

E.R.

RBS 45/11

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NOTE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND HELD ON MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER 1985 AT STORMONT CASTLE

Present:

Secretary of State
Mr S Hewitt
Mr Cleasby

Rt Rev Robert Dickinson, Moderator
Rev Dr Tom Simpson, General Secretary
Rev Harold Allen)
Rev Dr McDowell) Government Committee

Anglo-Irish Discussions

1. Dr Dickinson said there was pressure on the Church to make a statement about the possibility of an Anglo-Irish agreement. They had responded to this pressure by issuing a statement to the effect that they would say nothing until the terms of any such agreement were known.

2. The Secretary of State said he was very grateful for the stance taken by the Church. Discussions between Governments had to be on a confidential basis, but the secrecy was fuelling fear and wild speculation. The constitutional guarantee had been repeated often enough by British Ministers. He hoped that people would consider that there could be benefits from reaching an agreement:
 - co-operation with the Republic in the fight against terrorism;

 - a restatement of Northern Ireland's position within the UK, while at the same time opening up a process in which points raised by Dublin could be answered with the facts, leading gradually to reassurance of the minority within Northern Ireland about the fairness of the administration there;

 - a future UK Government might take a different view about the constitutional guarantee; there was therefore merit in reaching some new arrangement now, rather than doing nothing.

3. Mr Allen and Dr McDowell stressed the importance of the manner of presentation of any agreement. It would be disastrous if the agreement were to be signed in Dublin, since the inevitable epithet "Dublin Agreement" would generate automatic opposition within Northern Ireland. Dr Dickinson said that Unionists felt threatened,

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notwithstanding repeated assurances of the constitutional guarantee, because they saw the SDLP were being briefed by Dublin while no such facility was available to them from London.

4. The Secretary of State said he could not comment about the location of any summit, but he noted the Church leaders' views. As to reassurance, he said he had been seeking to stand up for the interests of Northern Ireland. He suggested the Church leaders consider why some Unionist leaders were claiming signs of "backing down" on the part of HMG: had someone been making efforts to ensure the Northern Ireland position was more clearly understood in London? In all this it was helpful to him to have had the views of the Unionist political leaders and the Church leaders.

The Assembly

5. Dr Simpson said that many people recognised that a return to the old Stormont Cabinet government system was impracticable, but they thought that the "Catherwood proposals", now put forward by the Assembly, might be workable. Mr Allen said that the proposals had been supported by 70% of the Assembly, which seemed to satisfy the Government's test of acceptability: he hoped the Anglo-Irish talks would not preclude action on this front. The Church would be studying the proposals before forming a view. It was unfortunate that the Alliance Party seemed to be cooling towards the proposals. Dr Dickinson said that the SDLP attitude was unhelpful: it was wrong that they should be able to veto progress, as Mr Scott's recent remarks implied.

6. The Secretary of State said he had not yet been able to study the Assembly's proposals in detail. He was a strong advocate of a devolved system of administration for Northern Ireland, and the Anglo-Irish agreement would not be an alternative to it. But it was not clear exactly how much support the present proposals had: it was possible that Sir Frederick Catherwood had formed during his rapid round of talks some impressions which were not wholly accurate. For example, the SDLP's attitude may have been misunderstood, which would have led Sir Frederick to give the impression that all the parties supported his proposals. Mr Scott's remarks merely emphasised the need for widespread agreement. But the Secretary of State was sympathetic to Dr Dickinson's general point about negative attitudes: those who rejected all constructive proposals would eventually lose credibility with the Government.

Western Education and Library Board

7. Dr Simpson said that there was great resentment that Sinn Fein should have seats on the WELB while they refused to renounce violence. Mr Allen and Dr Dickinson said that education was a particularly difficult field, since, at Board level, Catholics were seeking to control Protestant schools while opting to keep their own schools outside the system. While it was true that in practice the Board could not control appointments and the detailed running of schools, there was a principle at issue here.

8. The Secretary of State said he was well aware of the offence caused by the presence of Sinn Fein members on Councils and Boards. Mr Needham would be reporting to him about the attitudes of Councils, and would discuss the problems of ELBs further with Mr Scott. The Secretary of State took delivery of a resolution from the Boards of Education of the three Protestant Churches - attached at Annex A (ACTION: PS/Mr Scott).

Attacks on Churches

9. Mr Allen said there had been a number of attacks on church premises in North Belfast. This was seen as intimidation of congregations. He agreed to write to the Secretary of State about the problem.

Teenage Drinking

10. Dr Simpson said there was concern about the lack of observance of licensing laws, and the problem of teenage drinking was growing. There was particular concern in Bangor. He recalled that Mr Patten had undertaken to deal with the licensing laws once the gambling legislation had been put through. (PS/Mr Needham to advise, with part draft reply for the Secretary of State, please.)

Sinn Fein

11. At the end of the meeting Mr Allen handed me a resolution from the Presbyterian Church about Sinn Fein representation - attached at Annex B. (PS/Mr Needham to provide a part draft reply for the Secretary of State please.)

R P

R P CLEASBY
Private Secretary

6 November 1985

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The Presbyterian Church in Ireland

ANNEX A

The Boards of Education of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland -

- (a) Recognise that our Churches have a strong involvement in education as transferors and that our basic concern is neither sectarian nor party political but -
 - (i) generally, with the duty of the Area Boards, in accordance with Article 5 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order, 1972, "to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community ..."
 - (ii) specifically, with the ethos and identity of schools in the controlled sector.
- (b) Recognise the valuable record of service that has been rendered to the community by the Area Boards.
- (c) Recognise that the various Education and Libraries Orders confer on the Department of Education for Northern Ireland extensive powers of control and supervision over the Area Boards and over the conduct of the education service generally.
- (d) Are satisfied that the composition of the Teaching Appointments Committee is safeguarded by legislation, and that this must be maintained.
- (e) Express their sympathetic understanding of the anxieties of parents, transferors and others over certain developments within the Western Education and Library Board, but recognise that the affairs of one Area Board cannot be considered in total isolation from the others.
- (f) Support the decision of the Western Education and Library Board to appeal to the Minister, Mr. Nicholas Scott, to help find a solution acceptable to parental wishes (See 1972 Order, Article 34).
- (g) Would remind our Church members and the public generally of the long-standing and on-going co-operation of the three Church Boards (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist) in the monitoring of educational developments.
- (h) In this role are setting up a working party to examine the position in detail and are requesting the minister to receive a strong deputation from the Churches to discuss the situation at an early date.

CHURCH HOUSE,
BELFAST, BT1 6DW

5th November, 1985

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland



At a meeting of the General Board of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland held on 31st October, 1985, the following Resolution was passed unanimously -

"The General Board state without equivocation that under democratic Government it is totally unacceptable that groups or parties who enjoy the privileges of public representation either continue to espouse violence, or refuse to denounce violence or threaten violence for political or social ends, and call upon the Government to give urgent consideration to the problem".

J. P. [Signature]

CHURCH HOUSE,
BELFAST, BT1 6DW