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Meeting with Mr Robert McCartney

I had several hours' discussion with Mr McCartney at his home near Belfast on 29 April 1983. On the morning of 30 April we were joined by a number of his friends none of whom is at present publicly active in politics.

I outlined the objects of the New Ireland Forum to Mr McCartney stressing the process which it would involve of facing reality in relation to:

- a re-definition of "Irishness" so as to accommodate the problem of self-identification as British of Unionists;
- the need to face the implications of an Anglo-Irish dimension to any solution (sovereignty, security);
- the need to confront the difficult Church/State issues at the heart of the problem;
- the difficult economic implications of unity (as well as counting the cost of violence and lost opportunity so far).

Mr McCartney was after some time prepared to concede that this process, if seriously pursued, might have benefits in the sense of creating a more realistic approach on the part of the South generally.

He said that his own hope was that arrangements could be made to involve the SDLP in the Assembly - specifically power-sharing. This would require changes in legislation and in the attitude of Unionists. He could not foresee this happening while the emphasis remained on short or medium-term progress towards Irish unity. He felt that perhaps the Forum would lead to the inescapable conclusion that Irish unity (which he does not oppose) is a long-term process. If that implication were clear in the conclusions of the Forum it would help to create the climate necessary for concessions by the British and a less ungenerous attitude on the Unionist side.

He said that he would probably make a number of speeches challenging the Forum in detail to face a number of the key problems as he sees them. It would be politically impossible for him at this stage to contemplate a personal involvement in the Forum.

He gave me a copy of his recent statement to John Robb's group entitled "A United Ireland - Cloud Cuckoo Land or a Reality?" He made the comment that in looking for a second guarantee of the Union from the South as a condition of political progress in North/South relations, an acknowledgement of the long-term nature of progress towards unity from all the parties in the South would go a long way. He used a rather compelling image to illustrate his view: the situation is like a canal lock with the different levels of water in each section of the lock representing the different stages of opinion on the part of Nationalists and Unionists; Nationalists seemed to be attempting to open the lock gates before the levels in each section had been equalised - an impossible task; were the Nationalists prepared to let the water in the lock find the common level over time, "even a child" could open the gates with a slight push.

He feels his political career is progressing well and is optimistic that he will be elected to Westminster even if Kilfeddar stands in North Down (which is by no means certain).

Mr McCartney expressed concern and disappointment at what in his view was the political imprisonment of the Taoiseach on the Northern Ireland issue by the Leader of the Opposition and the SDLP. I sought to convince him that he was mistaken. While he was depressed about the Amendment to the Constitution on Abortion, he felt the affair might after all have a silver lining as it confirmed in the mind of the public the real incapacity of Southern politicians to deal now or in the short term with the Church/State problems inherent in any ambitious approach to Northern Ireland. He nevertheless hoped that the Taoiseach's approach would be maintained as it helped to limit Unionist intransigence even within Northern Ireland.

M.J. Lillis

4 May 1983