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DFA

Secret

26 August, 1975

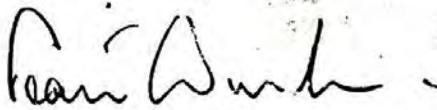
Dear Minister

I enclose a note of yesterday's meeting with Mr. Canavan. I have also sent a copy, together with a copy of this letter, to my Minister and to the Secretary to the Government.

In talking to Mr. Canavan over a cup of tea after the meeting, he was more specific than he had been at the meeting about the phrases "resources" and "effective channels of communication between the SDLP and the Government". By "resources", he said he was thinking primarily of guns and ammunition and by "channels of communication" he meant the appointment of army officers with whom the SDLP would immediately begin planning the effective use of the "resources".

I am also enclosing a copy of the notes which Mr. Canavan spoke from during the meeting.

Yours sincerely,



Seán Donlon
Assistant Secretary

Mr. T. Fitzpatrick, T.D.
Minister for Lands
23-24 Upper Merrion Street
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Following the request made by the SDLP at the meeting with the Government on 14 August 1975, Mr. T. Fitzpatrick, T.D. Minister for Lands met Mr. Michael Canavan, of the SDLP at Government Buildings on 25 August 1975. Mr. Seán Donlon, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs was also present.

2. Mr. Canavan outlined the history of the SDLP's policy of making political progress through peaceful means and pointed out that in following this line the party had had a clear electoral mandate from the minority community. They had also enjoyed and were grateful for the support and help of the Government in Dublin in pursuing their policy. The latest stage of the political progress was now taking place at the Convention where the SDLP and the UUUC had at least been able to agree on creating the sort of climate which made further political progress possible. However, success at the Convention was by no means assured and indeed the more likely it became, the greater the possibility of having political progress blocked by men of violence in both communities. It was obviously necessary to draw up plans to deal with the situation that might arise following a failure of the Convention and Mr. Canavan outlined the following as the two situations which were likely to arise and to meet which the Government would have to take action now:

- (a) if the Convention failed because of the Loyalist refusal to accept the British terms, viz. power-sharing and an Irish dimension, the SDLP would be calling for the withdrawal of the Westminster-guaranteed union between NI and Britain, joint London/Dublin control of NI for an interim period to be followed by British withdrawal from Ireland. A section of the Gardiner Report on internment* referred to the possibility of joint British-Irish responsibility in the event even of risk of civil war and that risk was real to-day. It would best be dealt with by both Governments now sitting down ^{agreeing} and on a contingency plan which would be brought into operation as soon as the need arose;

* "There is one aspect of the problem of communal conflict which should not be overlooked in this context. It involves the special international obligations of the Government of the UK. In the first place the UK and the Republic of Ireland are both members of the European Community, whose members explicitly recognize an even higher degree of obligation to co-operate than is the case between sovereign states in general (as expressed, for instance, in section 22 of the Treaty of Rome which specifically covers situations of internal disturbance in a member country)" p.5 para. 10 Cmnd 5847

(b) the second situation for which planning was necessary was that in which, following the failure of the Convention, the Loyalists unilaterally assumed power and the British Government remained inert or took insufficient action to deal with it. In such an eventuality, the minority community would react, primarily to protect itself, and the SDLP would then have no option but to assume leadership at once in order to protect stability and preserve order where possible. Such action would best be taken in the name of the Government of the Republic which would then be the sole, de facto sovereign Government on the island and the SDLP would be acting as the agents for that government in NI. To provide the effective leadership needed by the minority community, the SDLP would need to be certain of securing the resources of the Irish Government and in view of the worsening situation it was essential to make plans now for utilising these resources, especially in relation to (i) rescuing those in physical danger (ii) assuming control of suitable areas and (iii) defending certain communities. To make preparations for these matters, the SDLP considered it essential that work should now be put in hand as a matter of grave urgency and that as a first step an effective channel of communication on these matters should be opened between the Government and the SDLP without delay.

Quoted

by Hon. Mr. O'Hara

3. Before completing his outline, Mr. Canavan again emphasised that the SDLP had until now always acted politically and its decision not to have military backing was a deliberate one. In the deteriorating situation, it might, however, be impossible for the party to continue to act in an exclusively political way and though they would not easily abandon the political road, circumstances might force them to do so. It would be very important in that situation to act quickly and decisively, otherwise the IRA would take over completely with disastrous consequences, not only for politics in NI but also for the political institutions in the Republic. If the SDLP were to maintain the leadership of the minority community it would have to take the right initiatives without delay when circumstances forced it to do so. If there was no joint planning now between the Government and the SDLP, the only people who would be physically ready for the new circumstances would be the IRA. The SDLP had no wish to abandon the exclusively political line but if a new type of leadership had to be given, it should be given by those who had the moral mandate to do so.

4. In reply to questions from the Minister for Lands, Mr. Canavan said that optimism in relation to the Convention was not completely dead. There were, however, intense pressures from the men of violence on both sides and it was possible that they were even acting in

conjunction one with the other. Loyalist violence was at an all time high and a confrontation was building up between the loyalists and the British on security policy. The Rev. Arlow's statement earlier this year had had the effect of precipitating loyalist takeover plans and these could not lightly be ignored. On the minority side, the Provos. were more or less holding their activists but there were inevitable occasional acts of retaliation. In the long run, the Provo. leadership would be unable to keep the activists in check when nothing was being delivered politically by the leaders and in all these circumstances it would be irresponsible to close one's eyes to the possibility of a disastrous situation following a failure at the Convention. Unfortunately the general climate outside of the Convention, was rapidly worsening and this was happening at what was politically the worst possible time. The majority, certainly in the minority community, still wanted peace through politics but the line between politics and violence was generally a very thin one and if people on both sides ever thought that the non-politicians would win, support would swing massively and quickly to the para-militaries. The lesson of the UWC strike was that, if the para-militaries were to be beaten, it was essential for others to take very quick action at the right time.

5. The Minister for Lands asked, in relation to the situation involving joint Dublin/London control, what exactly this would involve. Mr. Canavan replied that in the first place by making it clear that Dublin and London were going to act jointly, this in itself would be a deterrent. When the Minister asked what was the purpose of the joint control, how long it would last and what its ultimate aim was, Mr. Canavan said that the ultimate aim was to enable the British to withdraw from NI. The interim period of joint control would be used to negotiate the setting up of new institutions and the purpose of the joint British-Irish intervention would be to provide the right climate in which such political negotiations between Irishmen would be possible.

6. In relation to the second situation outlined by Mr. Canavan, the Minister for Lands inquired as to what the loyalist and indeed the British reaction would be if the Irish Government announced it was about to exercise sovereignty in NI. Mr. Canavan replied that at that stage the minority, led by the SDLP, would have taken the initiative and what would be needed from the government was the physical resources and expertise. If the British remained inert in the face of a loyalist takeover, they would hardly actively oppose the minority and the Irish Government in the situation outlined. When asked by the Minister precisely what physical resources would be required, Mr. Canavan said that the SDLP simply did not know what was required and hence their urgent request for a channel of

communication to discuss the matter. They had done some work in identifying areas from which people would need to be rescued but this was by no means complete. The areas where control would be assumed were obvious enough and included e.g. Derry west of the Foyle and Newry. The main area where defence would be needed for a community under attack was west Belfast. In reply to ^{Mr.} Donlon who asked what role, if any, the SDLP envisaged for the church in their planning, Mr. Canavan said that the Catholic church was well structured to help, particularly in the humanitarian area but also in the planning stage where information from the diocesan authorities e.g. about isolated communities would be invaluable. Mr. Canavan envisaged that in addition to having lines of communication with the SDLP on such matters the Government would also maintain contact with the church authorities, particularly about the relief of distress. The SDLP had already had contact with DACRAS, the Down and Connor relief agency, and also with some of the other dioceses and these contacts were continuing.

7. The Minister for Lands asked Mr. Canavan about the likely attitude of the Provos. to what the SDLP was proposing. He replied that if the SDLP moved first and were seen to be in control of the situation, their action would get general support and they would accept support from the Provos. provided it was clear that the SDLP was leading. He emphasised again the need for quick action and careful pre-planning. If the Provos. moved first, their existing military organisation and stock of weapons would go a long way to ensuring that they would exert leadership in the minority community.

8. In a general discussion at the end of the meeting, Mr. Canavan expressed the view that the loyalist para-military organisations were not at all as strong as they would have people believe and there were recent indications that they were short of arms. Some of the weapons captured in loyalist areas were primitive and homemade and the increasing number of desperate raids on UDR depots also suggested that arms were in short supply. There was no doubt that loyalists could mount an impressive show of strength - 20,000 men could be put on the streets without any difficulty - but the numbers involved trained for para-military activity was very small. The position of the UDR and the RUC was more worrying and the SDLP's efforts were now being concentrated on getting the British to remove arms from the personal control of UDR members so that if a crisis came and the UDR refused to take British orders, they would at least be largely unarmed.

9. The Minister for Lands concluded the meeting by saying that what Mr. Canavan had to say would be fully reported to and considered by the Government at an early date.