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Title: Report of conversations between Seán Donlon of the Department of Foreign Affairs and SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] Assemblymen between 31 May, 1974, and 2 June, 1974, at which the main points for discussion were the mood within and future plans of the SDLP, a potential British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, renewed efforts to power-share, the control over certain areas exercised by the UWC [Ulster Workers' Council] and the IRA [Irish Republican Army], the prospect of re-partitioning, the attitudes of the British and Irish governments towards the collapse of the Executive, and a diocesan relief committee re-constituted by Bishop Philbin.

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Visit to Northern Ireland - 31 May/2 June 1974

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1. The following report is based on a visit to Northern Ireland on the weekend 31 May - 2 June during which I met the SDLP Assemblymen and members of the party executive who attended a day-long meeting in Dungannon on 1 June. I drove Hume back to Derry that evening and spent many hours in session with him and his influential "kitchen cabinet" (Michael Canavan, Arthur Doherty, Raymond McLean, etc.). I stayed the night at Hume's and returned south via Armagh and Newry where I met briefly with politically non-involved contacts in the minority community whom I have found in the past to be reliable guides to local ~~minority~~ feelings and outlook.

2. The mood of the SDLP is generally one of considerable depression, frustration and despair, much greater than I had anticipated it would be. As might be expected, a serious and potentially divisive debate is going on within the party as to what its future policy should be but in addition there is much bickering between the leaders, bad feeling between many of the backbenchers and the leadership, internal disputes over media leaks and counter leaks, etc. All nineteen Assemblymen were present at Dungannon on 1 June and without exception they reported a massive swing away from support of their party to support of both wings of the IRA. This tendency was confirmed by sources outside the party. From many areas, notably Newry, West Belfast, ^{and} parts of Tyrone, the reports indicated that support was more likely to drift towards the Official rather than the Provo. IRA. The Officials were not as closely identified with the atrocities and violence of recent years and were in general more active politically than militarily. The swing away from the SDLP was said to be more dramatic in some areas than in others. Devlin and Fitt said they now had no support in Belfast. The personal

abuse about which they were complaining so bitterly up to last week ^{had} stopped but had been replaced by an even more hurtful political and, in some cases, personal ostracisation. Many of the leaders, particularly Hume and Currie, seem to feel that the SDLP is finished as a political force. They had pinned their colours firmly on power-sharing within Northern Ireland and partnership between North and South and neither of these was now possible. At different stages over the weekend, Hume made it clear that he believed that any hope of Irish unity was gone forever, that the prospects for a minimal Irish dimension to the Northern Ireland solution in the next 200 years were virtually non-existent and that there was no brand of unionism present or on the horizon which would be prepared to share power with the SDLP. Others within the party, particularly some of the traditionally nationalist backbenchers, advanced the view that if policy were changed radically to call for a definite British commitment to withdraw from Northern Ireland, the SDLP could survive largely intact since the overwhelming majority of their supporters would not in the long run wish to identify themselves completely with a movement of violence.

3. It is obviously much too early to make a realistic assessment of the prospects for the SDLP. On the surface, it is, of course, functioning normally and will probably continue to do so over the next few months. At its meeting on 1 June, it decided:

- (i) to send a four-man delegation to Westminster to lobby during the Northern Ireland debate and to see Wilson, Heath and Thorpe to impress on them that the only stable political future in Northern Ireland would be on a power-sharing basis;
- (ii) to set up a sub-committee to consider party policy;

(iii) to disassociate itself from the campaign of John Turnly who had months ago been nominated to contest the South ^{ANTRIM} ~~ANTRIM~~ by-election for the party. At the 1 June meeting, he made it clear that his campaign would be based primarily on a call for British withdrawal and nothing anyone could say or do succeeded in moving him from this position.

What is perhaps more significant, however, is that the meeting failed to decide on what party policy and tactics should be even in the next few weeks when party spokesmen will inevitably find themselves involved in public discussion of the whole situation. Not one person at the Dungannon meeting gave the renewed efforts to power-share any prospect of success. Hume argued very strongly against making any noises to indicate support for the British withdrawal lobby. This he said would, in the eyes of the minority community, make the SDLP indistinguishable from the IRA and while he accepted what he called "the inevitability of British withdrawal" he thinks the minority community would survive this situation best if withdrawal were seen to be the result of extreme Loyalist intransigence rather than of an IRA campaign. If it were seen as being brought about by the Loyalists, there was a reasonable chance that it would split the Unionist community down the middle and the minority might then at least exercise an uncertain element of power by playing one Unionist faction against the other.

4. In the event of a British withdrawal or of a declaration of intent to withdraw - or even, in the view of some of the SDLP, of the continuation of present British policy of minimum necessary movement to deal with the terms dictated by the UWC from day to day - what is expected as an immediate reaction is that the UWC or similar umbrella group will exercise de facto government over certain clearly defined geographic areas and by its control of key sectors of industry and public service will deprive areas of

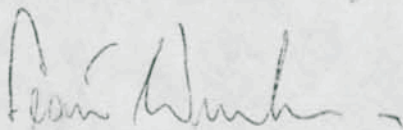
majority Catholic population, such as Newry, Derry and West Belfast, of all services. This would enable the IRA to consolidate its control of those areas, even to the extent of providing a semblance of government, and within a very short time a de facto repartitioning would have taken place along the border and in West Belfast a virtual siege situation would arise. Catholics would be in immediate physical danger primarily in the very few areas where there was still some doubt as to who controlled which "ant-hills" (the designated new towns and parts of North Belfast were mentioned) and to a lesser extent in some rural border areas, especially in Fermanagh, where sectarian lines had never been clearly established. That would be the immediate prospect. The long-term prospect was felt by many to be some agreement on re-partitioning - and this would come only after it had been forced on everyone concerned by a bitter and bloody conflict - since the only alternative was majority rule which the minority was simply not prepared to accept. No matter how many hours the various discussions I was involved in over the weekend lasted - and the one with Hume's kitchen cabinet was perhaps the most detailed and wide-ranging - the scenario of civil war and re-partition emerged with depressing frequency. I record it without assessing its validity because regardless of whether or not it is the only or most likely development, it is the one which dominates the thinking of those to whom I spoke. The sense of depression and despair in the SDLP is probably as deep as it can be at the moment. (Hume and others are even talking of leaving politics and Hume is, for financial reasons, immediately looking for a job. Michael Canavan, for one, is prepared and anxious to help out financially by arranging company directorships but for the moment at least he won't contemplate accepting any help on the grounds that he cannot reasonably expect people to back him for political reasons at a time when he sees himself as having no political future).

5. On the recriminations side, it may be worth recording that I sensed no general criticisms of our recent policies and tactics.

The Taoiseach's statement in the Dáil on the collapse of the Executive was regarded as "stretching credibility to be helpful". The minority in Northern Ireland simply cannot at the moment see how the IRA can be blamed for bringing down the Executive when all the evidence on the ground is that the major factor was British reluctance to confront the Loyalists. The SDLP are extremely critical of the British authorities and regard Frank Cooper of the Northern Ireland Office with particular hostility. As they see it, he was the strongest opponent of committing the troops early and fully and they now regard his tactics, including, they allege, his orchestration of the Northern Ireland civil service against the Executive, as even more despicable than those of Roy Bradford. There is at least some evidence to support the allegation. Cooper apparently "directed" the Northern Ireland civil service emergency co-ordinating committee for the first ten days of the strike without any reference to the Northern Ireland Executive though it is also clear that the committee was happy to acquiesce in this "direction". Considerable SDLP hostility is also directed against the RUC, the UDR and the BBC and the Party feels that a detailed inquiry into the strike might serve to highlight the wavering loyalty of these bodies. On a minor key, there is criticism of the Alliance Party who "were great until the crunch" when they announced that they agreed in principle with the SDLP but would have to face reality and vote with Faulkner on the issue of talking to the UWC. Through it all, the SDLP have retained the considerable respect they built up for Faulkner though they are now convinced that he and his party are even "more finished than the SDLP". They expect Faulkner to go to the House of Lords and be the first to write a book about power-sharing in due course. (A politically insignificant but nevertheless revealing footnote should be recorded. When Hume took office, he was assigned a car and driver from the official car pool. He was given the option of nominating his own driver but rejected it and said he would take Charlie, an East Belfast Protestant. For five months, Hume brought him into his confidence

and into his home. He gave him a bed two or three nights a week so that Charlie could save his subsistence. He paid him generously and privately when he came to Dublin on unofficial trips. He brought him to meetings and parties and generally did everything he could for him. On the first morning of the Loyalist strike, Hume received word that Charlie was not available. He had gone on strike. The day after the Executive collapsed, Hume returned to his former office at Chicester House to thank his personal staff but, though invited, Charlie didn't turn up. As Hume says, intimidation can't have been all that bad.)

6. I gather from a number of Belfast contacts that Bishop Philbin has re-constituted a diocesan relief committee with many of the same people, including Seán Cooney, Tom Conaty and Canon Murphy, who were active in relief of distress in 1969 and 1971. A first meeting was held in Trench House last week where it was generally felt that the pattern of help needed would be radically different to that which suited the previous situations. It was felt unlikely that there would be significant movement of refugees to the Republic but that there might be some further movement of Catholics into West Belfast. Accommodation and supply requirements are being studied and it is likely that in the next two weeks the committee will send a deputation to Dublin to discuss matters either with Government Departments or with the Irish Red Cross. The feeling is that what will be needed is some emergency system of getting basic supplies from the Republic along some safe corridor to West Belfast where distribution will be arranged through existing retail channels



Seán Donlon

4 June 1974