has slipped a little recently but in newspaper circles, says McSparran, the main interest at the moment is focussed on the expectation that the next ABC figures will show a slump in sales of the Newsletter. Since that paper

went tabloid it has been under pressure and according to McSparran there is a suspicion that hitherto its sales figures have been exaggerated.

McSparran is now somewhat concerned at the slow rate of progress under the Agreement. He is inclined to question British motives and their commitment. But at the same time he emphasises his view that constitutional nationalism in the North is finished if the Agreement is abandoned. (I, of course, outlined our current thinking).



Colm O Floinn,
5 November, 1986.

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