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**Title:** Copy letter from Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Conor Cruise O'Brien to Attorney General Declan Costello regarding the latter's recent meeting with members of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and giving his views on Irish government co-operation with the SDLP.

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31 July 1973

Personal and Confidential

Mr Declan Costello TD  
Attorney General

Dear Declan

Thank you for sending me a copy of your report on your week-end visit with the SDLP.

I am in general agreement with what you say with the exception that I have reservations about your recommendation at 5(c) - about attending "as much common ground as possible with the SDLP through regular meetings on a strictly confidential basis".

My first reservation is that it is not enough to assume, or hope, that our discussions will be on a strictly confidential basis. The Devlin leak was, as is clear from your report, not an impulsive indiscretion that he regrets but a calculated move to put pressure on us as a Government, and also to isolate certain individual members of the Government. I think we must make it clear to the SDLP that we are not prepared to tolerate this sort of behaviour and that we must have firm assurances from them before engaging in further substantial discussions with them, that there will be no repetition of this.

Subject to that condition I think indeed it would be useful to have regular meetings with them. I would also agree that it is desirable that as much common ground as possible is obtained with them. But there are important provisos here. Some of them - perhaps not all - have the idea that the way to establish common ground is for us to agree to their policies in full, and support them at every step. If we do this, or anything substantially resembling it, we shall immediately throw away the degree of credibility we have established with the Unionist population. That degree of credibility is something which the SDLP should recognise as being of value to those whom they represent, because it makes for the relaxation of tensions and the diminution of the suspicions that ~~breed~~<sup>breed</sup> violence. It is disquieting that in fact the SDLP, far from welcoming this development, obviously regard it with resentment.

*those*  
It should I think be made clear to the SDLP that the Government in the Republic have a different kind of responsibility in this matter to the responsibility of the political parties in Northern Ireland, even with whose general responsibilities it is in sympathy. This can be most clearly seen in the case of the proposed Council of Ireland. The SDLP can quite legitimately press ~~with~~<sup>for</sup> the linking of the establishment of a council to the establishment of an executive but if the Government of Ireland were to join them in that insistence it would actually - by seeming to intervene in internal Northern Ireland matters ~~from~~<sup>from</sup> the side of a minority - be increasing the resistance among the majority to the whole idea of the Council. Concerning the council it would be best from every point of view for us to keep a low profile indicating only at this stage that we wish to see it come into being and that we are prepared to play our full part in it.

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With reference to the last sentence of your recommendation 5(c), experience does not suggest that it would be possible to avoid the impression of a common approach if the common approach becomes a reality. If we align our policy with the SDLP, then some members of the SDLP will be no slower to proclaim that fact than they are slow to proclaim the opposite at present.

It is important here to consider what SDLP policy actually is and what we would be committing ourselves to if we were to go all out for common grounds with them.

As is apparent from paragraph 3(b) of your report, and from other sources, the SDLP are not disposed to try to work out an agreed settlement with the Unionists. What they are interested in is presenting their demands, getting support for them from both Dublin and London and then having the Unionists forced to toe the agreed line.

How could the Unionists in fact be forced in the desired direction? In public naturally the SDLP are not disposed to be very specific about this matter. From private discussions however, and in particular from ~~our~~ own very interesting discussion with Mr Austin Curry in Blackpool last October, I have formed the very definite impression that their thinking runs like this:

If the SDLP make a reasonable case for phased progression towards unity, if the Dublin Government backs this, and if the Unionists then refuse power-sharing on these terms and a Council of Ireland so orientated then Britain will lose patience with the Unionists and will declare in favour of an SDLP type solution recognising the need for eventual unity. This will be the signal for an outbreak of Protestant violence on a considerable scale which can however be contained by the British Army. After the failure of this extremist outbreak Protestant opinion will resign itself to the inevitable, that is to progressive absorption into a united, or new, Ireland.

This scenario is just <sup>plausible</sup> ~~vulnerable~~ enough to be extremely dangerous. The SDLP have consistently under-estimated the extent and depth of Ulster Protestant resistance to the whole idea of being absorbed in a United Ireland. The idea that all this would be changed by a British declaration - followed if necessary by an equivalent of Bloody Sunday with Protestants on the receiving end - is illusory. If we commit ourselves to finding common ground at all costs with the SDLP we are in danger of reinforcing <sup>their</sup> intransigence and perhaps triggering off further and even more serious troubles.

For all the above reasons I would favour a more cautious approach to finding common ground with the SDLP than appears to be envisaged in certain parts of your report. I think that up to now we have been working generally on the right lines. The SDLP are trying by various different approaches, to get us to go farther in their direction. I think that while keeping on as good terms with them as possible, we should politely but firmly decline to be pushed.

I am sending copies of this to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Yours sincerely

Conor Cruise O'Brien