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Visit to Northern Ireland 10/11 August 1975

1. Among those I visited were Messrs. Currie, Canavan and Hume of the SDLP and Dr. Maurice Hayes of the Convention secretariat. I travelled to Newry, Dungannon, Derry and Belfast and spoke to people who between them give a reliable indication of current attitudes in the minority community.
2. On the political front, Hume and Currie gave me separate but identical accounts of their private talks with the UUUC on 8 August. Neither side made formal proposals and the meeting might best be described as a preliminary run over the course with no attempt made to look at, not to mindjump, the difficult obstacles. There were, however, some hopeful signs, e.g. there was no difficulty in agreeing on a brief press statement saying that the meeting had "provided a positive basis for further meetings". The SDLP also found the UUUC participants in a friendly and apparently helpful mood. Even the DUPP's Rev. Beattie was moderate in what he said and Craig said that if agreement could be reached on a form of government for Northern Ireland, he would not foresee any major difficulty in "reaching agreement on the Irish dimension". The SDLP was not in fact ready for the 8 August meeting as their Convention members had not agreed on a mandate for the negotiations. Both Hume and Currie felt that the UUUC were equally unprepared and that it was for this rather than any more positive reason that there was no difficulty in agreeing that the time remaining before the resumption of the Convention on 19 August would not be sufficient for the private inter-party talks. It was therefore provisionally agreed that the Convention would resume for three days to discuss a motion welcoming the inter-party talks - in addition to the UUUC/SDLP talks, Alliance and the UPNI are also talking to the UUUC which has a different delegation for each set of talks. Paisley leads in the talks with Alliance and in what must be the coldest non-talks of the lot, West leads in the

sessions with the UPNI - and would then adjourn for about a fortnight at the end of which it would be clear whether or not there was a basis for agreement in the Convention. Depending on the outcome of the talks, there would be a debate or debates in the resumed Convention either on an agreed motion or on at least two separate and conflicting motions.

3. The SDLP appears to be having considerably more trouble than usual in reaching agreement on the line to be taken by their negotiators. The Committee under Seamus Mallon's chairmanship which had been given the task of producing a draft mandate (and which had for this purpose consulted Mr. R. O'Hanlon, S.C.) produced a document which was remarkable only in that it was a virtual repeat of the party's Convention election manifesto. In presenting the draft to the full Convention party, two of the committee members, Messrs. Duffy and Cooper, had made a very strong plea for the party to go for negotiated independence ~~at this stage~~ but consideration of this line has been rejected by the party, at least at this stage. Following prolonged discussion of the Mallon committee draft, it was finally decided that it did not form a suitable basis for a mandate and Hume was delegated to prepare a new draft for discussion at a meeting on 11 August. This draft will almost certainly form the basis of the SDLP's proposals to the UUUC and will be officially conveyed to the Government and the Opposition later this week. When I saw it before presentation to the party on 11 August, it contained three main points. Firstly, it proposed a number of possible systems of sharing power, e.g. an executive proportionally representative of the parties in the legislature; a committee system of government under which departments would be run by committees, each committee to reflect the balance in the legislature. The SDLP are asking Professor Richard Rose for assistance in fleshing out these proposals and possibly in adding one or two more systems which would be acceptable. The second point in the draft related to the Irish dimension and it contained a rigid adherence to the principle of having some all-Ireland institution. It suggests maintaining

North/South contacts on economic and social matters on an informal basis but formalising North/South security arrangements which would be brought into effect on both sides whenever there was a threat to the institutions of state on either side. Since such arrangements would probably involve amendments to the Irish Constitution and since the whole package, to have maximum prospects of success, should have public endorsement on both sides of the border, the third point in the draft proposed simultaneous referenda north and south of the border. (It will be recalled that SDLP members have previously floated the referenda idea as the only way in which the "legitimacy" claim of the IRA can once and for all be laid to rest.)

4. Dr. Maurice Hayes (whom I met in Stormont on 11 August and whom I had also met for a few days towards the end of my holidays in July) was generally pessimistic about the prospects for the Convention and indeed had at one point been concerned that the Convention would collapse in the private talks where there would be no opportunity for the chairman to play his mediation role. He was concerned both at the general lack of preparedness on the part of the SDLP and also at the apparent lack of will on the part of the UUUC backbenchers to take the Convention seriously. If the mood of these backbenchers was a reliable guide to the UUUC - and Dr. Hayes believed it was - there was no way in which the Loyalist leaders had any room for even a slight departure from their manifesto position of no power-sharing and no Irish dimension. If anything, the mood had become harder over the last six weeks and in so far as those concerned could explain it, the hardening of attitude derived both from the failure of security policies to cope with violence, even during a Provo ceasefire, and from suspicions of a British deal with the Provos. In the face of fear or uncertainty the natural Loyalist reaction was to express it in increased hostility towards the traditional enemy. When I met him on 11 August, Dr. Hayes had not in fact received any first-hand account of the inter-party talks on 8 August so he was not able to

confirm the Convention timetable outlined by Messrs. Hume and Currie but he did say that they were now thinking generally in terms of a short Convention and he himself was making it known that he would probably be available for another assignment within the Northern Ireland civil service within a few months.

5. During my visit, the situation on the ground was as bad as anything I have seen there since 1972 and the anti-internment protests and subsequent violence was certainly well above the 1973 and 1974 pattern. Those with whom I was in contact had no doubt that all the disturbances were highly organised though there were differences of opinion as to whether it was the IRSP or the Provos who were responsible. The balance of information suggests that, at least initially, the Provos did not want trouble - among other things, it does not suit the "respectable" image which they are trying to cultivate in minority areas - but that once it started, possibly at the instigation of the IRSP, ~~the~~ Provos became involved and their involvement was subsequently ratified by the leadership in a "defenders of the people" statement. There were also differences of opinion as to whether or not the disturbances were likely to fade out quickly or were the beginning of a build-up which would end in a full-scale resumption of the Provo campaign in the near future. The most frequently expressed view was that the Provos were trying to cool the situation as part of their overall plan of winning support from the minority for the inevitable but not imminent resumption.

6. What is clear from talking to people in minority areas in Northern Ireland is that the Provos have had considerable success during the ceasefire in creating a climate of opinion a few degrees more sympathetic ^{to them} than it has been for some time. It is difficult to give precise explanations for this but the following are some of the factors mentioned:

- the continuing violence, most of it non-Provo in origin, shows that all the troubles of Northern Ireland in recent years cannot, as has frequently been claimed, be blamed on the Provos;
- despite the absence of Provo violence, security policies have not been any more successful in dealing with loyalist violence and sectarian assassinations;
- the incident centres are "serving the Provos well. They are no longer regarded in the same joking way in which they were when they were first introduced and though they may not have had any dramatic public impact they have provided a useful point of contact between the Provos and people who previously had no easy and safe way of giving their views, e.g. about aspects of Provo activity. From the comfort of offices allegedly paid for by the British Government, the Provos can now easily monitor the vital, local reaction on an area-to-area basis and adjust aspects of their activities accordingly;
- there seems to be little hope that the Convention can succeed and there is much criticism of the SDLP for continuing to participate in a political exercise which is regarded as being doomed to failure. (This criticism is getting through to SDLP representatives and may be one of factors in the current party difficulties in reaching agreement on their negotiating position);
- internment is being seen to end as a direct result of talks between the Provos and the British Government and many on the minority side believe that in the next round of political talks involving Northern Ireland, their point of view and interests will, whether they like it or not, be looked after by Provos. The crust between support of constitutional politics and acceptance of a campaign of

violence is probably as thin now as it has been since
the fall of Stormont.

Seán Donlon

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12 August 1975