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NORTHERN IRELANDLatest DevelopmentsVisit by Messrs. Devlin and Cooper

Mr. Paddy Devlin and Mr. Ivan Cooper, S.D.L.P. members, visited Ministers in Dublin yesterday to say that they had written to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that, unless certain actions were taken by the British Army to deal with the Ulster Workers' Council strike, the S.D.L.P. members of the Northern Ireland Executive would resign at 6 a.m. this morning. From the news bulletins it is understood that the army, have, in fact, moved to take over fuel depots and petrol stations - more or less in line with S.D.L.P. requirements on this front. They have, however, not, so far as we know now, acted in relation to power stations, in a way which would meet the S.D.L.P. demands. It is, therefore, not certain yet whether or not the Executive will stay in office.

(It was indicated at one stage yesterday that, if the army did take action, then three or possibly more members of the Assembly Unionist Parties would resign. The net effect of these threats, if carried out, would of course be the collapse of the Executive whether or not the army acted.)

Meeting between Irish and British Governments

On 23rd May, the Taoiseach wrote to the British Prime Minister proposing a formal conference and the first meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Council of Ireland without delay - in a matter of days, at whatever location is most convenient.

So far no reply has been received to this letter. Since it was written, the situation in the North has changed radically. It would seem proper now that the meeting should be held - on the basis proposed - only if the Executive survives. If a meeting is held soon after the collapse of the Executive, while passions are still enflamed in the North, the effect of our participation could be to enflame these passions still further in that it would be said that we were interfering blatantly and openly in internal Northern affairs at a time of maximum stress there. Our participation in the meeting could achieve little or nothing positive, in practice, except to put us in the position of taking on more and more of what are now British responsibilities.

Consequences of Dissolution of Executive

The Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973, provides that the composition of the Assembly must be such that it is possible for the Secretary of State to appoint an Executive which having regard to the support it commands in the Assembly and to the electorate on which that support is based, is likely to be widely accepted throughout the community. If it appears to Her Majesty that such an Executive cannot be formed and that it is in the public interest that the Assembly should be dissolved, Her Majesty may dissolve - or prorogue the Assembly (section 27). If the Assembly is dissolved Her Majesty may fix a date for a new election.

The first question to be decided therefore on the dissolution of the Executive would be whether the Assembly should be prorogued. It would probably, in practice, be impossible for the Secretary of State to avoid this course. Prorogation would then be followed by direct rule from Westminster - in all probability while arrangements were being made to hold a further election.

This election could be followed either by -

(2)

- (1) a continuation of direct rule
- (2) a further attempt to form a power-sharing Executive or
- (3) temporary arrangements to keep Government etc. going while the British are preparing to withdraw.-

British withdrawal would, in all probability, be followed by a unilateral declaration of independence (U.D.I.).

It is important to stress that, certainly initially, a British withdrawal would not, in all probability, lead to anything like the unity of the country. What the Northern people would go for is the establishment of an independent State. They appear to have a thoroughly confused picture of the extent of the economic support given to them at present by the British. Some of them are working on a figure of the order of £25 million as the extent of this support. In fact the figure is closer to £400 million. It would not, therefore, be possible for a Northern state to exist for long without outside aid. The consequences of an attempt to establish U.D.I. could therefore be extremely serious for the people of Northern Ireland - and for us. The consequences would be even more serious if an attempt were made at immediate takeover by us, in the event of British withdrawal.

Security

Apart from the need to dispel illusion on the subject of unification, it would be highly important that the state of near anarchy in the North does not affect us either directly - as with the Dublin and Monaghan bombings - or indirectly by the side effects it could have on industrial etc. development. This is probably easier to say than to do but immediate and effective action could be taken so as to ensure the build up of our security forces. This could be done under the guise of tackling the problem of border security and the I.R.A.

There is the associated question of action to be taken in the event of widespread disturbances in the North following the breakdown of the Executive or otherwise. This could involve us in -

- (1) the provision of refugee camps and
- (2) a decision as to whether intervention on our part would be desirable.

This type of disturbance is perhaps less likely now than in 1969 because of the concentration in Belfast of the different communities within more or less fortified ghettos. It would nevertheless be well for the Departments of Justice and Defence to -

- (1) look to security arrangements and
- (2) take stock of arrangements which could be made for refugees.

Government announcement

A Government statement on their attitude to developments in the North going much beyond a "watching developments" stage would probably be premature. It would nevertheless be worthwhile initiating work on the lines of a draft statement to be produced in the event of the Executives collapse.

27th May, 1974.