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Title: Memorandum from Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Conor Cruise O'Brien on the current situation in Northern Ireland, the possibility of full-scale civil war there, and the problems with either a United Nations or an Irish Army intervention.

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Northern Ireland

Memorandum from the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs as requested by the Administrative Council.

1. It is generally agreed that there is a serious danger that:
 - (a) The projected Convention may have a Loyalist majority;
 - (b) That such a majority might disregard the parameters of the White Paper and might establish, by majority vote in the Convention, an entirely Loyalist Executive which would proclaim itself the Provisional Government of Northern Ireland;
 - (c) That the Loyalist para-military groups would be recognised by the 'Provisional Government' as security forces of the Northern Ireland State.
 - (d) That a British Government might either acquiesce de facto in this state of affairs or be drawn into military confrontation with Loyalist groups.
 - (e) That the further development of the situation so created would place the British Army in a situation of being fired on both from Catholic and Protestant areas.
 - (f) That the British Army Command would then inform the British Government that its position was untenable and recommend withdrawal.
 - (g) That in these circumstances, and facing a worsened economic situation, the British would disengage altogether from Northern Ireland.
 - (h) If this decision were taken it is virtually certain to be carried out speedily. It is known that no military Staffs would favourably envisage the kind of gradual 'phased withdrawal' which journalists and others discuss in this context.

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- (i) In the event of a British withdrawal under such circumstances it is virtually certain that civil war would break out in Northern Ireland.
- (j) The precise outcome of such a conflict is unpredictable but it is certain that they would include heavy civilian casualties in Northern Ireland, especially among exposed minorities, and most especially among the Catholics of the Belfast region; serious casualties also in the Republic as a result of 'retaliatory' raids and bombings by Loyalist forces into our territory; massive disruption of the economy and of social life both North and South, total elimination of the Tourist Industry, suspension of foreign investment, widespread and lasting unemployment, and a vast refugee problem in the Republic. SDLP members estimate that in the event of such a 'dooms day' situation the number of refugees from the North we might expect here would be of the order of sixty to seventy thousand families - not less than a quarter of a million people. It is obvious that such an incursion could not be sustained without a very severe drop in the standard of living in the Republic. Northern observers have also warned us that any such incursion would necessarily include large numbers of teenagers who by reason of the conditions in which they have grown up are tough violent and virtually ungovernable.
2. It is sometimes carelessly assumed that if a situation of this general type came about it could be controlled either by the Irish Army or by United Nations forces. Unfortunately neither assumption is tenable;

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- (a) As far as the Irish Army is concerned it is reliably estimated that, with its present effective size it could, if called upon, hold one border town, e.g. Newry. Unless we were to put the entire economy of this country on a war footing - thereby among other things accelerating the escalation towards disaster - our forces could not hope to exert significantly wider control. It should be noted that that intervention of this limited kind, while perhaps saving lives in this small area, could precipitate massacres on a grand scale in other much more vulnerable areas. It should also be noted that the Irish Army in such a situation would be severely extended by additional security duties in the territory of the Republic itself, as a result of Loyalist incursions, the refugee situation etc.
- (b) It would also be unwise to over-estimate the very limited potentialities of the United Nations. The United Nations has no military force of its own and can only draw on limited contingents from countries willing to contribute for specific purposes. It is unlikely that a United Nations force could be brought together for restoring order in Northern Ireland if that meant quelling in effect the majority of the people there (or for that matter a large minority). The most the UN would in fact be likely to do would be to provide a kind of peace line after a cease-fire - in effect or a new border - with an observer force to monitor cease-fire violations etc. If things go very badly we might need the UN for such purposes, but it would be wrong to expect that they would be either willing or able to do much more.

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3. Granted the ghastly potentialities inherent in all this it is clear that what is important is to try at all costs to avert such a drift of events. The potential which any Dublin Government has to control events in Northern Ireland is extremely limited. However Dublin's approach can have a significant though limited impact on the situation there (for example the significant negative impact of Fianna Fáil's ambiguous verbal threats and covert intervention activities in 1969 - 1970 and the impetus thereby given to Protestant violence on the one hand, and the Provisional IRA on the other). Dublin's present policy is aimed mainly at doing everything in our power that might help to avert the emergence of a Loyalist majority in the Convention elections - which could be the first long step in a disastrous evolution. It is our view that a relatively low profile by Dublin is that best calculated to allow the emergence of a non Loyalist Protestant vote - precisely that vote which would be most susceptible to the arguments in the Green Paper. On the other hand a noisy and threatening posture by Dublin would play into the hands of Loyalists and help to make a Loyalist victory certain. If a Loyalist victory at the convention can be headed off, then power-sharing can be rebuilt. If on the other hand a Loyalist majority does emerge and refuses to accept power-sharing (as of course it would) then we would urge on the British to dissolve such a Convention immediately and make it clear that no form of local executive not based on power-sharing was acceptable, and that there could at no time be any question of returning to the old Stormont, B Specials etc.

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4. The Government recognises the need for an 'Irish dimension', which is recognised in the White Paper. When and if a power sharing executive is formed in Northern Ireland the exact nature of the 'Irish dimension' would then have to be determined between that Executive and Dublin. It would be unwise to lay too much emphasis in advance on defining the exact nature of what an Irish dimension would have to be. Such an emphasis at present could reduce the chances of power-sharing, and increase Loyalist strength.