



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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7 April 1987

Mr. E. O Tuathail  
Assistant Secretary  
Department of Foreign Affairs

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Dear Eamonn

1987

Lunch with John McConnell

Noel Ryan and I had lunch today with John McConnell and Steve Hewitt. McConnell, who is Northern Ireland-born, is a senior official in the Political Affairs branch of the Northern Ireland Office. He is a Catholic and served previously in a number of positions including secondment to Newry District Council. I would guess that at best he is an Alliance supporter. There is not a great deal that was new that emerged from the lunch.

McConnell said that he is one of the few in the Northern Ireland Office who believes that Joe Hendron has a good chance of winning West Belfast. Hendron and Fitt between them got around 21,000 votes in the 1983 election. McConnell thinks that no more than 2,000-3,000 of those votes came from Protestants voting for Fitt. He believes that between 2,000 and 3,000 of Adams' votes were the result of impersonation and would not be repeated in a future election. He would put the real Sinn Fein vote at about 14,500 though the sitting M.P. always has an advantage. The anti-Sinn Fein vote is about 17,500- 18,000. The issue is, however, complicated by the Alliance and Workers Parties. Contrary to previous reports, he believes that the Alliance Party has not yet made up its mind on whether or not to contest the West Belfast seat. It is likely that they will do so at their party conference next Saturday, 11 April. There is pressure on Cushnahan to run candidates in as many constituencies as possible so as to ensure a respectable total

vote throughout Northern Ireland for the Alliance Party. Alliance will not contest the Foyle seat and Cushnahan is trying to convince his Party executive that they should only contest two of the other three seats where the SDLP stand a chance of winning. In effect, he is trying to get the Party to agree to contest South Down and Newry and Armagh but not West Belfast. It is not yet certain whether or not he will succeed. McConnell would have no doubt that the deep-seated opposition within the Alliance and Workers Parties to the SDLP could overcome their even stronger hatred for Sinn Fein.

Having said that, McConnell believes the seat is worth fighting for. He does not think that large gestures by the authorities in Belfast would particularly help Hendron. What will be of much more help to him would be an increasing awareness among the population of West Belfast of the seriousness of the SDLP in looking after the interests of people there. He believes the decision to reopen a full-time SDLP office in West Belfast would help. The decision taken by Alex Attwood to devote himself full time to SDLP concerns in West Belfast should, in McConnell's view, be publicly underlined.

He said that the unionist task force - McCusker, Millar and Robinson - has emerged because of anxiety, and particularly in the OUP, that their leadership, or lack of it, is losing them support in the community. This was brought home most strongly to them during the recent Castlereagh by-election when the turnout was but fourteen and a half per cent. The unionist population remains opposed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement but very large numbers of unionists are dissatisfied with the way in which unionist leaders have handled that opposition. A large and growing number of unionists do not favour the boycott policy. The recent weekend speeches of Millar and McCusker showed an awareness of their difficulties. As McCusker said, it is not sufficient to protest against the Agreement, an alternative must be found. The OUP are particularly worried that they must provide their supporters with what will be seen by them as a positive alternative to the Agreement if they are

to ensure a maximum unionist turnout in the next general election and if they are to retain their Parliamentary seats. They are particularly concerned about South Down where they feel Enoch Powell is seriously threatened by Eddie McGrady and where they think it will be difficult to get out the unionist vote in its entirety.

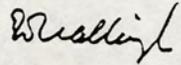
McConnell thinks that the unionist task force will come up with a package in which there will be three elements. Firstly, they will propose devolution with some form of minority involvement. Paisley has referred to this as shared responsibility. It is too early to say definitively but it is unlikely that the minority will be offered power-sharing on a Sunningdale basis.

Secondly, and Millar referred to this in his speech in Fermanagh, they would wish to see security in so far as it affects the police being devolved to a new locally-elected administration in Stormont. For many years now Hermon has resisted meeting with unionist leaders. Yet, as unionists see it, Hermon meets with the Irish Co-Chairman of the Conference and does his bidding. The most recent example of this they would see as the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order. Another prominent example would be the handling of parades and marches last year. The third element in the package would be an acceptance that in cross-border matters contact be maintained between a government in Dublin and a devolved executive in Stormont broadly along the lines of what was envisaged in the Sunningdale agreement.

Unionists are not thinking of putting forward proposals such as these in tandem with the Agreement but in replacement of the Agreement. McConnell thought that if they could come up with proposals which were reasonably imaginative there is a possibility that both the Alliance and the Workers Parties would support the unionists. If this were to occur, it would represent a significant shift on the part of the Alliance Party which has heretofore supported the Agreement. The Alliance

Party are apparently very dissatisfied with the manner in which the SDLP have treated them over the past 15/16 months and in McConnell's view this will be an important factor in any Alliance response to unionist proposals.

Yours sincerely



Daithi O Ceallaigh