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Title: Copy report by Seán Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs, of meetings with John Hume and Paddy Devlin of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), mainly discussing the position of Northern Ireland Chief Executive Brian Faulkner, and the position of the SDLP with regard to policing.

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Visit to Northern Ireland 2/3 April 1974

1. With the exception of calls on the CCDC Office in the Lower Falls and Fr. Brady in St. Joseph's College in Andersonstown, the only people I saw during my visit were SDLP Assemblymen and in particular Messrs. J. Hume and P. Devlin with whom I had lengthy and separate discussions.

2. Attached is a copy of the suggested amendment to the Sunningdale Agreement given to the SDLP by Mr. Faulkner. Though it has not been formally considered by the party and no one is certain what reaction Fitt may have given, Hume and Devlin have informally told Faulkner that they could not contemplate any change whatsoever in the Agreement as negotiated in December. All are agreed that Faulkner went through a particularly shaky period last week, partly because of some doubts about the intentions of the new British Government but mainly because of threats from some of his Assembly supporters that they would not vote with the Executive at the close of the Sunningdale motion debate which was scheduled for 2 April. The main threats are said to have come from Bradford, McLachlan and Morgan - Whitten and Stronge are, of course, regarded as having defected some time ago - and Faulkner felt that if even one of them abstained, his position in the Assembly would have been impossible. (There is little doubt that in each of the three cases there were personal factors which may have dominated the ideological considerations. Bradford still seems to see himself as a potential Chief Executive, Morgan feels he should have been appointed Minister for Health and McLachlan is said to be disappointed that his sacrifice in returning from London to the NI Assembly was not rewarded by some Government post.) By 2 April, things were looking somewhat brighter for Faulkner. His visit to London on 1 April together with a statement by the NI Secretary of State on the same day that the Executive Assembly had been constituted for a fixed four-year term and that the British Government intended to operate on that basis restored his confidence and were it not for the unfortunate

and unexpected decision by the NI Assembly Speaker to postpone the Sunningdale debate vote until 30 April, there is no doubt that all the pro-Assembly Unionists would have followed Faulkner, the SDLP and Alliance Party into the voting lobby.

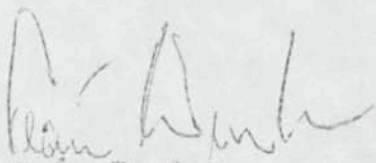
3. SDLP sources say that Wilson and Rees are exerting considerable pressure on Faulkner at the moment to keep him on the Sunningdale tracks and they regard this as being the most effective source of pressure. They hope that the Taoiseach will encourage Wilson to maintain the pressure and indeed secure his agreement to push Faulkner to ratify the agreement by a date within the next month or six weeks which should now be set. Hume and Devlin are not certain that direct pressure from the Taoiseach can be productive and they say that the more approaches Dublin makes to Faulkner directly the more ammunition is provided for Bradford and the others who point to the "republican" domination of events by Dublin and the SDLP. Devlin is convinced that Faulkner has now recovered from his most recent attack of the jitters and that he should be confronted with a date for the ratification of Sunningdale before he gets his next attack. Hume agrees that a date should be fixed without further delay but sees it primarily as an exercise to test Faulkner's commitment to Sunningdale for once and for all. Hume doubts that Faulkner will pass the test but thinks it is of vital importance that this should be found out sooner rather than later. Hume still seems to be alone in the SDLP leadership in doubting Faulkner's intentions. Devlin, Currie, O'Hanlon and a number of backbenchers whom I met on my visit take the view that Faulkner will continue to struggle and kick right up to the ratification table but that he is the political survivor par excellence and realises that if the present package disintegrates, he has no political future. In support of their view, they also point out that he has now in effect been given a guaranteed four-year period in which to sell the package and that this should be child's play in comparison to some of the changes which he has had to sell in recent years.

From a strategy point of view, the SDLP are generally of the view that the main thing for consideration and, if necessary, confrontation at this stage is the fixing of a date for the ratification. Other issues such as action on security and the Common Law Enforcement Commission report should be discussed in detail only in the context of a fixed date and one suggestion made was that, allegedly to speed the work of the Commission, Dublin and London should agree on a date, communicate it to the Commission and in courtesy communicate it, at the same time or shortly before, to the NI Executive.

5. The SDLP are also feeling pressure from Rees, in their case in relation to publicly backing the security forces in their anti-terrorist campaign. They are sticking to their position that until the NI Police Authority is re-constituted - this cannot be done until the Council of Ireland is established - they are not prepared to call on their followers to join the RUC. They feel that anything less than such a call would be hypocritical and they are not therefore responding to suggestions from Rees that they might consider issuing a general and vaguely worded statement calling on their supporters "to support the security forces". In the past four or five days, there has been an obvious change of direction in the activities of the forces and while it is too early to assess the implications of the change, some initial reactions may be worth noting. The two most noticeable changes are in the frequency and thoroughness of the operation of road blocks and in the combing out of specific areas. The road blocks are crippling traffic and disrupting life to an extent greater than anything done by the Army since Operation Motorman in July 1972. In the combing out of a number of areas, little seems to have been found in the way of arms and explosives but it is said to have resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers of persons being lifted and detained under interim custody orders. The figure has been put as high as 20 per day over the last four days but it has not been possible to verify this officially. It is significant that there is

no howl of rage from the Catholic community. Fr. Brady and the CCDC would be the first to howl and neither had any complaint to make in relation to the current operation. In addition to the general feeling of war weariness and antipathy towards the Provos., the lifting of people is this time not accompanied by interrogation and it is also seen to be operating as much in Protestant as in Catholic areas.

6. Hume and Devlin are in no doubt that the UVF and Sinn Féin will be legalised this week but they have some doubts now about the announcement of troop withdrawals. Devlin is convinced that there are continuing talks between the Provos. and the British but he doubts that they will lead to anything significant in the near future. He mentioned that he had had an approach from the Provos. on 7 March asking him to set up talks between Provos., UVF, SDLP and Desmond Hoal. He himself thought such talks would do no harm but he said Hume was totally opposed to talking even to Sinn Féin and I gathered that Hume's view was the one most likely to prevail.



Seán Donlon

4 April 1974