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Note:

Six Counties: Situation.~~SECRET~~

Mr. Kelvin White, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, called on Mr. S.G. Ronan and Mr. E. Gallagher on 2nd March to have a general discussion on the Northern Ireland question. On 3rd March Mr. White and Mr. P. Piper of the British Embassy had lunch with Mr. Ronan, Mr. Holmes, and Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. White said that last summer he had been transferred from the British Embassy at Stockholm, where he had been engaged in trade work, to a section in the FCO dealing with bilateral relations with Western European countries including ("the Republic of") Ireland. Therefore he had been engaged in matters relating to the crisis in the North since then. It appeared that he was essentially engaged in policy questions on a political basis. Connected with this he would be present at all bilateral discussions between Ireland and Britain e.g. Free Trade Area Agreement talks. He gave the impression that there were policy gaps in British relations with Ireland which probably arose from the North being a Home Office matter while the CRO had previously dealt with Dublin. Now his *section* ~~responsibility~~ looked at the overall situation.

It became clear that Mr. White had visited Dublin expressly for the purpose of getting acquainted and having a discussion with officials here and would welcome occasional private discussions at official level either in Dublin or in London.

He made it quite clear that the British Government are determined to introduce reform in the North; that they are confident of being able to maintain law and order in any conceivable circumstances and that they realise that there is a case, in due time, for a new look at the "settlement" of the Irish question.

Among the points of more immediate importance which were discussed were the following:-

- (i) Mr. White mentioned that when Dr. Hillery had previously met Mr. Thompson there seemed to be no conflict of view between them on the facts of the situation but that on the last occasion they met there seemed to be a divergence and he wished to "close the gap" on this issue. He said that on the most recent occasion Dr. Hillery appeared to be worried about the possibility of widespread violence in the North whereas the British were confident that this was not a possibility. In reply to this we said that, while it was understandable that both the British and ourselves could take an objective view about the progress of reform in the North, it was too much to expect the minority to see progress so clearly within the area particularly as the Unionist Party seemed bent on swinging to the Right and the same people more or less occupied the same positions of influence in local government. This together with the speeches of Young Unionists, including Craig, and UVF activity explained to a degree a genuine fear among elements of the minority that they may again become the target of extreme unionists. The Minister felt compelled to put this point of view to Mr. Thompson, not necessarily sharing it himself but obliged to direct attention to what might be described as the worst possible case, so as to ensure that it did not occur through miscalculation.

(ii) Mr. White agreed that there is a shift to the Right in progress in the Unionist Party but did not seem very much concerned about it. In regard to the Brooke appointment he repeated what was said in London i.e. that it is better to have him in a position of responsibility where he must behave responsibly than to have him on the outside joining in an attack on the Government. He agreed that Paisley and Morgan would probably win the two by-elections in due course. When it was put to him that the right-wing would "break" on the question of local government reform, if they "break" at all, he asked for a count of heads. In reply we referred to the nine unionists who had put down amendments to the Police Bill, added Paisley and Morgan, and suggested that other back-bench unionists might join them on the particular subject of real local government reform which would be the death-knell of discrimination locally in housing and jobs. They could be encouraged in a revolt if no disciplinary action were now taken against Craig, West et al. and we were watching this closely. It was conceivable, therefore, that as many as half of the Unionist M.P.s would revolt on this issue and try to remove Chichester-Clark from leadership of the Party. What would the British do in those circumstances? Mr. White presumed that the Opposition M.P.s would vote with the Government and that local government reform would, therefore, be legislated even in the case of a substantial back-bench revolt. In this respect we said that the Opposition attitude would depend on the actual legislation. Whereas the drafting of the Police Bill was relatively uncomplicated the drafting of local government reform could leave much scope to Brian Faulkner for loading it against the minority unless he was very carefully watched indeed and this, of course, would determine how the Opposition voted. In the up-shot there seemed to be an understanding between us that local government reform would become the key issue round about June and certainly not later than next October. In reply to Mr. White's query as to whether we assumed that Stormont would be suspended if it eventually refused to vote suitable local government reform we responded by referring to Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act which enables Westminster to legislate direct without necessarily dismissing Stormont and the subject was dropped at that point.

(iii) Mr. White probed quite deeply on the question of what we would do if there were widespread disorder in the North. He presumed that we would go to the United Nations and that each side would utter speeches condemning the other, probably more in pain than in anger. On this we responded by saying that a real breakdown in the North, which we frankly thought to be unlikely, would have incalculable consequences to which the United Nations might not be a sufficient answer and that it was up to the British to make sure that such a case did not arise. He enquired as to what we would do if, say, an Irish battalion commander on his own initiative crossed the border, and again we replied by pointing out that there was no reason why this should happen. It could only be justified in a most extreme case, say, a pogrom continuing for

48 hours in perhaps Armagh or Newry during which the British Army made no effort to protect the minority. We did not anticipate that such a situation could arise. Mr. White indicated that the British Army are in a position to be anywhere in force in the North in 90 minutes. There seemed to be a suggestion in the course of this questioning by Mr. White that the British felt that in some unspecified circumstances we might create an international incident by crossing the border. On this we hinted that conditions had almost been ripe for such a thing in August if we had wanted an excuse; we had not done it then so that it was quite unnecessary even to think that we might look for such an excuse in the future. He finally seemed satisfied with this answer.

Having given the assurances mentioned earlier - that the British Government were serious about reform - Mr. White enquired whether we would then be satisfied with the situation. He received the reply that we would regard the new situation as a satisfactory first step but that our aim was to secure the reunification of Ireland by peaceful means as soon as this could be done. In expanding on this we referred to the aspirations of the majority in the North, the minority there, our aspirations and those of the United Kingdom. To this Mr. White replied by saying that the United Kingdom had no aspirations other than friendly relations with Ireland; which brought the question as to whether the United Kingdom would assist discreetly in helping to forward the idea of Irish unification among their contacts in the North. Without endorsing this suggestion Mr. White said that the United Kingdom was certainly concerned to forward the idea of friendly relations between North and South and would use their influence in this direction.

In this respect he enquired as to what we saw to be the factors which favour achievement of Irish unification. In reply to a mention of the demographic factor Mr. White responded by saying that the Catholic proportion had only increased by one percentile point per decade in the past 50 years and on his estimation there would not be a 50% Catholic population for over 100 years. We said that this was not the case. Statistics showed quite conclusively that the natural increase in the Catholic population had been syphoned off almost wholly into emigration and this had been the purpose of the Unionist policy of discrimination on housing and jobs etc. Now that this policy had been dismantled the demographic change would take place much faster. In addition, of course, it could be taken that sensible Unionists would realise the need for a new arrangement with Dublin before the Catholic population became able to out-vote Unionists in the area and might hopefully be expected not to wait until they had nothing to bargain with. Mr. White replied by saying - "you are talking about ten to twenty years from now" and we did not deny this but expressed the hope that suitable steps in the right direction could begin much sooner than that.

Reverting to local government reform Mr. White enquired as to what we thought would be reasonable representation for the minority in political terms - one-third? On this we replied by saying that an honest electoral division of the area was the essential thing to do and that would itself determine representation without putting in a mathematical bind. We enquired whether the British would look seriously at the idea of proportional representation which would free unionism from excessive extremist influence. He felt that PR was contrary to British political instincts but recognised that the North was a special case, quite unlike Britain itself where the straight vote has produced regular changes of Government.

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At lunch on the 3rd March Mr. White raised the subject of contacts between us and Stormont. We all agreed on the desirability of this and the value of contacts when the political situation became ripe for such activity. Various methods were mentioned but none were carried to a conclusion. They included frequent visits by someone from Dublin to the North, a Consul - to which we interposed constitutional objections -, the idea of having someone in the Embassy in London stationed in Belfast, the idea of doing it through an organisation such as Bórd Fáilte, etc. It was stressed that the main problem here from our point of view was contact with influential Unionist opinion.

We asked Mr. White whether Mr. J. Oliver Wright (now succeeded by Mr. R.A. Burroughs, as the British representative in Belfast) had received full cooperation from Stormont circles in carrying out his task. Mr. White replied emphatically in the affirmative and even gave the impression that the Stormont civil servants were dazed by events and more than anxious to have his assistance. It was a case of "what should we do now?" and on receiving advice the attitude was "thank you very much, we shall do that". It was put to Mr. White that perhaps Mr. Wright and his UK colleagues in the North might be up against Unionist influence too much and might not have enough contact with minority opinion. Mr. White seemed to think that this was not the case and he said that Mr. Wright had, for example, paid periodic visits on Cardinal Conway and was also in constant touch with Opposition M.P.s (we know this to be true).

On the related subject of contact between Unionist and minority leaders Mr. White referred to contact between Chichester-Clark and Cardinal Conway and we took the opportunity to distinguish between the Cardinal's role and that of minority political leaders.

Mr. White made some remarks which appeared to be intended to draw us out on the subject of a "federal solution". In this connection he adverted to Quintin Hogg's recent suggestion that some solution might be found along Scandinavian lines which led to a discussion of what this might mean. It was suggested on our side that Mr. Hogg's reference, which also took in US-Canada as an example, could have only a general "geographical" application in relation to common regional interests rather than any constitutional implication. Mr. White agreed with this and added that it certainly did not indicate, in his view, any need for us to brush up our files on the details of Nordek. It seems possible in this connection that the FCO may already be giving thought to possibly Conservative policy lines on a long-term solution for the North should they win the forthcoming British general election. In a response to the use of the phrase "federal solution" by Mr. White we had also mentioned "local autonomy".

The general impression we got is that the British are quite honest in their determination to reform the North, are quite sincere in their belief that they can contain right-wing unionism and do not rule out a priori the view that a new settlement of the Irish question should be reached in due time. In the meantime they are quite obviously anxious that we should keep in touch both by visiting London and by receiving visits here at official level.

The atmosphere in our conversations was cordial and informed on both sides.

E.G.

3 Márta 1970