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REPORT OF MEETING BETWEEN SDLP DELEGATION AND
MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT ON 22nd NOVEMBER, 1974.

1. A meeting was held at 4.30 p.m. on the 22nd November, 1974, in the Council Chamber, Government Buildings, between an SDLP delegation and a number of members of the Government, who were accompanied by officials. The SDLP delegation consisted of Messrs. J. Hume, P. Devlin, P. O'Hanlon, A. Currie, M. Canavan and S. Mallon. The members of the Government present were the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Finance, Posts and Telegraphs, ^{and Justice} as well as the Attorney General. The officials present were Messrs. D. Nally, M. MacConghail, and W. Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach, and P. Keating and S. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs.
2. The Taoiseach opened the meeting and invited the SDLP delegation to indicate the matters which they wished to discuss. Mr. Hume conveyed the apologies of Mr. Fitt, who was indisposed. He referred to the previous meeting between the SDLP and Ministers last August. He recalled that at that meeting, the SDLP delegation had put forward an analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland which indicated that it was drifting towards a full-scale confrontation. They had suggested that it would be necessary to have total co-operation between the Irish and British Governments to deal with the likely Loyalist intransigence in the proposed Constitutional Convention. They had indicated that if the Loyalists refused to accept the pre-conditions for remaining a part of the United Kingdom, as set out by the British Government and Parliament, the SDLP would regard the situation as being totally changed. They would then call on the British Government to work with the Irish Government for the establishment of new agreed institutions ^{for} Northern Ireland and to remain in the area only until such time as such institutions could be established. He recalled that they had wished that the British Government should declare as non-negotiable conditions for the recommendations of the

proposed Constitutional Convention, power-sharing within Government and an Irish dimension, expressed through institutions. Mr. Hume expressed the view that events in the interval had proved that their forecasts were accurate. It now seemed that the situation which they had envisaged was in fact emerging. It was now necessary for all parties and for the two Sovereign Governments to consider what action would be taken if a Loyalist majority in the Constitutional Convention rejected the non-negotiable conditions. This was the main thing they wanted to talk about.

3. Mr. Hume went on to say that it was the considered view of his Party that the Provisional IRA had now taken a deliberate decision to attempt to provoke a civil war which would embroil the whole of Ireland. It was likely that they saw this as the only way of vindicating themselves, in the wake of all the suffering they had caused, apparently with little success, so far as their objectives were concerned. The result of the recent escalation in the campaign of violence had been a massive increase in retaliatory sectarian assassinations. The Catholic population in the North was now gripped with fear. In general, the situation was perhaps at its most serious since the troubles had begun.

4. Mr. Hume recalled that at the meeting with the Government in August, his Party had also enquired about the position in regard to contingency planning. They were aware that the Taoiseach had had a number of meetings with British Ministers since August and they wished to establish whether we had taken a strong line on the matter of contingency planning. The Taoiseach recalled that, accompanied by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Local Government, he had met the British Prime Minister, Mr. Wilson, and other British Ministers, in London on the 11th September. In the joint communique issued following that meeting, both Governments had reaffirmed their commitment to power-sharing and the Irish dimension.

The SDLP had also, of course, received a similar undertaking from Mr. Wilson at a meeting on the previous day. On the occasion of that visit, the Taoiseach had also met Mr. Heath, the Leader of the Conservative Party, and Mr. Gilmour, the Party's spokesman on Northern Ireland. At that meeting, the Irish side had referred to certain changes in phraseology, from that which had previously been used, in the Conservative Party's manifesto for the recent Westminster election. However, their doubts on this matter had been cleared up at the meeting with Mr. Heath.

Mr. Wilson, at the meeting on that occasion, had expressed the view that not only the present British Government, but also the British Parliament and a Conservative Government would also regard power-sharing in Government and the Irish dimension as essential conditions for an enduring settlement in Northern Ireland.

5. There had been a second meeting with Mr. Wilson on the 1st November. At that meeting, the Taoiseach had been accompanied by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Tánaiste. They had questioned the British side at some length on what action they would take in a doomsday situation in which the loyalist majority assumed or attempted to assume control. Their questioning related to two broad subjects. Firstly, the protection of lives, especially in key vulnerable areas. On this the British appeared to be satisfied that they had adequate forces to protect life. The second front was the maintenance of essential supplies of power and food.
6. Mr. Hume enquired whether the British had said what they would do if the loyalists said a flat "no". The Taoiseach replied that the British had outlined the course of events as they saw them in a run-up to the Constitutional Convention. They had referred to the proposed publication of a number of documents. It seemed that the elections might take place in the second week of March. However, in relation to what

they would do in the face of loyalist intransigence, there seemed to be no clear plans of action.

7. The Minister for Foreign Affairs suggested that leaving violence aside, the loyalists would not be able to force us to do anything by striking. If the strike were to peter out, violence might ensue and it is possible that the British would not face up to this. Mr. O'Hanlon enquired whether there were any contingency plans at all dealing with the situation. Mr. Hume said that a strong line was needed in this matter.
8. Mr. Currie said that there were indications that the British were now trying to put together a new package. This would include the ending of internment, as might be advised by the Gardner Committee, and the withdrawal of troops to barracks in certain areas. Mr. O'Hanlon said that among the ideas in circulation on this matter were that there would be big movement on internment before Christmas, linked to a cease-fire by all para-military bodies; that there might be an amnesty or rather a review of sentences for persons convicted of political offences - this might take the form of a two-thirds remission of sentence; that there might be an amnesty for persons surrendering illegally held arms within a certain period; that from a certain date anyone charged with political offences would receive no remission ~~from~~ of sentence for good behaviour; and that in certain areas there might be a withdrawal of British troops to barracks. It was now possible that this initiative might be forestalled by the reaction to the Birmingham bombings. Mr. Hume indicated that these ideas were being floated by Mr. Frank Cooper of the Northern Ireland Office in order to get the SDLP again closely involved with Mr. Rees, the Secretary of State. At this point Mr. Devlin mentioned that it now seemed that Mr. Rees was permanently in that office.

The Taoiseach mentioned that Mr. Rees seemed to have a better appreciation of the situation and to display more confidence in his ability to handle it on the last occasion he had met him. Mr. Devlin said that he was no doubt conscious that any initiative at present could fall dead in his hands and that it was for this reason that Mr. Cooper was being used to float off the various ideas. It was possible that an initiative might work if all the internees were released and if simultaneously, there was movement on other matters such as local policing and legislation on human rights. There were 1,300 long-term political prisoners and there were a further 1,100 individuals involved in cases going through the courts. It was being suggested that large proportions, say 10%, 25%, 50%, and 100%, of the internees might be released as the level of violence declined, culminating in a complete release when all violence stopped. The idea here was that the dependents ^{of} the internees would begin to bring ~~an~~ pressure on the IRA to call off the campaign of violence. In this thinking, military disengagement by all the forces involved might be followed by an amnesty and this in turn, would be followed by the proposed Constitutional Convention. Mr. Devlin was doubtful whether Rees could sell this package.

9. Mr. Currie said that he was conscious of the need for care in dealing with Mr. Cooper (of the NI Office) but nevertheless Cooper was putting forward serious questions for consideration. He was asking what would happen if the troops were withdrawn from, say, Bogside or South Armagh - would the Provisional IRA take ^{over} ~~it~~? Mr. Currie said that he and others in the SDLP were convinced that the IRA leadership had taken a definite ^{decision} that only in a civil war, involving the South, can they (the IRA) achieve their aims. He was sure that the Government had taken on board what Dathi O'Connell had said in his recent television interview. O'Connell seemed to be taking a very hard line. Mr. Currie said that he thought the campaign of

bombing in Britain would intensify, perhaps leading up to an explosion involving very large loss of life, say in the Oxford Street area of London in the period immediately before Christmas. It had to be remembered that 1974 had been described as the Provisionals as the year of victory. The thinking here would be to generate an irresistible demand among the British public for a withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland. Mr. Hume said that the one factor that might bring about a doomsday situation was that brought up by Mr. Currie. He suggested, however, that we should not concentrate too much on this possibility. It was still possible to split the apparently solid loyalist monolith. This would be greatly assisted by the open and public support for the SDLP's position by the Irish Government. If there was a commitment to power-sharing and the Irish dimension, fully backed by both Governments, there was a hope that the loyalists would draw back. If the people of the North were to vote, in the elections for the proposed Convention, in full knowledge of the readiness of both Governments to stand firm on power-sharing and the Irish dimension, against the background of the consequences of other scenarios proposed by the loyalists, the results might be surprisingly favourable.

10. The Minister for Foreign Affairs enquired whether insistence on pre-conditions by the two Governments would not precipitate a situation which looked like developing in any case but which it might still be possible to avoid? Mr. Hume replied by asking whether we could afford to drift into the situation without having an alternative plan ready. It was very likely that the loyalists would command a majority in the proposed Convention. It seemed certain that they would refuse to agree to power-sharing and the Irish dimension and it was only too possible that the British might then withdraw, that the loyalists would move to seize power, that this would be resisted by the nationalists, that large-scale inter-communal violence would ensure. It was inevitable that this would

involve the Republic. Thus, Dublin would be involved in any case, but in the worst possible situation for the Government of the Republic and for the SDLP. For this reason, the SDLP were again putting forward the proposals they made in August, i.e. that the Irish and British Governments jointly should be prepared to confront the loyalists and enforce the implementation of power-sharing and the Irish dimension. However, the SDLP were not calling for public statements at this time. What they wanted was that the Dublin Government should decide to adopt the policy advocated by the SDLP in the event of the contingency to which he had referred arising and that they should convince the British that they should agree to adopt the same policy. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, referring to the proposals put forward by the SDLP in August, said that it was not possible to be sure that the British would, in fact, stay in the North. Mr. O'Hanlon said that the British would either go or stay. Contingency plans should be prepared, designed to minimise the amount of suffering that would ensue, whatever happened. The Minister for Foreign Affairs expressed the view that if the Irish Government were to say anything to the British about contingency plans, involving the possibility of a British withdrawal, before this situation actually arose, it could be very dangerous. If the Irish Government were to indicate that it was facing up to the possibility of British withdrawal, this might give the British Government the alibi they almost certainly wanted to get out of the North; in this way we would be letting them off the hook. Mr. Hume did not agree. In his view, the British would leave. We should try to ensure therefore, that it would be in the best possible circumstances and that they would stay until stable institutions had been set up. The SDLP's strategy was to get all the major forces involved, except the loyalists, together on one side. In their view, the best way to do this was for the Irish Government to offer its close co-operation to the

British. The Taoiseach enquired what were the hopes of establishing stable institutions in the ^{is} situation, if the loyalists had already balked at power-sharing and the Irish dimension. Mr. Hume agreed that it would certainly not be easy to set up such institutions. The Minister for Foreign Affairs suggested that what would be involved would be the British remaining indefinitely, as there seems little prospect of reaching agreement on such stable institutions. Mr. Hume said that the SDLP recognised all the difficulties. However, they thought that if we were to await the malignant scenario actually coming about, it would be too late. We would be scrambling to recover a situation which ^{was} ~~is~~ already on the slide.

11. The Minister for Justice indicated that the Government here was faced with a dilemma. They could certainly see that the scenario painted by the SDLP could all too easily come about, including a British withdrawal. They could see the need to plan for this situation. As against this, it had to be admitted that it was also only too possible that any overt planning or recognition of this possibility, might encourage the British to proceed with withdrawal. The difference between the views of the Government and the SDLP seemed to be that the SDLP regarded as a certainty or near certainty what for the Government was, so far, an unspoken thought, viz. that, despite their assurances and ~~gratitude~~^{gratitude} up to now, the British Government might in fact withdraw from the North. He could understand the SDLP's need to pre-empt the possibility~~as~~ that the IRA would obtain the credit for such a development. The Minister for Foreign Affairs insisted that the SDLP could not ignore the existence of the dilemma referred to by the Minister for Justice. Mr. Hume said that the question remained whether we had a policy for the situation in which the loyalists rejected the basic conditions for a settlement. Mr. O'Hanlon said that the present Government policy was quite satisfactory to the SDLP but it was necessary to have an alternative policy for

the situation where present policy no longer applied. A number of Ministers again asked how the SDLP saw a way out of the dilemma referred to by the Minister for Justice. Mr. Currie said he felt that ways and means could be found of getting over this problem. The scenario envisaged, involving British withdrawal, could be only one on a list of possible scenarios for discussion with the British. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that the danger of letting the British off the hook would arise if we included British withdrawal at all on any list of possible developments. Mr. Hume said that the possibilities which the SDLP had sketched were by no means new. They had been set out in public in their manifesto for the recent Westminster election. The Minister for Foreign Affairs recalled that Mr. Rees had also given some hints about the British Government's attitude in the event of loyalist intransigence. Mr. Devlin expressed the view that it was certain that the British had already considered the various alternative possibilities. In his view, the Republic had the right to come in, in a substantial way, and to discuss with the British every step of the ^{hasing} ~~step~~ of policy. This could be done privately. The Minister for Foreign Affairs indicated that the Government's position was that it was not certain that the British would, in fact, withdraw. Mr. Hume indicated that all present realised they were talking about situations which none of them liked. The Minister for Foreign Affairs enquired whether it was not better to seek assurances from the British that, in the event of the failure of the Convention, they would stone-wall on direct rule, until the loyalists were prepared to agree to the essential conditions for a settlement.

12. Mr. Mallon said that it ^cwould be taken for certain that the loyalist politicians were now considering how to arrange matters _{so that the SDLP} could be brought to acquiesce in a settlement.

There was the danger that the British would go for "a soft option", involving token power-sharing and no Irish dimension. This situation could arise very soon after the elections in March - in other words, it was a much nearer possibility than the other malignant scenario which had been discussed up to then. The SDLP could be put in the impossible situation of accepting these conditions or taking the responsibility for a civil war. The Minister for Foreign Affairs recalled that the British Government had committed itself in a number of recent statements to power-sharing in Government. They would find it difficult to opt for token power-sharing against this background. Mr. Mallon expressed the view that even the assurances that had been given permitted some dilution of the content of power-sharing. He went on to say that he was more convinced than ever that the Irish dimension was relevant and indeed more relevant than ever. In the area of the EEC, and particularly in relation to agriculture, it should be possible to sell the Irish dimension fairly easily. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, recalled that the purpose of the recent visits by the Taoiseach and other Ministers to London had been to secure sufficiently explicit statements from the British. Mr. Mallon said that from what the Taoiseach had said it seemed that the British had no clear plan to ensure the provision^{of} essential supplies. Mr. Hume said that his party wished to avoid a repeat of 1969. He did not want all the parties concerned going off in different directions. It seemed to him that the Government's position was simply to rely on the British. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that this was not the case: the policy was rather to take no action now which would make it easier for the British to withdraw.

13. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs said that all must aim at a solution that would minimise violence. He enquired whether the SDLP had reached any decision on the shape of an acceptable solution, in the event that the British did, in fact, withdraw? Mr. Hume replied that they had. Their view was

that there would have to be agreed institutions and that the British should stay until these agreed institutions had been established. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that one had to have regard to the possibility that the British would simply say that they were withdrawing, without reference to whether agreed institutions had been established or not. Mr. Canavan said that any solution must be such that it would leave both traditions protected, that both aspirations would be able to exist in parallel. Until the day the British actually commenced withdrawal, it was not possible to predict what the reaction of the loyalists would be in that situation. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that, nevertheless, the question had to be posed as to what the loyalists would accept. Mr. O'Hanlon expressed the view that there would be an interim situation in which the British were neither going nor staying. It was only then that the loyalists would face up to the British withdrawal and only then that they would be prepared to talk. Mr. Hume said that the SDLP position was that if the loyalists refused to accept power sharing and the Irish dimension, they were breaking the rules of membership of the United Kingdom and, in that situation, the SDLP would take the line that the guarantees about Northern Ireland remaining within the UK, enshrined in various British Acts, would have to be withdrawn. The Minister for Foreign Affairs thought that the question of these guarantees would be irrelevant in a situation where the British had already indicated their firm intention to withdraw. Mr. Hume said that in his view there was a strong case to be argued with the British on this matter. It could be pointed out to them that they could not simply pull out. The arguments against such a course of action was that the violence which would probably ensue could not be prevented from spreading to British cities.

14. Mr. Devlin said that the SDLP's position was that the situation that would arise in the event of a British announcement that

they were withdrawing would have to be tackled as quickly as possible. Any attempts at a coup d'etat would have to be forestalled. It was unreasonable to ask the SDLP to look beyond that. Mr. Hume expressed the view that once the Irish Government became fully involved in the situation, the Provisional IRA would be finished. ^{This} ~~It~~ would be the case if the 1920 guarantees about Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom were withdrawn. If the British said that they were not staying in Northern Ireland indefinitely but only until agreed institutions were established, the loyalists would be left in an uncharted situation and might well be prepared to "play ball". Mr. Currie said that the SDLP felt that our lines to the British Government were very good at the present time. Both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Heath had shown themselves very conscious of the need to maintain good relations with Ireland. The representation at the funeral of President Childers had clearly indicated this. What the SDLP wanted was that we should use these links to secure a joint attitude ^{on the} ~~of a~~ part of the Irish and British Governments which would make the loyalists step back from the brink. Mr. Devlin said that the affect of the withdrawal of British guarantees would be mainly economic. If ~~the~~ British goodwill were lost, investment by the multi-national companies in Northern Ireland would cease or be run down. This and other factors would bring about large-scale unemployment. The loyalists would be conscious of the implications here. The Taoiseach said that if the British were to ^{brandish} ~~rampish~~ the threat of withdrawing their financial support from the North, it would be so popular with the British people that a momentum might be generated which the British Government would find very difficult to withstand. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that what the SDLP were proposing was a gamble. It might work and succeed in making the loyalists pull back from the brink but if it did not succeed and if the Convention failed, one would be left in the situation where there might be a British commitment to withdrawal and the loyalists would be in a very

ugly mood. Mr. Currie said that ^{if} the leaders of the three main British Parties could be brought to make a joint declaration on the attitude of the British Government and Parliament to loyalist intransigence, it might have greater than a declaration by Mr. Wilson alone. *Since his* "spongers" speech Mr. Wilson's credibility with the loyalists was rather low. The Attorney General felt that this idea of a joint action by all the British parties might well be worth pursuing.

15. The SDLP delegation said that it wished to get a response from the Government to the views that it had put forward. It was agreed that the Government delegation would withdraw for a while to consider this matter. It was also agreed that, following the meeting, a communique might be issued in which the Government and the SDLP would jointly condemn the Birmingham bombings.
16. When the meeting resumed, it discussed the terms of this communique. Agreement was reached on a communique and a copy of this is attached. The meeting then concluded.