

CONFIDENTIAL**10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA**

From the Principal Private Secretary

23 November 1998

CONFIDENTIAL*See Nick,***MEETING WITH THE ORANGE ORDER, 23 NOVEMBER**

A delegation from the Orange Order called on the Prime Minister for an hour this morning. I attach a list of those present. Jonathan Powell, Bill Jeffrey and I were also there.

Macrea said that they wanted to discuss the future of the Order in Northern Ireland. Since their last meeting with the Prime Minister in May, the Good Friday Agreement had been endorsed in the referendum. The Order had recognised this in a statement in August and made clear that they were ready to play their part in future structures. As the statement had clearly said, they were now ready to deal with the realities of the present. However, the Parades issue also had to be sorted out. Nothing much had moved on this and unrest was growing again. People wanted to see their basic democratic rights to parade restored, not least in Portadown. He saw three issues for discussion: how to ensure Portadown district could complete their parade, recognition of the Orange Order's cultural identity and position in Northern Ireland affairs, and the general issue of the Parades Commission.

Gracey recalled the long history of the parade from Drumcree Church. They could not give up the march back down Garvaghy Road. There was no reason why this should cause problems to others. Blocking it was an attack not only on the Orange Order in Portadown, but on Protestant people all over Northern Ireland. They had tried to contain the violence over the summer, and in the end had scaled down the protest, but there had been no reciprocation from the NIO or David Trimble. His people felt they had no choice but to sit there until they were allowed their civil right to walk the Queen's highway. They had been demonised in the media after the Ballymoney murders, and support had fallen away. But people could now see that this had been black propaganda, and support was returning. Crowds would therefore return, and would be hard to control, particularly in winter. He had not spent a night at home in 140 days,

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and would be prepared to stay another 140 days if necessary. Garvaghy Road did not pass through housing estates, but was a main road with houses standing well back. The present situation was dangerous, to put it mildly.

Watson said that the Orange Order had shown its willingness to take part in the talks led by Jonathan Powell, but these had got nowhere. There did not seem to be any movement from the Garvaghy Road residents. Orange representatives were ready to be involved in forums of one sort or another. They had a right to be included in civic events since they represented some 500,000 people overall. But the parade had to come back down the Garvaghy Road. He thought the Prime Minister essentially shared that view. Meanwhile, violence was growing elsewhere, for example the trouble in Lurgan the previous night. He hoped there would be no deal involving Drumcree and decommissioning. He wondered whether the Prime Minister could establish ways of looking into the Orange Order's cultural aspects, and foster a climate of accommodation where all cultures were accepted. This might involve new funding arrangements. They would put forward a detailed submission about this at a later stage.

Robert Overend said that the Order had tried to influence the Parades Commission before it was finally set up, but their views had not been sought or taken when offered. The Orange Order was defending the basic rights of free assembly and free speech. There had been no problem in Bellaghy until a small, politically-motivated group had started to threaten violence. Even his Roman Catholic neighbours thought these trouble-makers should be dealt with firmly.

Patton said that they had looked in detail at all the determinations of the Parades Commission and found a pattern of inaccuracies which undermined the Commission's credibility. This had contributed to alienation. They had never said they would work with the Parades Commission, but had submitted views to the North Committee, and on the form of the legislation. These had been ignored, which had created a problem.

Macrea said that, before the Prime Minister responded, he wanted to raise one question. McKenna had said the basic problem was not the Drumcree Parade, but the economic and social situation in Portadown. Had he been offered £15 million over three years? If there was such a package, would it be for Portadown and indeed Craigavon as a whole?

The Prime Minister, responding to the last point, said that there had been talk at one stage of the need for regeneration in Portadown. But that could not be

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taken forward while a kind of civil war continued. He assumed that the Orange Order would welcome local investment, as long as it was not one-sided. We would certainly not simply be buying off the Garvaghy Road residents. There was also no question of tying a solution on Drumcree to decommissioning. Jonathan Powell added that, as the representatives of the Order would know, there had been quite a lot of shuttle diplomacy going on. He was ready to come back into the negotiations at any time if that was thought helpful by both sides.

The Prime Minister continued that he was well aware that Drumcree still had to be sorted out, as a necessary part of reducing tension in general. The Parades Commission had never been the best solution, since turning to them meant acknowledging that the problem could not be overcome in other ways. He wanted to get to a position where marches could take place without causing trouble. He accepted the right to march. But we had to create a situation where these rights could be exercised. Macrea said that McKenna was trying to break the Drumcree cycle by stopping any parade in 1998. It was therefore important that this parade was completed as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister said that we were under no illusion about McKenna's own agenda. He repeated that we were ready to come back in to the negotiations when the right opening was there. More generally, he accepted that the Orange Order was a respectable body which made a huge contribution to the life of Northern Ireland. It was deeply unfortunate that people were able to criticise the organisation when it did do so much work for the community. The vision of the Orange Order had to be to engage with the new and different Northern Ireland which was emerging, on a basis of mutual respect. This would involve educating people about the real work of the Orange Order. The Order had to get across to people that members did not join it to fight sectarian battles, but to uphold moral principles acceptable to all. He acknowledged that the Order represented a large part of Northern Ireland society, through its wider family links. Even if we could sort out the present difficulties over decommissioning, voluntary organisations like the Orange Order would be critical to the success of the peace process. Politicians could only create the framework. In sum, we were ready to help the Order in any way we could. He would look very carefully at any proposals they had to make.

Overend said that Orange Order members were able to work with Catholics in all kinds of areas, but were being attacked by Sinn Fein working through the residents groups. The Government should be more positive and offer greater protection from intimidation to ordinary people. The Prime Minister said

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that resolving Drumcree would require skill as well as willingness to argue. Sinn Fein might use parades as a bargaining ploy, but a huge effort was still needed to resolve the current situation. It required a sense that the Order was engaging with the future, not just defending the past. He was ready to play his part by saying positive things about the Order. The Order itself also needed to explain what it did and what it stood for much better.

Gracey said that the problem was not Drumcree Church but the Garvaghy Road. The parade could not take another road. If they tried to do so, they would not be allowed back into their own communities. He wanted the road open to walk down for his children and his grandchildren. Portadown was seen as a symbol not only by the Orange Order but by the whole of Protestantism and Unionism in Northern Ireland. If they lost that battle, they had no future. He would try to keep violence down. He had never had any involvement in paramilitaries himself, or with the courts. But many young people were getting very frustrated and the depth of feeling was very strong.

McNarry said that they were not willing to negotiate about their principles and simply had unfinished business in Garvaghy Road. Orange Order representatives were responsible people who did not want to break the law, but would do so if necessary to defend their principles. We were now close to Christmas and it was inhumane for Harold Gracey still to be there protesting over Christmas. The Parades Commission could reverse their determination. Everyone had made their point and the time had come to settle this. The Orange Order wanted to engage more broadly with Northern Ireland issues, but it was difficult and dangerous to do so while 1400 men still had their unfinished business in Portadown. He was making an appeal to the Prime Minister from the heart.

Macrea concluded that there were four issues which the Order had raised:

- the need to complete the parade down Garvaghy Road as soon as possible, and in any case before the end of 1998;
- the need to work together to resolve the parades issue for next year. This had to be done by next March when the first parades were due;
- an end to the demonisation of the Orange Order, including absolution for the Quinn murders, where there was no evidence of Orange Order involvement;

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doing something about the Parades Commission. The Orange Order's bottom line was its disbandment.

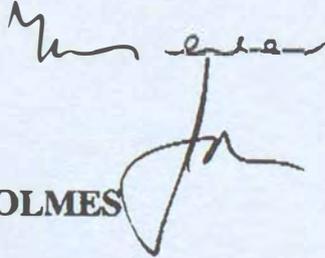
Looking forward, he hoped the Prime Minister would be imaginative about an initiative to include the Orange Order in Northern Irish issues in general.

The Prime Minister responded that he had listened carefully, and would study the best way forward. He was certainly ready to be open and constructive, and to speak positively about the Orange Order.

Comment

The tone of the meeting was good, including at a photo session afterwards, where Robert Overend caused considerable amusement by haranguing the Prime Minister about the pig industry in Northern Ireland. It was useful for people like Harold Gracey to be able to say their piece. But there was not much flexibility on display, to say the least, about the Drumcree Parade, except for a suggestion of greater willingness to join in local civic institutions in Portadown. There were some ominous hints about the difficulty of controlling crowds in winter. We will see whether this meeting leads to further statements from the Orange Order, which might create openings for renewed negotiations.

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Sebastian Wood (Cabinet Office) and by fax to Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).



JOHN HOLMES

Nick Perry Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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MEETING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

23 NOVEMBER 1998-11-23

ORANGE ORDER DELEGATION

George Patton

John Macrea

Dennis Watson

Harold Gracey

Robert Overend

Nigel Dawson

David Burrows

David McNarrey