

STATEMENT BY MR. JOHN HUME, SDLP PARTY LEADER

ON BEHALF OF THE SDLP

26th April, 1982

Mr Prior's White Paper - 'A Framework for Devolution' - is designed to provide a basis for peace, stability and economic progress in Northern Ireland. It is from this standpoint that the SDLP has viewed the proposals. The SDLP are extremely anxious for peace and stability. The people, of whom the SDLP are the democratic voice, have suffered more than any other section of the community from the continued failure to provide stability. We represent the areas of highest unemployment in Northern Ireland. We represent the areas which have suffered most from paramilitary violence and security force excesses. We want peace, and we want stability, and we believe that our wishes are shared by all the people of Northern Ireland.

It is the duty of any political party therefore, to give serious consideration to any proposals brought forward by government, This we have done. We have had no less than four lengthy meetings with Mr Prior, at which our reservations to his proposals were spelt out in detail. Before he published them, he was left in no doubt about the SDLP view. Any party, which accepts, without question, proposals which can be clearly shown to be unworkable, in order to present an image of reasonableness to the community, is an irresponsible political party. We contend that by any standards the proposals for devolution of power contained in the White Paper are unworkable. We contend that Mr Prior knows that they will not work and will therefore be a source of further instability. Why then is he proceeding with such ruthless haste?

The basic proposal for devolution of power is that the Secretary of State be satisfied that it has "cross-community support". This can be achieved in two ways - (1) Agreement of a 70% majority in the proposed Assembly. (2) More than 50% agreement in the Assembly, provided it has "cross-community support". Nowhere in the document is "cross-community" support defined. Does it mean a majority in each community? If less than a majority in either community, how much less.

In practical terms, however, this section, the major section of the White Paper, and the one consistently alluded to by the Secretary of State, to demonstrate his even-handedness, is in fact irrelevant for it has already been dismissed by both the D.U.P. and the O.U.P. who have made it clear that they do not accept the analysis on which it is based, nor will they work the mechanism which it proposes. How then does the Secretary of State insist that such a proposal is "workable"?

Let us suppose, however, that all parties actually did a political somersault and agreed on terms for devolution of power. From the moment an administration is formed, the need for 70% agreement ceases and all decisions are subject to simple majority rule. What is the position of a minority minister in such an administration, if his policy proposals for his department are defeated by a majority in the Assembly? Does the Administration fall? Paragraph 61 which is an attempt to answer some of these questions is a pathetic statement and a disgraceful production by any government which only reflects on its own confusion about its own proposals.

Or let us suppose that an administration does function for the life of the first Assembly. What happens then? Is power returned to Westminster again while an election takes place and while the parties go through another lengthy process of haggling to achieve a 70% majority? If they fail, are we back to direct rule? Does Mr Prior accept that his proposals are open to a situation where there is perpetual oscillation between Direct Rule and Devolution? Is such a system in the eyes of any objective observer really a basis for stability? Is it not instead a recipe for political and administrative mayhem?

It is quite clear therefore that Mr Prior's unworkable "power-sharing" proposals are included only to give a gloss of respectability and fairmindedness to what is the only concrete proposal in the White Paper - an election to a powerless assembly, with powerless committees and with well paid chairmen and vice-chairmen. Even the appointment of chairmen is in the hands of an Assembly President elected by simple majority. Such a body is no more than a talking shop, but a dangerous talking shop which could be seriously abused for their own ends by individual parties as has already been demonstrated by the intentions stated by some Unionist spokesmen.

The attempt to make his proposals appear even-handed does not stand up to a careful examination of his White Paper. Paragraph 13 reads:

"The Government adheres to the view that in any administration in Northern Ireland, there must be reasonable and appropriate arrangements to take account the interests of the minority which are acceptable to both sides of the community".

In short therefore reasonable and appropriate arrangements for the interests of the minority must have the approval of Unionists? Not only does Mr Prior give the Unionist Community a veto over constitutional change in Northern Ireland, but he has extended that veto to cover the form of government of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

Is this either a wise or a tenable policy given the history of Unionist attitudes to the use of power in Northern Ireland, and given their present behaviour in local government and given the price that has already been paid by everyone for such a policy in the past? On the other hand, while the White Paper insists that any system of government for Northern Ireland must be acceptable to both sides of the community, Mr Prior states that his initiative will proceed, whether the SDLP participate or not. What value does he therefore place on the consent of the people represented by the SDLP?

On the much quoted issue of identity, the White Paper states:

"The difference in identity and aspiration lies at the heart of the problem of Northern Ireland: It cannot be ignored or wished away".

The White Paper then proceeds to ignore it for there is not a single concrete proposal in the White Paper based on what it concedes to be the "heart" of the problem.

Instead Mr Prior has stated in the British House of Commons on April 5th 1982 - "I believe that our proposals are the most likely to tie Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom". He went on to affirm that devolved institutions could serve to strengthen the Union, and continued - "I believe passionately that that is the case. Otherwise there will be continued erosion in Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom. With a little wisdom we could put that behind us forever".

So much for an even-handed recognition of both identities or of the need as the SDLP has consistently insisted to construct a solution which is firmly based on the reality of conflicting identities.

The entire debate on these proposals has to date been carefully orchestrated to avoid debate on whether or not the proposals are either viable or workable. Mr Prior's main objective has been to get parties committed to his election. The SDLP's objective is to focus public attention now on our assertion that Mr Prior's proposals will not in fact work, will not provide stability and to put forward our reasons for it before any clear decisions are taken by the Westminster Parliament. In fact, given our analysis of this insulting document, it is difficult for us to avoid the unkind conclusion that Mr Prior's so-called "initiative" has more to do with his own political future than with the future of the people of Northern Ireland.

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