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NORTHERN IRELAND REACTIONS TO THE WHITE PAPER

1. The political parties in the Province have reacted in a generally predictable fashion to the White Paper. None have openly welcomed it. Most have been critical. They have already begun to jostle for positions in the forthcoming elections and to strike their electoral postures.

UUP

2. Mr Molyneaux has continued his familiar hostile line. He rejected the proposals in the White Paper as completely unworkable and promised to go into the elections on the basis of the 1975 Convention Report, in order to transform the scheme proposed, not to wreck it. Others in the Party have been less negative. Harold McCusker said the UUP should attempt "constructive change" and even though that might fail should fight elections committed to make the scheme work, provided no sacrifice of principle was involved: no Unionist could afford to be seen as an ally of Hume or Haughey. John Taylor, who has consistently sought to distance himself from Molyneaux over recent weeks, emphasised the need for devolved government and "proper" devolution. John Carson described the proposals as flexible and leaving room for manoeuvre. He urged unionists to seize the opportunity before them.

3. Other elements in the UUP went ever farther than Mr Molyneaux in condemning the proposals: Bill Craig, for example, who proposed using the Assembly elections to set up a de facto government - a sort of UDI. His ex-Vanguard group have decided that the proposals give the SDLP a veto on devolution which they cannot accept.

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DUP

4. Mr Paisley divided the proposals into two parts and gave very different reactions to each. He welcomed the Assembly elections and the role to be given to the Assembly, particularly the scrutinising committees which would, he said, be used to bring Direct Rule to account. But was highly critical of the sections dealing with the Irish Dimension and the formation of an Executive, and promised that the DUP would be using the elections to destroy the idea that Assembly members could serve on an Anglo/Irish Parliamentary Council, and the "enforced power-sharing" inherent in the 70% majority. He stressed that unionists had a veto on progress in both these areas which would be decisive provided that the people of Northern Ireland elected to the Assembly representatives who would stand by their pledges - ie the DUP.

5. Mr Paisley said he intends to seek meetings with the Secretary of State in order to "force changes" on the unacceptable parts in the White Paper.

SDLP

6. SDLP leaders repeated their view that the White Paper proposals were unworkable and expressed disappointment at the "limited" recognition of the Irish Dimension. John Hume, while conceding that the White Paper made explicit recognition of the two identities, said there was nothing to indicate how that recognition was to be translated into practice. The fact that the unionist parties had already declared the principles embodied in the White Paper unacceptable made the whole exercise futile. He saw little difference between what was now proposed and the 1975 Convention. Asked about whether or not the SDLP would contest the Assembly elections, he refused to be drawn beyond saying that a decision would be taken in due course "in the normal democratic fashion".

7. Some in the SDLP (notably Paddy Duffy, a champion of the "greens") are arguing that the Party should not fight elections, let alone enter the Assembly. They have drawn attention to the apparent powers vested in the Presiding Officer (to be elected under the 1973 Act by simple majority vote) and the possibility that an Alliance/Unionist coalition might satisfy the criterion of acceptability in both parts of the

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community. But no decisions have been taken and are unlikely to be made for some time: Eddie McGrady, the Chief Whip, was hinting over the weekend that the Party might want to see the new Act passed first.

Alliance

8. Alone of the four major parties Alliance have given the proposals a guarded welcome and urged that they be given a fair chance. They have emphasised the usefulness, as they see it, of the Committee system in providing a local political input into the administration of the Province.

The Smaller Parties

9. Ernie Baird's UUUP stated that while it had not yet studied the proposals in detail, the Assembly should provide a means to influence direct rule. Though the mechanisms were complex, a devolution of powers could be arrived at. The (integrationist) NILP predictably criticised proposals for devolution. The WPRC expressed disappointment about the absence of a Bill of Rights and described the proposals as too woolly. The IIP, who before publication of the White Paper had indicated they would contest the election, said after reading it that they were doubtful whether to do so - though they reserved the right to fight.

PSF

10. The Provisionals predictably condemned the proposals as a scheme to preserve British rule in the Province and promised to wreck them. However, their Easter statement reportedly said that Republicans should use the proposals to show who spoke for the Nationalist people in the North. Joe Austin, a PSF spokesman, also reportedly said that the organisation would put up candidates in the election if the SDLP did so.

Conclusions

11. Publication of the White Paper has made few changes in the political landscape, almost certainly because it contained little that had not already become public knowledge. The split within the UUP continues, with Mr Molyneaux eager to sink the scheme and the devolutionists anxious to make what they can of it. We can expect approaches by the DUP in an attempt to transform the scheme into a version of majority rule and to scotch the Parliamentary Tier. The unionist parties will be active at

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Westminster too during the debates on the Bill. The SDLP will continue to bewail that the scheme is unworkable and pro-unionist and gives them no election platform. They do this to please their electorate and to strengthen their bargaining hand over the Irish Dimension, and because they would like nothing better than to persuade us that the proposals will not work and should be dropped. But whatever their complaints, they have no choice in the end but to fight. Their national and international credibility is at stake and they will not be keen to allow unionists or others to portray them as abstentionist Republicans/Sinn Feiners in disguise. The Provisionals' declaration that they will fight if the SDLP do only turns the screw tighter: the SDLP cannot appear to be afraid to take the Provisionals on. For their part, the Provisionals appear to be looking for an excuse to stand. And if they do, so too will the IIP.

12. The initial reactions to the White Paper have thus been as good as we could have expected, perhaps even a little better. We have had some useful statements in support of the proposals from Alliance, Harold McCusker, John Carson and others. No party has committed itself against taking part in elections or the Assembly, and it remains very likely that all four major parties, and probably most minor ones too, will in the event go to the ballot box.



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-4-

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