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Callaghan proposal to create a branch of the
British Labour Party in the North

We have been aware for some time both through the Ambassador in London and through other contacts that Mr. Callaghan is enamoured of the idea of creating a regional branch of the British Labour Party in the North. He first mentioned the matter to the Ambassador when he was Secretary of State at the Home Office last March. The Ambassador had expressed misgivings and since then the Ambassador has been advised, at official level, that the idea would probably not be acceptable to the Government here. When Mr. Callaghan raised the subject again with the Ambassador on 21st October he was, therefore, told that Dublin would look on the development with disfavour.

This does not seem to have made much impression on Mr. Callaghan.

We must, therefore, look more seriously at the matter and obtain, within a very short period of time in my opinion, the Minister's instructions on what should now be said to Mr. Callaghan and/or Mr. Wilson. The reason for expedition is that I understand from other sources that Mr. Callaghan is likely to produce definite proposals for the National Executive of the British Labour Party on this subject in the near future and if the Minister's view is that the Government would be strongly opposed then we should consider expressing this view appropriately without much delay.

Mr. Callaghan's case in favour, so far as we know it, is contained in the following extract from the Ambassador's report of the conversation of 21st October -

At that stage, Mr. Callaghan said he wanted to tell me of the efforts he is making to set up in the North a regional branch of the Labour Party. He has been working very hard on this matter in recent months and is hopeful of getting approval for the idea fairly soon. Under the arrangement he has in mind, the headquarters of the regional branch would be in Belfast and agents would be appointed in all the constituencies. He stressed that he is not at all motivated by any consideration of getting more Labour seats in Westminster. His plan would, in fact, be geared essentially to the building-up of a genuine Labour opposition in Stormont. I recalled that he had already mentioned this matter to me when I called on him in the Home Office in March last. My understanding then was that his plan was related to Westminster seats and he told me he has changed his mind on this in the meantime. I recalled the misgivings I expressed to him off the cuff at our earlier meeting and said I could now give him a more official view as to what our attitude would be. We would, in fact, view such a development with disfavour. It would mean a more positive recognition by the Labour Party of the continuing division of my country. He said he would greatly regret it if we were to take this stand officially. He, and many of his colleagues in the Party, are convinced that only through a sustained and systematic operation aimed at workers and small farmers in the North will it be possible to build up an effective opposition to the Unionist Party. He would envisage having Labour candidates in all constituencies in the next general election in the North and he hoped that we would see our way to fall in with the plan he has in mind which would be introduced as an experiment confined to a ten year period. With the type of organisation which the Labour Party would set up in the North there would be no danger of infiltration by undesirable elements. The policy of the Northern branch would certainly have to be that unification of Ireland could come only when the majority of the population in the North favoured this change. I remarked that the development he has in mind could do serious damage to the new opposition party in Stormont and we would regard this as unfortunate. He brushed

this comment aside by saying that the new party has no future. It will disintegrate quickly because it has no genuine basis of cohesion. I said that, with a strong reaction at home to such a development, the standing of the Labour Party in this country with the Irish voter might be seriously damaged. He said he doubted if this was likely even though people like Maurice Foley would share my view".

The reasons against would appear to me to include the following -

- 1) in general my opinion is that Mr. Callaghan takes a superficial view of the situation in the North and has very little understanding of the deeper currents of opinion there. If this is the case his reasons for creating a Labour Opposition in Stormont derive from an insufficient understanding both of psychology within the area and of our attitude about the country as a whole;
- 2) historically there never has been a British political party in the North. The Unionist Party, although connected with the Conservative Party, is a strictly Irish party and always has been. If the British Labour Party had taken a real interest in the Northern situation 50 years ago one might give them some credence today. The fact is, however, that they did not do so and now deserve no acquiescence from us in setting up their own operation in the North;
- 3) possibly Mr. Callaghan thinks that the political breakdown in the North leaves some room for capitalising on the situation in the interests of the British Labour Party - as if the problem were essentially a British one. In fact, of course, it is nothing of the kind and Mr. Callaghan should be disabused of any notion that the minority in the North will now vote for Labour out of gratitude for what Mr. Callaghan was forced to do to maintain British prestige;
- 4) the minority is attempting the very difficult task of forming its own political party at the present time. In doing so, via the Social Democratic and Labour Party, it has managed to attract support from, among others, part of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (Mr. Paddy Devlin MP), part of the Republican Labour Party (Mr. Gerry Fitt MP), part of the Nationalist Party (Mr. Austin Currie MP) and strong representation from the original Civil Rights Movement (Mr. John Hume MP, Mr. Ivan Cooper MP and Mr. Paddy O'Hanlon MP). The intrusion of the British Labour Party into the political scene will be resented and opposed strongly by all of these elected representatives of the minority.
- 5) the two major political parties here, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have been careful not to organise themselves in the North although any Irish political party has a greater right to do so than any British political party. Instead their policy has been to maintain a liaison with the major opposition party in the North. Until recently the major opposition party was the Nationalist Party which has considerably lost in prestige and influence for reasons which I need not go into now. It appears to be in the best interests of all involved that the general policy of good liaison between the Government here and the principal Opposition party in the North should be continued rather than that the major parties here should themselves enter the political arena in the North. Insofar as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have restrained themselves in this situation for the general good then it might be expected that Mr. Callaghan should also stay out of the situation.

6) there has been an apparent attempt by the Irish Labour Party to form a liaison with the SDLP in the North. This attempt at liaison has so far failed and in my opinion will continue to fail. I have reported on this subject already and merely mention it here in order to distinguish between the restrained record of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the matter as compared with the more forward position which the Irish Labour Party have attempted;

7) Mr. Callaghan admits that a British Labour Party in the North would necessarily be pro-constitution. According to the Ambassador's note he expressed the idea in this way "the policy of the Northern branch would certainly have to be that unification of Ireland could only come when the majority of the population in the North favoured this change". The policy of the Social Democratic and Labour Party is expressed in the following terms -

"To promote cooperation, friendship and understanding between North and South with the view to the eventual reunification of Ireland through the consent of the majority of the people in the North and in the South".

The difference is more than one of verbiage as, in fact, there is a great gulf between the known views of the leading members of the SDLP and those of Mr. Callaghan. There is no doubt at all for example that the SDLP would push forward anything which favours cross-border cooperation but a British Labour Party, if it replaced the SDLP, could have other overtones - so much so, indeed, that it would be incapable, in any event, of attracting the support in any measure of the minority. It could conceivably, however, create a situation where both the majority party in the North and a minority British Labour Party were equally pro-partition and this is something which we have every right to oppose;

8) the general policy on the North expressed by the Taoiseach is designed to facilitate reconciliation between North and South. In this respect we are in a position to count on pressures in this direction from the Conservative Government in Westminster which, while holding to its view that the North is entitled to remain British, if a majority there wishes it, appears to have a greater historical sense in the matter and appears dimly to realise the need for an eventual new arrangement. Mr. Callaghan's concept may run directly contrary to any such supposition. It would not surprise me if he privately believes that the minority in the North would be glad to remain British if they are treated equally with their neighbours. Even if he were right in this - something with which I disagree very strongly - it is in the interest of our general policy that he should not be allowed to try for such a "solution". Mr. Callaghan's support for the idea of integrated education is of a piece with the suspected view that he is very far from understanding the minority in the North.

In the circumstances I recommend the following -

- 1) We should oppose firmly the Callaghan suggestion and make it clear to him that it is not acceptable to the Dublin Government;
- 2) if he proposes to go ahead in spite of this we should make our views known to Mr. Wilson and to other Labour leaders like Mr. Denis Healey so that they will know the Government's view in advance of the meeting of the National Executive and will not act in ignorance of it;

- if the British Labour Party, in spite of such behind-the-scenes pressures from us, should decide to go ahead in the North we should publicly dissociate ourselves from the experiment and indicate a preference for the indigenous minority party. Apart from the effect of this on the prospects of the British Labour Party in the North it would pay dividends in terms of the relations of the Government of the day here with minority political leadership in the North;
- 4) at an appropriate time we might consider also making it clear to the Conservative Party that we oppose this initiative by Mr. Callaghan; this could have the additional dividend of increasing our influence with the present British Government;
 - 5) I also submit that any consideration of a return of the Labour Party to power in Britain should not prevent us from taking a resolute line on this subject. If, as suggested, our long-term national interest could be affected by competition in the North from a well-financed British Labour Party, we should oppose it without reserve.

S.S. 9/11