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Department of Foreign Affairs

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Dear Assistant Secretary

I had lunch today with John McConnell of the Political Affairs Division of the Northern Ireland Office. He mentioned some recent interesting developments in the unionist camp.

McConnell said that he has met Sammy Wilson of the DUP and currently Lord Mayor of Belfast on two or three occasions since Christmas. Wilson is a devolutionist and what he has indicated to McConnell would be required before real talks on devolution could start is considerably different to what he and his party leaders are saying in public. McConnell would not wish to over-stress the importance of what Wilson is saying to him but he is certain that Wilson is keeping his leader informed and is trying to tease out whatever options might become available.

Wilson said that the DUP want "a gap" between meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference to enable talks to take place. In effect he is asking that no meeting of the Conference be held while meaningful inter-party talks involving the SDLP are in session. It would be up to the Government to decide when the usefulness of such talks would be over and to call a further meeting of the Conference, i.e. once the Government decided that there was no possibility of further meaningful discussions the Government would then announce to the parties that they intended to have a Conference session. Wilson is not asking that the Secretariat be suspended during the period of the "gap" but he said they would need some form of public statement by both Governments that during the period of the "gap" the Secretariat would not be preparing a meeting of the Conference. Wilson also said that if a "gap" were to be found it could only be found with the agreement and support of both the Irish and British Governments.

McConnell sees these views as an attempt by the DUP to tease out how far the British Government might be prepared to go. He seemed anxious not to close off the discussion and I would guess therefore that he has not been negative with Wilson about the

possibility of "a gap" between meetings of the Conference. McConnell's anxiety, and presumably this would reflect NIO concerns, would be to try to keep the door open now that contact has been made between the administration and Sammy Wilson. McConnell added that Wilson does not expect any real movement to occur before the British general election. McConnell also said he maintains contact with Ken Magennis.

A second interesting development in the unionist camp is the attitude of unionist councillors towards the rates, rent and tax strike and towards participation in council business and on publicly-appointed bodies.

McConnell believes that of the 26 district councils, 23 are likely to strike a rate within the next few weeks. Of the remaining 3, 2 - Ballymena and Cookstown - could well agree to strike a rate while the remaining council, Castlereagh, is unlikely to do so. He thought that the recent prison sentence served by McCusker for non-payment of road tax had been a damp squib and that any other terms of imprisonment served by unionist politicians on similar grounds will likewise have little effect and be of little benefit to the unionist cause.

With regard to unionist participation on public Boards, he said that pressure exists and is building up within the unionist community not to resign their seats as there is a fear that in so doing they could hand over the game to their political enemies. A further interesting development within the Official Unionist Party is that the hardline officers of the local Unionist Councillors Association, and particularly Arnold Hatch, were replaced at a meeting a few days ago by much more liberal (in unionist terms) councillors, led by the Mayor of Lisburn, Walter Lilburn. The new officers have already cancelled a previously agreed meeting with their DUP opposite numbers.

While these developments are interesting in themselves and indicative of some measure of movement within the unionist body politic they don't amount to a major shift in unionist opinion. McConnell admitted that he had been one of those who most strongly underlined over the last 15 months or so the strength of unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. He still believes that the opposition to the Agreement is widespread but he thinks that against a background where the two Governments, and particularly Thatcher, are seen not to waver, more and more unionists are coming round to the view that while they are opposed to and cannot support the Agreement they have to accept that it's going to remain in place at least in the immediate future. The clear implication is that they have to find ways of putting forward their views against that background. The unionists have "calmed down" more than McConnell or the NIO expected.

He said he had seen a report of the meeting which the Friends of the Union had last week with Mrs. Thatcher in London and that he and his colleagues had all remarked on the firmness with which Mrs. Thatcher had dealt with them. She had given them no cause

at all to believe that they could expect any change in her support for the Agreement and in her determination to implement it.

On the party leadership, McConnell repeated the by now well known bemoaning of the leadership of Molyneux. Molyneux is an integrationist. He doesn't want devolution and he will not make any move which might lead towards devolution. So long as the British Government continues to oppose integration, and McConnell expected that they would continue to do so, Molyneux has nowhere to go. In effect there is no official unionist leadership which can guide unionist politicians through their present dilemma. Nor is there anybody in the party who can put forward a policy different to Molyneux's and effectively challenge his leadership.

McConnell was not as certain as others that Robinson had been seriously damaged politically by his guilty plea in Dublin. It has certainly damaged Robinson's standing with people such as George Seawright, with the UDA and with the loyalist paramilitaries. But he thought that Robinson's standing within the DUP may not suffer significantly in the long term. What was most interesting was that of all the leading unionist politicians Robinson was the one who so far has declined to say anything about the recent UDA proposals. Musing aloud McConnell hoped that his own side would not go overboard, as he believed John Hume had done, in welcoming these UDA proposals. He had no doubt that the man who put them forward, McMichael, was responsible for the intimidation of Catholics and for the murder of Catholics. He has publicly said the UFF is an arm of the UDA. To give credibility to policies being put forward by John McMichael and the UDA has significant implications for relations when one thinks of Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA. If UDA proposals are worth looking at why not the Provisionals.

McConnell firmly believes that it is possible for Gerry Adams to lose his seat in West Belfast in the next Westminster election. In his view, no more than 3,000 of Gerry Fitt's votes were unionist. If Hendron can succeed in holding his own vote and attracting that part of Fitt's vote which was not unionist, then Adams can be defeated. McConnell is aware that Hendron is saying that Glendinning is not going to run for Alliance in West Belfast and that this will help him (Hendron). This may well be true but McConnell fears that Cushnahan, who deeply dislikes the SDLP, may put forward another candidate to run for Alliance in West Belfast which would of course damage the SDLP.

McConnell said that they in the NIO would do everything possible to assist Hendron. They have had several meetings with him and will try to put as many "goodies" his way as they can. They clearly however have doubts about Hendron's political acumen and would have preferred somebody like Brian Feeney to have run for the seat. They specifically hoped that Hendron and the local SDLP would keep in contact with the police so as to sort out difficulties on the ground as they arise. Far better, he said,

to have the benefit go to Hendron than to the local clergy. He also thought it very important that the SDLP open a proper advice centre on the Falls and that they put their backs into constituency work.

We had a short discussion about the Irish language. I stressed that what we are talking about in terms of place names is a finite number of the names of postal districts amounting to 600-700 names. McConnell said they have no difficulty with the Irish forms of names which have become anglicised e.g. Beal Feirste for Belfast. Nor have they any difficulty with the original Irish place name of an area which may have a modern English name, for example, Port Mor/Blackwaterstown. But in the meetings of Permanent Secretaries of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, at which this issue is a regular topic, and which are chaired by Bloomfield, the question of how to translate a name which is English continually arises. The example he gave was Crawfordsburn, where many of the Permanent Secretaries live and for which there is no Irish name except one that is contrived (Sruth Chraford in Ainmeacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist). To so contrive a name, the Permanent Secretaries feel, amounts to bilingualism and they are opposed to it. (It might be worthwhile for the Department to examine Ainmeacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist with a view to seeing how many such names exist and whether a solution can be found to this problem.) We also discussed the naoiscoil in the Short Strand and the possible reopening of the post office in Creggan about which I am reporting separately.

All in all, McConnell was more relaxed than usual. He said that whatever about the hesitant start the British Government are now fully committed to support of the Agreement and to the implementation of their responsibilities under it. He thought that Tom King had found his feet and while he fully accepted that a gaffe had recently been made by the Secretary of State when speaking of suspension he thought that his understanding of the issue was now much more sure than heretofore.

Yours sincerely



Daithi O Ceallaigh