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"The Irish Dimension"

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Memo from the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs on the recent
British Suggestions.

1. There appear to be at least two dangerous pit falls in connection with these new suggestions. The more obvious one would be the danger that if we were to raise no objection to this line of thought, we would thereby expose ourselves to attack from the SDLP and the Opposition for having 'abandoned the Irish dimension'.
2. The less obvious trap is the one into which we would fall if we were to insist on being specific at this stage about what the Irish dimension means, coming out in favour of 'an institutionalised Irish dimension' i.e. the Council of Ireland whether under some new name or not. Here the danger is that, by overloading the package with something clearly known in advance to be unacceptable to the Loyalists, who will almost certainly have a majority at the convention, we are ensuring the breakdown of the convention and therefore might later be said to bear serious responsibility for subsequent events, which may be very serious.
3. I suggest that the best way of avoiding both these dangers is to tell the British that we cannot agree to any abandonment of the Irish dimension, but that it would be wrong at this stage for any side to offer any definition of what the Irish dimension would eventually involve. The first priority is to get a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland; after that the forms reflecting the Irish dimension will be the subject of discussion between that Executive and the Government in Dublin. The principle involved is that the matter of the Irish dimension, by definition is one for arrangement between Irishmen and is not suited for predefinition, either by Britain or the Republic or by any one section in Northern Ireland.
4. It is suggested that by pressing for the maximum of Irish dimension - that is in effect for a Council of Ireland - we will be providing ourselves with bargaining counters which we can give away later in exchange for material concessions on power-sharing etc. This is of course the same reasoning through which we built up the Council of Ireland with two tiers and Executive powers in advance of Sunningdale. In the event we were only too successful in getting the British and Faulkner to agree to virtually the whole of our bargaining position

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and in the end the whole thing collapsed, partly under the weight of our own too-successful bargaining.

5. The moderate interlocutors (Faulknerites, N.I.L.P) have now virtually disappeared, largely due to the continuance and escalation of the Provisional offensive after Sunningdale but partly also to our high-profile Council of Ireland and continuing suggestions that it represented the road to unity - a unity which was by definition unacceptable to the Faulkner Unionists. The people we have now to deal with are the people who broke the Sunningdale Executive and whose principal propaganda weapon in breaking it was the Council of Ireland. To offer these people at this stage an "institutionalised Irish dimension" is not offering a bargain counter; it is offering a red rag. It will not make power-sharing easier to get; it will diminish the already small chance of its coming into being. Systems which can make reliable use of "bargaining counters" etc. are found in places in which people on all sides can be relied on to pursue their material advantage with cool and rational calculation. The politicians who proceeded on the assumption that Northern Ireland was such a place - the Faulkner Unionists and NILP - have now succumbed to the passions which were aroused by their rational policies.

6. The nearest desirable approach to rational decision-making which we can hope for in the convention is: "we Loyalists can only get power in Northern Ireland, together with the advantages of remaining within the United Kingdom, if we concede some power to Catholics. How much power do we concede?" The answer most will want to give will be 'none, or only a semblance'. Still this may be forced up by Britain's firm refusal to concede any Stormont without some power-sharing at the top. We drastically diminish these chances if we insist from the start on an institutionalised Irish dimension. The very people who would try to get agreement for some real power-sharing would themselves be discredited, and fall into Faulknerite oblivion, if they had some kind of Council of Ireland around their neck as well as power-sharing. In fact Council of Ireland ideas whenever they are raised only succeed in pushing majority opinion in Northern Ireland further to the right and making the kind of relations which we would like to see symbolised in such a Council even more remote than ever from achievement.

7. We have a problem in all this with the SDLP who seem at the moment bent on a high-profile Irish dimension - though they themselves at the time of the strike had to throw over-board unceremoniously the full-scale Council of Ireland in a belated and vain effort to save power-sharing. Their present reasoning is not altogether clear to me, but from a number of indications it seems to be based on the idea of insisting on getting objectives which are known to be unacceptable to the Loyalists, through some kind of confrontation between the Loyalists and the British: that is if the British can be brought to confront the Loyalists using a certain amount of force and "calling the bluff of the para-military organisations", then Protestants will come to their senses and agree to power-sharing, a Council of Ireland and possibly even Irish unity. This line of thought is a fantasy born of desperation and capable of providing only more desperation. It is extremely unlikely - as appeared last May - that the British Government and Army will allow itself to be led into a military confrontation with the majority in Northern Ireland. If it were forced into such confrontation - as it may be through no will of its own - the likely outcome would not be 'Protestants coming to their senses', but that which we have all most reason to dread - the withdrawal of the troops followed by full-scale civil war.

We should therefore avoid giving any hostages to the SDLP's version of confrontation politics. The institutionalised Irish dimension is such a hostage and we should most carefully avoid it. The SDLP will find it rather hard to fault us if we say: "There must be an Irish dimension, but the forms of that dimension have to be worked out among Irish people, not predetermined by a British Government, however well-disposed. As soon as a power-sharing executive is set up in Northern Ireland adequately representing the full spectrum of Northern Ireland opinion, we should be happy to discuss with that Executive how best we may give expression by free agreement to our desire to work for peace together in this island".