

E.R.

PAB/1875/RE

Mr Wyatt

② Body to Mr. Doyle + Mr. Clonfield
CONFIDENTIAL

① Mr Bell
③ POL
WJH
83/7
cc: PS/S of S (I&B)
PS/Ministers (I&B)
PS/PUS (I&B)
PS/Mr Bell
Mr Marshall
Mr Blelloch
Mr Wyatt
Mr Moriarty
Mr Chesterton
Miss MacGlashan
Mr Harrington

ADVISORY COUNCIL: LOCAL REACTIONS

1. The political parties' reactions to the Secretary of State's announcement of an Advisory Council on 2 July have ranged from the lukewarm to the hostile. None of the major parties has welcomed the proposal, but none has completely ruled out participation.
2. The DUP has come closest. Mr Paisley called the initiative "an absolutely foolish endeavour" which he would seek to "bring to a speedy end". He wants a devolved Parliament with powers especially over security. According to the press, he professes to suspect that the concept of an advisory council arose from the Dublin talks: a similar body would be set up in the South and the two eventually be brought together. However, while Mr Paisley and Jim Allister (in private) have indicated that the DUP will neither participate in the Council nor take up the Secretary of State's invitation to preparatory talks while the Joint Studies continue, Peter Robinson implied on the radio on 3 July that it might suit the DUP to participate in order more effectively to prevent any North/South monkey business. But it is not yet clear whether this divergence is significant.
3. As for the UUP, Mr Molyneaux's comment on 4 July that the new Council would be "toothless, worthless and useless" is fairly typical. Mr McCusker spoke similarly in private on Saturday night. Mr Powell predictably called the proposal "incompatible with the nature of the House". The devolutionists in the Party, although more cautious, fear the Council may be designed to defer the "real issue" - ie the return of major powers to a devolved assembly. A decision to participate in the Council would need the approval of the UUP's Executive Committee, which is not due to meet until September. The UUP will find it very difficult to participate if the DUP does not.

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4. The SDLP have taken a cautious line in public, saying they want to seek clarification of the proposal. Seamus Mallon was very cautious when I explained the scheme to him on 2 July, and laid great stress on the need for a North/South dimension. We have heard that when the SDLP Executive discussed the scheme on 5 July, concern was expressed that:

- (i) parties in the Council might incur criticism for Government policies over which they had no control (an anxiety also expressed by Peter Robinson);
- (ii) the Council might divert attention and effort away from the Anglo/Irish talks, which the SDLP see as the only legitimate road ahead;
- (iii) many leading SDLP figures - Austin Currie, Michael Canavan, Sean Farren, Brid Rodgers - would not be eligible for the Council.

The SDLP will certainly take part in preparatory talks with the Secretary of State, but their participation in the Council may well depend on the sort of reassurance they receive about the Anglo/Irish process.


5. Alliance have, as expected, been less critical and clearly intend to come both to the preparatory talks and to the Council itself (though party leaders have said privately that they will not turn up to the Council if all the other parties boycott it). Oliver Napier told me on Saturday that he had few hopes for the initiative, but would give it a fair wind.

6. Of the smaller parties the IIP (who would be entitled to representation on the Council) has not commented; while the UUUP and WPRC have criticised the advisory role of the Council. Nevertheless, the MPs from the smaller parties have shown some interest in whether they would be eligible for inclusion; and Mr Alison's commitment to include Mr John Dunlop MP in the preparatory talks has been noted.

7. Insofar as we can judge it, general public reaction to the proposal seems fairly favourable, as was the editorial response of the leading Belfast papers.

8. Two main themes run through all the party reactions. First, there is widespread unhappiness with an appointed as opposed to an elected Council (and some people, with the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act in mind, do not accept our excuse that it would have taken too long to legislate for elections). DUP, UUP, Alliance and SDLP leaders have all made this point in private and most in public. Secondly, there is understandable scepticism that the advice given by the Council will have no effect. The preparatory meetings with the parties will need to cover these points. They will also need to bring out more fully the aspects of the Council which the parties are likely to find attractive, eg the powers to investigate Departmental activities and the trappings of a new political forum (allowances, office facilities, access to media).

9. The development of the "unique relationship" with the Republic will clearly be crucial too. The SDLP will want the Council somehow to be linked with this process, or at the least an assurance that the process will continue in parallel. The Unionist parties will probably boycott the Council if any linkage with the Anglo/Irish process is established; indeed the DUP may carry out its threat to boycott unless the process is broken off. It will be very difficult to win the one without losing the other.



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7 July 1981