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**Title:** Report written by Seán Donlon, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs, concerning his visit to Belfast on 6 March, 1974, to meet a delegation from the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party]. Prominent topics of discussion included the performance of the Faulkner Unionists in the Westminster elections and their current attitudes, the implementation of the Sunningdale Agreement, the need for a clampdown on IRA [Irish Republican Army] activity along the Border, the progress of the Common Law Enforcement Commission, internment, and the Council of Ireland.

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ConfidentialVisit to Belfast 6.3.1974

1. I met Messrs. Hume, Devlin and Currie, initially together and later met Messrs. Hume and Currie separately. I also met a group of SDLP backbenchers and with the notable exception of Hume whose views are recorded separately below, SDLP opinion generally is that the current Faulkner Unionist reaction is a panic one and derives largely from their bad performance at the Westminster elections. It is felt that the statement of 4 March (attached) was proposed by Bradford who has taken his defeat by Kilfedder badly but that significantly it was seconded by Peter McLachlan who feels that his performance as leader of the party machine has been found wanting and that he is trying desperately to rescue his reputation. Whatever the origin of the statement, what is beyond doubt is that Faulkner stands over the statement as issued and has in recent days convinced his colleagues on the N.I. Executive that there can be absolutely no further progress in implementing the Sunningdale Agreement without "some further move" from Dublin. They do not doubt the genuineness of his intentions to implement Sunningdale though they disagree on what further move he requires from Dublin. Devlin is convinced that what is required is massive action on the border, including increased overt co-operation between the security forces on both sides. Currie shares this view and has no doubt that a massive clampdown on the IRA in border areas would have the support of the



majority of people living along the border. He claims that I.R.A. activity in the Tyrone/Armagh area is still blatantly directed from Monaghan and largely involves flying columns who spend two or three weeks in the north and then return south to Monaghan from where they direct the campaign and rest and recuperate in preparation for further missions. Where Devlin and Currie differ is that the latter feels that tackling this problem should not delay the ratification of Sunningdale since there is no reason for believing that whatever measures are taken in the Republic will be completely effective in dealing with the situation. In contrast, Devlin feels that there should be no question of ratification until there has been a significant improvement in the situation on the ground, and he does not see that the sort of improvement required could be effective "much before May or June". No one seems to feel that the Taoiseach's clarification on status will in itself be enough to satisfy Faulkner <sup>and</sup> though they recommend that it should be made along the lines agreed at Hillsborough, they do not think it will have much of a sweetening effect.

2. By contrast, Hume takes a totally pessimistic view of the situation. He is inclined to the opinion that Faulkner has seen the writing on the wall and wants to abandon the Sunningdale agreement since he now has clear evidence that he moved too fast even for moderate Unionists. Faulkner wishes to ensure that the blame for the Sunningdale breakdown will be laid at Dublin's door and all his current actions are aimed



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at ensuring that Dublin will be clearly seen as the wrecker. The issue on which he will eventually direct his hottest fire will be the impossibility of setting up a Council of Ireland in any shape and no matter what Dublin delivers on status, security or "extradition", Faulkner will find a reason to break everything on the Council. Hume is particularly emphatic that Faulkner's venom will be directed not against London or the SDLP but at Dublin. Faulkner has probably calculated - mistakenly according to Hume, Currie and Devlin - that there is a reasonable possibility of retaining power sharing with the SDLP while abandoning the Council of Ireland and if he is to retain any credibility with a British administration he cannot afford to link the collapse of Sunningdale with a Belfast-London break. In this situation Hume feels it would be ill-advised for Dublin to concede in any major way to Faulkner at the moment but that some gesture should be made, partly to show good faith to the new British administration and partly as a test of Faulkner's intentions. Given that there is little room for manoeuvre in the status area - and Hume hopes that the Taoiseach in his clarification will go no further than what was roughly agreed at Hillsborough - and that further politicisation in the security area is full of dangers, Hume's suggestion is that some very early action should be taken in the area currently being examined by the Common Law Enforcement Commission. Ideally the British and Irish Governments should announce action in the next two/three weeks on the basis of an interim report from the Commission but if necessary, both Governments should now accept the inevitability that the Commission will in effect not recommend any specific course of action. In such a situation, Dublin should take the initiative and take the necessary decisions without regard to the Commission's



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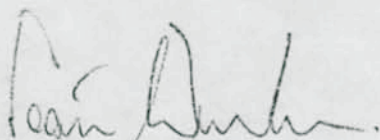
activities. Insulting a few distinguished legal luminaries would be a small price to pay for possibly saving the Sunningdale package. Assuming that one way or another a concession is made to Faulkner in this area in the near future, a March date should be set for the ratification of Sunningdale and if Faulkner refused to accept this, the SDLP would then simply work out tactics for withdrawal from power sharing and the Sunningdale agreement with maximum party advantage to ensure their political survival in Northern Ireland.

3. All in the SDLP remain convinced of the need for immediate and dramatic action on ending internment. Hume feels that even in a breakdown situation - and he does not envisage internment as a breaking point - the party would by then have to have shown progress on ending internment if it were to survive the breakdown. Devlin mentioned "hints" from Faulkner about the possibility of a deal whereby Faulkner would support the SDLP's demand to end internment in return for a commitment from the SDLP to abandon "for the moment" the Council of Ireland. There seems no likelihood of such a deal being concluded - irrespective, says Devlin, of what Gerry Fitt might be saying privately in London or elsewhere - and I have no doubt that while the SDLP will take an even stronger line than hitherto on the ending of internment they will not in any situation drop the Council of Ireland aspect of the Sunningdale agreement. There is a general feeling of optimism that the new British administration will be more favourably disposed to ending internment though Hume, who had a private meeting with Mr Rees in Belfast on 6 March, said that, not unexpectedly, Rees was very

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careful indeed to keep all his options open and gave no hint of what his current thinking might be on this or any other subject. (Indeed newsmen who followed Rees during his first day in Belfast said that he was very careful to keep his options open on everything, even to the point of saying that the Sunningdale agreement was like "any piece of paper", not the last word.)

4. In summary and taking into account a certain conflict in the assessment of the situation as seen from within the party, the SDLP's general position seems to be that we should make some early concession to take account of Faulkner's post-election state of shock but that having done that we should then move quickly either to the ratification of the Sunningdale agreement or to establish the sincerity of Faulkner's commitment to that agreement.



Seán Donlon

7 March 1974