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SECRET

Meeting with John Carson, 23 January 1987

Below are some points made by John Carson when we met in Belfast on the 23 January 1987.

- Robinson

The plea of guilty on the unlawful Assembly charge has been recognised by the unionists in Belfast as a plea bargain to get off the more serious charges in order to avoid prison. Many of Robinson's own DUP supporters, even in East Belfast where he has been on a few occasions since the end of the trial, were openly critical of Robinson's 'cowardly' admission of guilt in a Southern court. His tough unflinching reputation has taken a severe dent and as a consequence he has lost much of the propaganda mileage which he acquired from his arrest and the other court appearances.

The difference between the treatment given to Robinson and some other less important figures in the unionist fold who have found themselves in trouble because of the anti-Agreement campaign is striking, Carson noted, and this has not been lost on the unionist community. He gave as an example, the case of a DUP member (John Foster) who had received a £275 fine for assaulting a policeman outside Maryfield. Finding difficulty in paying the fine and worried about his position as a teacher, he first approached Ian Paisley for help and was turned away. He then went to Alan Wright of the Ulster Clubs who told him that he was unable to help and that "he should take his punishment like a man". Apparently Foster is now totally disillusioned with his erstwhile friends and deeply regrets ever ^{having} been involved with them.

Meanwhile, the DUP has placed adds in the newspapers seeking contributions to pay for Robinson's fine and defence. A £100 per head dinner in the Mons Restaurant outside Belfast

netted some £30,000. Alan Wright, Chairman of the Ulster Clubs, contributed £14,000 and Sammy Wilson, Lord Mayor of Belfast, has committed himself to raising a further five figure sum. They expect to raise a total of £100,000 through all their efforts. Nobody has been questioned as to why so much is being raised.

Most official unionists were quite pleased to see Robinson 'taken down a peg' and the fine imposed by the court was just about right. Most people were relieved that he did receive a prison sentence as this would have undoubtedly caused some violent response from the loyalist paramilitaries.

In the meantime, there is a row going on in the DUP about the conduct of the trial. Questions are being asked as to why Kane was dropped in favour of a Southern Junior Counsel to assist Desmond Boal. Why did Robinson plead guilty to any of the charges? Why did he bargain at all with the Southern authorities? Why did he not stand up and defy the Southern court to jail him and give the DUP and the Ulster Resistance Movement a propaganda victory irrespective of the effect it would have on the trial's outcome.

- Official Unionists

He is no longer invited to unionist HQ at Glengall Street or to any of the meetings called by the leadership of the party. In fact he believes the only reason that he has not been thrown out of the Official Unionist Party is because of a threat he issued that as an Independent he would run for Cecil Walker's Westminster seat in his own North Belfast Constituency. This is the seat he held before and he is reasonably confident that, with a good effort, he would have a reasonable chance of regaining the seat. Support for him is still strong especially in his own constituency and he believes that many of the official unionist population would now be more disposed to his way of thinking than to Jim

Molyneaux; like him some of his colleagues in the party see no logical reason for Molyneaux's adherence to what they perceive as Paisley's decisions. Many are asking what "hold" Paisley has over Molyneaux. The forthcoming general election in the South is having no effect on unionists who believe that no matter who comes to power here they will carry on with the Agreement as before. They are more concerned about the results of the next British general election which they now believe will return the Conservatives to Government with a 30 or 40 seat overall majority. While a recent poll showed that Labour had reduced the gap between them by 1%-2%, Unionists believe that the Conservatives will swing back to a healthy lead after they introduce what should be a tax-cutting budget. All in all it is a rather gloomy time for unionists, many of whom now expect that before the year ends they will be faced with two newly elected Governments who will continue to implement the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Margaret Thatcher's recent strong statement on her determination to implement the Agreement confirms this.

- International Fund

John Carson continues to support the Fund and has advised people in his community that they should apply if they have projects. He mentioned a YMCA project which is trying to involve local unemployed young people but which needs assistance to employ more personnel. While advising that the Fund was looking more to private industry rather than community help organisations, I nevertheless said I would pass it on to the Fund Secretariat and perhaps the organisers could fill out an application and discuss the project with the Fund personnel.

Liam Canniffe,
29 January 1987.

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