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SECRET

Meeting with the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church,  
Belfast, 25 September, 1986

I met the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. John Thompson, in Belfast yesterday.

In contrast to his immediate predecessor, Dr. Thompson is a relaxed and urbane individual of moderate Unionist views. He is of the same liberal/ecumenical mould as Dr. Tom Simpson, the Clerk of the Assembly and former Moderator. He cooperates willingly with the other Church leaders and has a warm personal regard for Bishop Cathal Daly. Prior to becoming Moderator, he was President of Union Theological College, the Presbyterian seminary. He spent eight years in Dublin in the course of his career (1958-66) and will be making his first official visit to Dublin as Moderator from 27 to 30 September. He will be returning in October to take part in a three-day ecumenical visit to Dun Laoghaire area in the company of the Cardinal, the Church of Ireland Primate and the Methodist President.

The following were the main points which Dr. Thompson made in the course of our discussion.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement

Even for moderates such as himself and Dr. Simpson, the Agreement is fundamentally unacceptable. There is "almost universal" opposition to it in the Unionist community. This opposition will not disappear. The "irresistible force" coming from London and Dublin will continue to encounter the "immovable object" of Unionist hostility. There is deep resentment at what is seen as interference by the Dublin Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland. While conceding that progress in Northern Ireland would be impossible without the

application of "pressure of some sort" to the Unionist politicians, he felt nevertheless that the structures introduced under the Anglo-Irish Agreement "go too far". (When I pressed him to suggest what other form of pressure could have been devised, however, he was unable to respond).

The Moderator complained that, where previously there was only one "alienated community" (and he used the term with some hesitation, believing that it had been "overdone"), there were now two "alienated communities" in Northern Ireland as a result of the Agreement.

He also dwelled on another familiar Unionist theme, that of the contrasting presentations of the Agreement by the two Governments. Describing the Agreement as "an exercise in studied ambiguity", he said that the various interpretations placed on it merely add to the tension and uncertainty which it has created in Unionist minds.

The Moderator regarded as unhelpful the reference by the Minister for Foreign Affairs in his UN speech (24 September) to "the right of the Irish Government to speak for nationalists in the North". If the Agreement is to be sold to Unionists, the Irish Government should not represent its role exclusively as one of defending nationalist interests. He was also irritated by the Minister's failure to mention, for the benefit of this world audience, the fact that the Agreement does not enjoy Unionist support.

The Minister also disliked the impression conveyed both by the UN speech and by the Minister for Justice's speech at the BIA (which he himself attended) that the Agreement is a permanent fact of life in Northern Ireland which can never be changed. "It is wrong for both Governments to speak of the Agreement as if it is holy writ". It is being described constantly as a framework - "well, frameworks do not last forever: they can be replaced by other frameworks". While he recognises that the Agreement cannot be scrapped (as this would be "political

suicide"), he would like to see nevertheless evidence of greater "movement" on the part of both Governments towards the Unionists. The Unionist politicians are on a hook and should be helped off it. (I suggested that they had impaled themselves on it and he did not disagree). The Moderator hopes that the Governments can devise some compromise formula which will safeguard their own interests but at the same time enable the Unionists to take part in devolution talks. In this connection, he mentioned that he and two colleagues (Jim Simpson and Harold Allen) met Molyneaux recently. The Moderator formed the impression that there was "really not very much distance" between Molyneaux's requirements and the two Governments' position. A "single gesture of generosity" from the Governments would do it. (While he did not say so explicitly, what he seemed to be hinting at was a slowing-down of some kind in the work of the Conference and in the implementation of the Agreement). The Moderator also recalled that, at a meeting which he had with the Secretary of State some months ago, the phrase "talks outside the ambit of the Agreement" came up in discussion as a formula which might be of use in coaxing the Unionist leaders to the negotiating table. The Secretary of State, in fact, tried out the phrase in a speech which he made about a week later.

Commenting generally on the Unionist campaign against the Agreement, the Moderator said that, while he himself is firmly opposed to the Agreement, he believes that Unionists must offer a constructive alternative to it. He tried to get this point across at the Presbyterian Assembly last June and in subsequent private contacts with Unionist leaders. He is glad to see that some Unionists, e.g., Peter Smith and Frank Millar, are beginning to take this point. When he met the Secretary of State some months ago, King asked him what he himself would suggest as an alternative to the Agreement. The Moderator replied that he would favour a devolved government. He would like the Unionists, in effect, to "talk the Agreement out of existence" - by agreeing devolution terms with the SDLP and, with the consequent transfer of powers away from the Conference

(which, he accepted, would not include security), reducing the Agreement to "a mere scaffolding". I reminded the Moderator of the devolution provision in the Agreement and of the Irish Government's explicitly stated support and echoed some of the points made by the Taoiseach on this subject at a meeting with Presbyterian leaders earlier this year.

#### Security situation

The Moderator held that the Agreement has generated more violence and instability and that, because of this, both communities are "worse off than ever before". He mentioned in this connection that he himself was recently the object of Loyalist intimidation. Following a statement in which he obliquely criticised the Ulster Clubs for trying to launch a civil disobedience campaign, Alan Wright arrived on his doorstep complete with a TV crew who recorded Wright handing over a letter of protest. The Moderator <sup>was</sup> incensed at this invasion of his privacy and complained formally to UTV. He mentioned that a number of Presbyterian Ministers who have been involved in Belfast's Education and Library Board have also been targets for Ulster Clubs intimidation.

Dr. Thompson also told me that, from an Orange Order source, he is aware that a number of ideas are being floated at present in connection with the next phase of the campaign against the Agreement. One suggestion is that an eminent persons' group, as in the case of South Africa, should be asked to visit Northern Ireland and to draft recommendations to the two Governments on "ways out of the impasse". (The Moderator's response, on hearing of this idea, was that it would be a waste of time - the group would probably make recommendations very similar to Catherwood's, which had not met with success). Another idea is that a referendum might be held on the Agreement. (The Moderator also rejected that as a waste of time, saying that the response of the British Government would be that last January's by-elections already constituted a referendum of sorts). Some of the "wilder talk" among the paramilitaries, he understands, includes plans to purchase

weapons abroad ("behind the Iron Curtain, if necessary") in order to stage a UDI.

His Orange Order source (who also has some paramilitary acquaintances) has told him that the UVF are putting out feelers to the Provisional IRA at present in a bid to end the tit-for-tat killings sparked off by the Bingham murder.

#### Portadown

The Moderator, along with Archbishop Eames and the Methodist President, had talks with the Chief Constable in Portadown on 10 July, two days before the controversial Twelfth parade. In the light of their detailed discussions with Hermon, he is firmly of the view that the Chief Constable took the decision on Garvaghy Road "entirely by himself". He may well have consulted the Secretary of State about it but it was "very much his own decision". Any other decision, the Moderator remarked, would have caused "murder and mayhem". The Orange Order had to be given some "leeway" if an explosive situation was to be brought under control. He made it clear, however, that he was unhappy that the authorities should have been confronted with a "threat" of this kind and left, as he saw it, with no alternative but to take the action they did.

#### BIA

Referring to the Minister for Justice's speech at the BIA, the Moderator felt it had been insensitive to "rake over Derry's past". He was irritated by what he perceived as a deliberate balance in the Minister's speech between criticism of Unionist shortcomings and condemnation of the IRA. In the latter respect, he remarked that, for a Unionist, condemnation of the IRA is so self-evident that "we don't award marks for it".

This applied also to the Minister for Foreign Affairs' Tipperary speech. In subsequent conversations, however, he softened his position slightly, saying that he welcomed any attacks on the IRA and that he agreed with Frazer Agnew's comments on the Tipperary speech.

Finally, the Moderator referred to the sense of "immobility" which comments made to him by participants in the conference conveyed about the present situation. British politicians and officials, he said, indicated to him that, in the present climate of political uncertainty on both sides of the Irish Sea, it was hard to foresee substantial movement in any direction over the coming months. The Unionists have indicated their intention to wait and see what happens at the next UK general election. The Moderator regretted that people are "thinking as politicians, not as statesmen" and that short-term expediency seems likely to dominate political thinking in relation to Northern Ireland over the coming months.

*David Donoghue*  
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26 September, 1986.

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