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MEETING WITH REV. TOM SIMPSON, BELFAST,

17 JULY 1986

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I met Rev Dr Tom Simpson, General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church and Clerk of its Assembly, in Belfast on 17 July.

Among the points which he made to me were the following:

THE TWELFTH MARCHES

The Chief Constable, in Simpson's view, made the correct decision in relation to the Portadown route. Some form of "compromise" had been necessary in order to defuse a very tense situation. This was the view which the Presbyterian Moderator, Archbishop Eames and the Methodist President had taken and which the RUC had "accepted" when the three churchmen had met them in Portadown on 11 July. I took issue in detail with Simpson's argument. He accepted that there had been a net disimprovement in the situation this year compared with 1985 but insisted that "compromise" had been necessary.

Referring to the 15 July statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simpson said that there had been varying reactions to it on the part of Unionists. Some had viewed it simply as "Peter Barry letting off some steam" - it was, after all, quite common for Irish politicians north and south of the border to air their grievances in public and the statement had shown that "Peter Barry is human like the rest of them". Other Unionists, however, had seen in it an admission that the Conference machinery was not working as the Minister had resorted to public criticism which, strictly speaking, should have been eliminated under the Agreement. Simpson's own comment was that he understood why the Minister had spoken as he had done but

that he would have preferred if there had been no statement. The British and Irish Governments, in his view, should try to settle their differences "behind the scenes" and should not engage in "public recriminations". While he made clear his own continuing opposition to the Agreement, there was also a clear implication in his remarks that, if the Conference machinery was now in existence, it should at least be used for the purposes of quietly resolving disputes such as this.

Simpson criticised the Orange Order (of which he is not a member) for failing to weed out a hooligan element which had been "moving up the ranks" for some time now and which, if unchecked, could eventually "take over the Order". The strict standards which had been imposed in the past in regard to membership of the Order were on the wane. Furthermore, no serious efforts were being made to prevent undesirable outsiders from joining individual Orange marches. The present Orange Order leadership seemed to be having great difficulty in asserting its authority. In permitting the Order to march down Garvaghy Road, the Chief Constable had no doubt been conscious of the need to shore up the leadership's credibility in the face of this growing threat.

I put it to Simpson that the effect of the decision had probably been to enhance, rather than to diminish, the influence of the "hooligans" in the Order. In addition, Paisley would no doubt claim that the decision had been forced by the display of militancy which he had mounted in Hillsborough. Dismissing Paisley as a "fascist" who liked to "lead the Unionist people up the hill" and, at the first sign of trouble, "just as quickly down again"; Simpson contended that pressure from the DUP leader had played no part in Hermon's decision. Rather, the Chief Constable had been "influenced" by Messrs McCusker and Smyth and by the three church leaders.

Simpson himself had spent the Twelfth weekend in North Antrim, where he described the mood as "festive". He conceded, however, that there had been "ugly scenes" in Rathsharkin. A

number of negative forces seemed to have been at work there: first, UDA members "imported" for the day from Belfast; second, hooligans from nearby Dunloy who had been made available by the DUP and the Independent Orange Order; and third, members of the "equally disreputable" Scottish Orange Order who were visiting the area. In Simpson's view, however, local nationalists had been "asking for trouble" by pulling down the Orange arch erected in Rathsharkin.

#### PRESBYTERIAN ASSEMBLY (JUNE 1986)

Simpson expressed satisfaction that the "rather extreme" text on the Anglo-Irish Agreement which Rev. Harold Allen had included in the report of the Church's Government Committee had not been reflected in the resolutions passed by the Assembly in June. Turning down also a proposal by Rev. Donald Gillies which called for the suspension of the Agreement, the Assembly had passed a resolution which, in Simpson's view, had been more "constructive" (it had sought "clarification" of the positions of the two Governments on the Agreement). He mentioned that he himself had, at the Assembly, welcomed the shift in support from Sinn Fein to the SDLP as a result of the Agreement (and had been privately criticised for doing so).

#### DIVORCE REFERENDUM

Simpson felt the Taoiseach had been right to put this matter before the electorate and he regretted that the outcome had not been positive. He was consoled, however, by the evidence that roughly one-third of the Republic's electorate had supported the Government's proposal, i.e., were "prepared to stand up to the Church" on this issue. He remarked also on the contradiction, as he saw it, between the Catholic Church's position on nullity and its opposition to divorce. He commented that the relatively restricted form of divorce proposed by the Government seemed to him to "strike the right

balance" (i.e., it would make divorce available, but subject to very strict conditions). Indeed, he would welcome it for the North where, in the view of many Presbyterians, the law in relation to divorce had become too lax in recent years. The average Unionist in Northern Ireland, however, had regarded the divorce referendum in the South as very much a domestic issue and had taken little interest in it.

*David Donoghue*

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21 July 1986.

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