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Mr Chesterton
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Mr Shepherd

MEETING WITH MR MARTIN SMYTH MP, NIO LONDON, 24 MARCH 1982

Present: Secretary of State Mr M. Smyth MP
Mr F Silvester MP
Mr Boys Smith

Mr Smyth called at the invitation of the Secretary of State for a preliminary discussion following his election as member for South Belfast.

Political Affairs

The Secretary of State told Mr Smyth of his firm belief that there should be devolved government in Northern Ireland. It was essential that local representatives should be able to assume responsibility and, for example, make their own assessment of priorities. A local Assembly would from the start provide a forum for valuable discussion of issues affecting Northern Ireland and would help open people's eyes to the true nature of the Province's problems. He was not seeking to impose a solution and realised that his scheme would take time to develop. He believed that the integration of Northern Ireland with the rest of GB would not work and would solve none of the problems. Unless something was started there was no prospect of lasting political stability and certainty, which he believed was essential if Northern Ireland was to prosper. He believed that independence was a wholly impracticable notion.

CONFIDENTIAL

E.R.

In discussion the Secretary of State said he appreciated the danger that an Assembly would unite to make unconstructive criticisms of the British Government, especially in the period before powers had been transferred, but he believed this was a risk which had to be taken. The Assembly would have very useful functions to perform, which he outlined to Mr Smyth. Even when legislative responsibility was still at Westminster the views of the Assembly would carry weight in Parliament when it considered Northern Ireland Orders. The Secretary of State explained to Mr Smyth his scheme for a weighted majority and how business might be conducted once agreement had been reached and powers transferred. He described the involvement of the Westminster Parliament in the process of transferring those powers, emphasising that Parliament would never accept rule just by the majority community. In the distant future, if politics in Northern Ireland should ever develop along the lines of politics in Great Britain, safeguards might no longer be so important, but this was not a situation likely to arise for a very long period and was not therefore one which bore on his present scheme. He hoped that it would be possible one day to transfer security to a Northern Ireland Executive. It was essential that the minority should in the long run give its full support to the forces of law and order if terrorism was to be satisfactorily dealt with. But, although he saw no possibility of transferring security for some years to come, the responsible UK Minister would be ready to talk to members of the Assembly or to a Northern Ireland Executive about security affairs. He noted Mr Smyth's concern that local involvement in security affairs in this way could prejudice essential secrecy and could lead to information passing to terrorists, but did not think that this was a relevant danger, given the restraints on discussion in the period while security remained a Westminster responsibility and given the circumstances which would have to prevail before it could be transferred. The Secretary of State also described to Mr Smyth the ways in which his proposals for devolution fitted into the conduct of the UK's relations with the Republic; North/South links were something which Northern Ireland had to develop, and he did not

believe that they required any very extensive machinery if they were to be made effective and fruitful. He thought that Parliament would in due course wish to proceed with an Anglo-Irish parliamentary body and he outlined how it might function and how he envisaged it relating to the Assembly and to individual members of that Assembly.

Mr Smyth made the following points in discussion:

- (i) He had been a member of the Convention, which had not attended to its proper tasks in the way that it should have. He feared that a new Assembly would engage in unconstructive debate and would not address itself to the real problems facing Northern Ireland. It would unite in criticism of the British Government on many issues.
- (ii) He noted the Secretary of State's explanation of his proposals, implying that he had not fully understood them before. He was opposed to the scheme. The Government should have started with changes to local government and should not fall into the trap of thinking that a scheme opposed by both sides must be good. For his part, he was ready to accept coalition or the need to reach agreement between parties if that was made necessary by the result of the election. But he was opposed to devices which enforced agreement irrespective of how people had voted. Moreover, the weighted majority would give undue influence to small groups able to determine whether the specified figure was achieved or not. The Government should have accepted the Convention report which avoided these pitfalls.
- (iii) The real issue in Northern Ireland was constitutional, not religious, although there were "religious overtones". The question was whether people should have positions of authority in a system of Government when they were committed to destroying "the very community" which that government had been elected to represent.

E.R.

- (iv) He was very concerned at the prospect of security being the responsibility of an Executive of which potential disloyal people were members. It must never be possible for information given to people in authority to be passed to terrorists.
- (v) It was not ultimately the form of Government, or the place in which that government resided, which would determine the future of Northern Ireland, but the will of the people of the Province. It would be at least three generations before attitudes to the union changed. He wondered whether Dr Paisley was hoping to win a large enough majority to enable him to press for independence.
- (vi) The OUP would fight elections against Dr Paisley. The party should not underestimate the strength of the opposition it faced but he believed it could beat the DUP.
- (vii) The Anglo-Irish aspects of the scheme would be much easier to accept if there had been a history of trust with the parties in the Republic. Fianna Fail in particular would forget any agreement it had with the North if that suited it. Although he noted the Secretary of State thought that North/South links were something which a devolved government would have to develop but no such government would have the necessary powers of negotiation. Before the troubles it had not been necessary to have instructions in order to have appropriate dealings with the Republic.

Higher Education

Mr Smyth said that he was not personally opposed to the Government's conclusions on the future of the NUU and the Polytechnic, although he realised there was a view held by some that certain people in DENI had long been determined to sabotage the NUU. There had been a damaging degree of uncertainty over the future of the University

CONFIDENTIAL

E.R.

for a considerable period and this had now to be removed; it was important to remember that whatever criticisms there were, some of the University's departments were of a very high standard. He was still sympathetic to the idea of a single University of Ulster with constituent colleges, along the lines of the University of Wales, but realised this was unlikely to find favour, in particular because of the entrenched position of QUB. He believed that instead of establishing the NUU the Government should have developed Magee.

S. W. Boys Smith

S W BOYS SMITH
25 March 1982