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REPORT OF MEETING BETWEEN SDLP DELEGATION AND
MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT, 13th JANUARY, 1975.

1. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Local Government, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and the Minister for Justice met an SDLP delegation on 13th January, 1975, at 4 p.m., in the Council Chamber, Government Buildings. The members of the SDLP delegation were Messrs. G. Fitt, J. Hume, P. Devlin, P. O'Hanlon, S. Mallon and E. McGrady. Also present were Messrs. D. Nally, M. Mac Conghail and W. Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach and Messrs. P. Keating and S. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs.
2. The Taoiseach opened the meeting by welcoming the SDLP delegation. He said that the Government was anxious to obtain their assessment of the present ceasefire situation. They would also give the SDLP delegation any information which they had on the developments that had occurred. The Taoiseach referred to the meeting of the previous Friday with the Church leaders. The Church leaders had emphasised that they were not emissaries for anybody. They had emphasised that the meeting was one of a series which they were having with political leaders, in furtherance of their ^{prayer} ~~peace~~ campaign for peace. They had nothing very much to report. The only point worthy of mention was that they hoped to bring some influence to bear on the media in order to get them to report events in a somewhat different way. In relation to the contacts which the Government had had with the British, the Taoiseach indicated that the British had assured the Government that they were not negotiating with the I.R.A. Assurances had been given both at ministerial and official level. There had been nothing new conveyed in respect of the ^PProposed Convention and the indications were that the elections for it would still be held in March. The Taoiseach referred to other suggestions, of little substance, which had been conveyed to the British Government through American sources, to the effect that a small committee should be established to maintain contacts between the various parties and ensure the continuance of the truce. ^{The} His suggestion was that this committee should consist of Messrs. Sean McBride, Desmond Boal and another person acceptable to the British Government. There had also been a suggestion that as Mr. Joe Cahill was in very bad health he should be released from Portlaoise Prison on health grounds. The Taoiseach mentioned that Cardinal Conway had expressed the view, although he was not very definite about it, that the "doves" are in the ascendant within the Provisional I.R.A.
3. Mr. Fitt enquired as to whether the Government had any indication of what was transpiring in the contacts between the British and the Provisionals. Mr. Hume said that he had seen Mr. Stanley Orme in Derry on the previous Thursday.

Mr. Orme had said that Dublin were very suspicious that the British were negotiating with the Provisionals but had insisted that in fact they would not talk to the Provisionals. After the meeting on the previous Friday with Mr. Merlin Rees, Mr. Hume thought this to ^{be true. It} seem that the British strategy, with which Mr. Hume was in agreement ^{was} to make a response to the I.R.A. ceasefire solely in the area of security; to do enough to keep them on a ceasefire long enough that it would be very difficult for them to restart the campaign of violence. As an aside, Mr. Hume said that most of the Catholic people in the North might not want a settlement at all which involved the I.R.A.

4. Mr. Devlin said that while the British might not be negotiating with the Provisionals in the strict sense of the word, they were definitely in communication with them. Officials of the Northern Ireland Office were in direct contact with Provisional Sinn Fein Leaders. Mr. Seamus Loughlin ^{was} releasing the ceasefire arrangement for the Provisionals and Sir Frank Cooper was doing a similar job on the British side. Mr. Fitt recalled that the SDLP had some months ago sought meetings with Sir Frank Cooper and had put various suggestions to him. All that was now being done ~~was~~ had originally been suggested by the SDLP. They had emphasised the adverse consequences of internment and the advantages that could accrue from a reduction of the British army presence. They had also put forward the view that, given a genuine and permanent cessation of violence, there might have to be some talk on a remission of sentences ^{or} of paroles, at some time in the future. He mentioned these points to indicate that the SDLP had not been inactive in the period since the fall of the Executive. He said that the Birmingham bombings had been the crucial factor in the loss of support for the Provisionals. It was hard to understand why this should be so but the spectacle of ordinary working people being killed as they went about their business had produced a new revulsion on the part of the people. Previously, the Provisionals and the Official IRA had believed that they could rely to some extent on the ^{support} report of the ^{left} rest of the Labour Party in Britain, on the Irish in Britain and on the British working class generally. Following Birmingham, this was no longer a prospect. Mr. Fitt said that while it was very desirable to ensure a continuation of the ceasefire, the Provisionals must not be allowed to undermine the decision of elected representatives. He went on to refer to the ^{dramatic} diplomatic change in atmosphere in the North following the ceasefire. There was a great mood and will for peace. Every hour that the ceasefire was prolonged made it more difficult for the Provisionals to resume their campaign. He was almost certain that the ceasefire would be extended for at least another two weeks or ^a months. The SDLP, as they had done previously, were asking for a phasing out of detention without trial.

5. Mr. Fitt indicated that the SDLP did not think that it would be wise to hold elections for the Convention in March. Mr. Rees had indicated that he would give a month's notice on these elections. This meant that he would have to announce the date in February if the elections were to be held in March. If an election were announced ^{at that time} ~~in future~~, the growing atmosphere of detente would suffer a reverse. All elements in the North would return to their tribe for the election which would be extremely divisive. It was also undesirable on other grounds. Paisley had now been totally ~~discredited~~ ^{dis} and it had now been shown that he could thrive ~~only~~ in an atmosphere of strife. If an election were to be announced the indications of ~~this~~ ^{dis} unity within the U. U. U. C. would be overshadowed by the need for Loyalist unity in order to get out ~~of~~ the vote.
6. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs inquired whether an postponement of the election would not evoke a loyalist backlash. In reply, Mr. O'Hanlon said the SDLP held no fears of the election as a party, - they were confident they would maintain their position. However, Easter Sunday this year was on the 31st March: the holding of elections about Easter was undesirable as this was always a period of tension in the North. If elections were held at that time the parties would be negotiating within the Convention during the period June to August when temperatures were also traditionally high in the North. The Provisional I.R.A. needed time to regroup as a political entity. His personal view was that the election should be postponed until next October. He was conscious that all parties had a responsibility for peace but his view was that progress could be made ~~solely~~ through concessions on the military side. He saw policing as once again being one of the major problems. It was a subject that would be aired more and more in coming months and that would be contentious. He said that one situation he saw coming was that, if the British do not hold elections in the near future, a deal which they might make with the Provisionals would be to withdraw from certain areas, especially South Armagh. This would be on the ~~other~~ ^{under} standing that if the Provisionals did not make their presence too ostensible or set up no go areas, the British would reduce their presence to say the complement of a police station, about five people or so.
7. Mr. Hume suggested that it was possible that the British would hope to gradually introduce ~~these~~ ^{police} patrols into areas where they now did not go. The SDLP would not find it easy to oppose this development. However, this would ^{not} help to solving the long-term problem. Nobody would join the RUC in these circumstances. In order to forestall the danger of the IRA assuming responsibility for "community policing", Mr. Hume suggested that as soon as

●. Rees started the process of informal talks with the various parties in the North, in advance of the Convention the SDLP should seek to talk to the Loyalists, to scotch ~~rumors~~ ^{ideas} on "community policing" which were unfortunately receiving some support from naive Churchmen. Mr. Hume said that the main question at present was what were the Provisionals up to? One theory was that ~~they had taken such a beating that the ceasefire was a way to gain time to regroup and to~~ ^{regain} public support and that at a certain stage they would engineer a breakdown of the truce in such a way that it would seem the fault ^{did not lie} ~~was~~ at their door. Another theory, held by for example by the Chief Constable of the RUC, was simply that the Provisionals wanted the campaign of violence stopped. It was important, therefore, that the other parties involved should not give the Provisionals any excuses for a resumption of violence. This had some implications for ^{the} a policy of the Government in the South. While the SDLP had not objections to the apprehension of Kevin Mallon - quite the reverse, in fact - they thought that the Government might adopt a publicly more compassionate attitude ~~in~~ relation to conditions in Portlaoise Prison.

8.

Mr. Fitt went on to say that he was being told by people he believed to be Provisionals in Belfast that the war was over. It was desirable to make capital of the present mood. The longer the campaign of violence continued the greater would be the difficulties of the Provisionals in going political. They now see that, for example, they cannot repeat the Birmingham bombing. By way of a response to their ceasefire it was desirable that arms cases be allowed to lapse and that political prisoners be let go. So far as ~~loyalist~~ loyalist reaction was concerned, the UDA also wanted their men out. He asked whether the Ministers agreed with the SDLP view that elections in the near future would counter productive. The Taoiseach mentioned, in relation to the timing of elections, that the British proposed to have a referendum on EEC membership in October and they might not wish to have another election in Northern Ireland about the same time. Mr. Fitt asked what would the Government's attitudes be to the holding of elections in September. The Ministers for Justice and Posts and Telegraphs expressed concern about the likely loyalist reaction having regard to the fact that their expectations had been so aroused by the prospect of early elections. In reply Mr. Fitt emphasized that so much had changed since the original announcement to hold convention elections was ~~held~~^{made}, in the ^uvacuum which existed following the collapse of the Executive. Everything had now changed and there was great political movement in the North. Mr. Devlin said that if the elections were held in March, the Provisionals would put forward the case that a vote for them would ensure the continuation of a ceasefire whereas ^athe vote for the SDLP would be ^{carry the} in danger of leading to a resumption of violence. They had put this view to Mr. Rees. If elections were held before the various Parties had any opportunity to ^ameet and work out some ^{Compromise} compromise between their rigid stated positions which had been adopted for negotiated ^{ing} purposes, the results could be very bad.

Once people had been elected on these rigid positions, they would be confined in the straight jacket of their mandates. The construction of a new constitution was a difficult task at the best of times and the task should not be made more difficult by compelling people to enter the necessary discussions on the basis of rigid positions. Everybody was now moving in the political ~~stage~~^{sphere} in the North. He again stressed that the SDLP had said to Mr. Rees that the British Government should not have any talks with the Provisionals on political matters.

9. The Taoiseach asked whether there was not a danger that a postponement of an election would give the loyalist politicians an opportunity to claim that the British were negotiating with the IRA? Mr. Mallon^{said} time was greatly needed in the North. The Protestants needed time to adjust their positions to an atmosphere of peace; the British needed time; the Provisionals needed time. If we were ever to get away from the ^heyes of violence in the North it was essential that the Provisionals ^{sh}ould go political. In his view, a Convention held without the participation of Provisional representatives would be doomed to fail. The middle ground unionists - the Faulkner and Alliance parties - also needed time. Time was need^{ed} so that the hard lines of the various parties' ~~at~~ positions could be softened - otherwise the Convention would be a ~~bare~~^{barren} garden. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs enquired whether the middle ground unionists were prepared to go along with this idea of postponing elections. In reply the SDLP delegation indicated that Mr. Faulkner had already made representations to this effect to Mr. Rees. The Alliance Party would also be agreeable to this course of action. The Taoiseach required what Mr. Rees action to this suggestion of postponement had been. In reply, the SDLP delegation indicated

~~hat Mr. Faulkner had already made a representation to this~~
~~effect to Mr. Rees. The Alliance/Party would also be agreeable to~~
~~this course of action. The Taoiseach enquired what Mr. Rees~~
~~reaction to the suggestion of postponement had been in reply,~~
~~the SDLP delegation indicated that he seemed to be quite warm~~
 towards the idea. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs
 said that he assumed all ^{were} ~~was~~ agreed that any move by the
 Dublin Government must be strictly secret. The SDLP delegation
 fully agreed with this. They stressed, however, that the
 effect of another political failure in Northern Ireland would
 be disastrous. The Taoiseach commented that this was a
 very valid point.

10 . The Tánaiste enquired what the effect of putting the elections
 back to September would have on the idea of power sharing?
 Mr. Mallon said that ^{it} ~~that~~ would be a mistake to lump all the
 loyalists together. There was an obvious move on the part
 of Vanguard towards the Official Unionists' line. ^{As} he had
 already stressed, this requires time to mature. Mr. Mallon
 went on to stress that it would be a mistake to overlook
 the fact that the minority in Northern Ireland had also strong
 expectations. They had ^{suffered frustrations} ~~four different stations~~ for fifty
 years and the Provisionals had constructed the campaign of
 violence on the basis of that frustration and had shown that
 they were on a position to ^{wreck} ~~set~~ any settlement. ^{in balance} Any ~~imbalance~~
 in the approach to the two communities in Northern Ireland
 would be a mistake. Referring to ^{the} ~~parameters~~ for the
^{said} Convention, power sharing and the Irish dimension, Mr. Mallon
~~said~~ his party would insist that there would be no departure
 from power sharing in the ~~sense~~ of membership of the Executive
 on the part of elected representatives of the minority.
 They would also insist on an Irish dimension," as expressed
 in practical terms". ^{The} question would be asked how this
 could be sold to the loyalist. His ~~v~~ew was that if it
 could be demonstrated to them that it would have a practical

benefits for themselves, that they would be prepared to accept it. As an example, he mentioned that it would be relatively easy to sell an Irish dimension to the agricultural community in the North at the present time. Mr. Mallon that at the previous two meetings with members of the Government, ^{the SDLP had asked} what were the Government's plans for the situation in which there was a deadlock in the Convention. At the last meeting, they had got stuck in a ^{semantic} ~~semantic~~ bog and had not got ^{our} ~~her~~ ideas on this matter. ~~He~~ would now like to get the views of the Government in this respect. The Minister for Local Government expressed his concern that the discussion was proceeding ~~on lines~~ as if the loyalist strike had never taken place. Surely we were not so naive as to think that a settlement could be based solely on what the minority would accept? He was very doubtful of the value of peace with people who seem to have no conscience whatsoever. Was there not a danger that we would ^{all} ~~have~~ put ourselves in a position that would increase the political credit of the Provisionals? Mr. Hume intervened to stress that the SDLP had been talking about a situation in which discussions could take place against the background of peace. The Minister for Local Government was worried about the consequences if the Protestants feared this peace would continue only at the price of the British giving ground on matters they regarded as non-negotiable, for example, giving the ^{delegation} ~~delegation~~ of intent ~~we~~ sought by ^{the} Provisionals. He also put the question as to whether the British would not go abruptly ^{and} ~~as~~ it suited them rather than withdraw according to a timetable that suited Irish ^{men}.

11. Mr. Mallon said that what the SDLP wanted the Provisionals to do was to stand for election where the SDLP would be able to beat them soundly. The Minister for Local Government commented that, for that very reason, the Provisionals would be slow to stand for election. Mr. Devlin stressed that the ^{hard core of support} ~~arts course~~ for the Provisionals consisted largely of the

relatives of the prison population. If detention could be phased out, much of the hard ~~core~~^{core} support would disappear. In relation to the timing of elections, the SDLP were saying that if these were postponed, there was a possibility, and no more than a possibility, that the whole thing could be worked out right. On the other hand, if the Convention failed and ~~a surveillance~~^{violence} restarted, the violence from the loyalist side could be on a much bigger scale than had been seen heretofore. What they wanted to work towards was an Executive that could be seen to run Northern Ireland with consent, and without the need for the British Army at its back.

12. Referring to the last question put by Mr. Mallon, the Taoiseach said that ~~if~~^{if} we were to disclose a fall-back position it might well lose its value and constitute an invitation to the British to get out of Northern Ireland. Mr. Hume commented that the SDLP did not visualise that any such fall-back position should be made known publicly. What they wanted ^{was} to know privately what the Government's plans and intentions were, so that all parties could co-ordinate their positions for this ~~eventuality~~^s. Mr. Mallon ~~expressed~~^s that he had not been referring to the ~~so~~ so called "doomsday" situation but rather to the political situation which could ensue, following a deadlock in the Convention. The Taoiseach commented that the position had changed greatly since the last meeting with the SDLP. He also stressed that the Government had made it clear to the British that power sharing and the Irish dimension were non-negotiable.

- These parameters had been accepted at the Taoiseach's meeting with the British Prime Minister in September and again confirmed at the meeting in November.
13. The Minister for Justice ^{said} that he took it it was accepted that nobody wished to spell out the exact character of the Irish dimension at the present time. Mr. Hume agreed that this was the case. The Minister for Justice asked whether the present was not the time to initiate contacts on matters of joint North-South interest with British ministers? By this means a certain momentum for this practical co-operation could be built up. The SDLP were fully in agreement with this view.
14. Mr. Fitt expressed his firm conviction that it was the Provisionals who had wrecked the power-sharing Executive in the North. The last elections to the Assembly and the February elections to Westminster had been held in an atmosphere of violence, in which it had been possible for ^{bizarre} characters to be elected on the loyalist side. A measured British response to the ceasefire would kill the Provisional case and bear out what the SDLP had been saying for a long time i.e. that if violence ceased, British Army harassment, detention and the other sufferings of the Catholic population would also cease. As regards suggestions that the Convention elections should be postponed, Mr. Fitt felt that various parties in the North would be pushing this idea and that, to be accepted by the British, it might simply require the little extra push that could be given by the support of the Government here.
15. Mr. McGrady said that there were two things needed to fill the vacuum in the North. The first was institutional government which had already been discussed. The other matter was security. He asked how far the Government had gone along the line to enacting the proposed legislation on common law enforcement. The Minister for Justice replied that the legislation had been introduced into the Dáil. However, it had always been understood that the legislation would be promoted in parallel with the corresponding British legislation. The British legislation had not yet been published. We would hold the further promotion of our legislation until the British moved.
16. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs expressed the view that it was primarily in the area of SDLP/loyalist contacts that the ground work for an acceptable Irish dimension must be laid. Mr. Fitt agreed but stressed that the SDLP had to look not only to the front ^{but also} to their traditional support at their back. They did not ask the Government in Dublin to push the Irish dimension but on the other hand they would not wish the Government to appear to be going too soft on it and to be ready to drop it as a ^{quid pro quo} for Loyalist acceptance of power-sharing.

The SDLP would also like the Government to push the British to open in formal discussions with the various parties in the North in advance of the Convention elections. Mr. Mallon said that there were things being done here that could be highlighted even by way of news items, as indicating the potential benefits of an Irish dimension. Examples were the work of the Minister for Foreign Affairs in securing an EEC Regional Fund, that would apply to all of Ireland. Another example was the money to accrue to farmers in the South, on foot of the proposed EEC hill subsidy. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs referred to difficulties being experienced by the Government with the media. He expressed the view that the SDLP were in a better position to highlight points of the kind which had been referred to by Mr. Mallon.