

E. R.

204/2

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HCS/5/65

cc PS/PUS (B & L)
Mr Brennan
Mr Carvill
Mr Gilliland
Mr Merifield
Miss Elliott
Mr Lyon
Mr Reeve

Mr Chesterton

THE UNIONISTS AND THE ANGLO-IRISH TALKS

1. I did not envy you the task of producing a briefing note for the Secretary of State to use in talking to the unionist parties about Anglo-Irish discussions. I realise why it is that the Secretary of State feels committed to such soundings, and one can of course understand the danger of growing resentment from the unionist parties that they know very little, while the Irish Government keep the SDLP informed.
2. Very understandably, the draft attached to your minute of 16 May to Mr Reeve does not go very much further than any intelligent person or party could have gleaned from previous ministerial statements and glosses on them. But in turn I am not sure that a sounding on such a basis will do more than tell us what we already know:- that the unionist parties are likely to remain deeply suspicious of the whole process, that they note the line drawn on "sovereignty" and "joint authority" but would really need to know in detail what is in mind before accepting that this line will not in practice be breached. (It could well be that an agreement allowing the Irish Government an opportunity to comment on purely internal Northern Ireland matters before decisions are taken will be seen as a form of involvement in those internal matters, even if the final power of decision continues to rest with HMG; and it may also be argued by unionists that, if devolution is made impossible by SDLP intransigence, the SDLP would then be left with a special influence on Northern Ireland administration (through Irish Government intercession) of a kind not available to themselves.) If, on the other hand, we do go further than envisaged in your draft, we risk having the unionists deciding to go on the stump without delay on the basis of "the union and the constitution are in danger; only your protest can stop the process before it is too late".
3. I share the nervousness expressed by Mr Merifield in his minute of 17 May about acknowledging the role of the Irish Government so specifically as spokesmen for the nationalist community in the North. The unionist parties are likely to be very

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quick to say that this is conceding at the outset a very important and controversial principle. There is, of course, a skillful "linkage" in the draft brief's final paragraph, where the exclusion of devolved issues from the Anglo-Irish arrangements is envisaged. I fear, however, that the unionists may say "here we are, trying very hard to persuade the SDLP of the importance of an internal arrangement, and yet you envisage providing another method for protection of their interests which they are likely to prefer, leaving us high and dry". Are we not going to face the vital question "Does this all go ahead willy-nilly, or is there some link to the other track, and if so what precisely is it?"

4. The attendant dangers might be somewhat reduced (although not of course entirely eliminated) if the Secretary of State were to see party leaders at an early date about the political situation generally. Stocktaking meetings of such a kind would be a natural development in the aftermath of the local government elections.

KPB

K P BLOOMFIELD

17 May 1985

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