

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Northern Ireland - Assessment of Current Situation

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Northern Ireland - Assessment of Current SituationThe Convention

1. The state of the parties after the Convention elections is UUUC 46, SDLP 17, Alliance 8, UPNI 5, NILP 1 and Independent Loyalist supporting the UUUC 1. The Convention consists of the 78 elected members and Sir Robert Lowry, the non-voting chairman, and its function is to consider and report to the British Government "what provision for the government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there". Initially the Convention has six months to complete its task but this may be extended indefinitely, three months at a time. The position of each of the main parties in the Convention is outlined below and there is at present little reason to believe that agreement will be reached on the fundamental question. Neither of the main parties, however, wishes to be seen to wreck the Convention and each wishes, for its own reasons, to keep the political process in Northern Ireland alive. For these reasons it seems that the Convention will debate for some months, probably mainly on the basis of proposals submitted by the UUUC, and the possibility of agreement on non-fundamental issues (e.g. social and economic policy, a bill of rights, housing) and some apparent "concessions" by the UUUC to the SDLP cannot be excluded. A report from the Convention is therefore unlikely to reach the British Government before October and it could even be delayed until the end of the year. There is little doubt that the main report will show the Convention divided as between the UUUC recommending a Westminster system of government by the party or parties comprising a majority of those elected to a Northern Ireland assembly and the SDLP, UPNI and Alliance recommending a power-sharing system of government. (The SDLP are also likely to try to put on record in the report their commitment to an institutional expression of the connections between both parts of Ireland but it is possible that this may be ruled out as being beyond the Convention's terms of reference.) It is understood that the British Government will probably consider the report for at least a month or two, and may even refer some aspects of it back to the Convention for further consideration, before announcing any decision on the future form of government for Northern Ireland. In the meantime direct rule in its present form will be continued.

The SDLP

2. At the recent Convention elections, the SDLP gained 23.7% of the total valid poll and won 17 seats as compared with 22% of the

total valid poll and 19 seats in the June 1973 Assembly elections. At the Westminster elections in 1974, they gained 22% of the total valid poll in February and 22% in October but have, of course, only one M.P. (Frank Maguire from Fermanagh/South Tyrone is the second nationalist, though virtually abstentionist, representative in the House of Commons.) Thus the SDLP has, over two years and four elections, held its position in the minority community. Its manifesto for the Convention, as for all elections it has fought, has two basic principles, viz. "power-sharing in government and the institutionalised recognition of the Irish dimension". The commitment to power-sharing is clearly stronger than that to institutionalising the Irish dimension and it will be recalled that in an effort to save the Northern Ireland Executive from collapse in May 1974 the SDLP agreed, without prior consultation with the Government, to a proposal to water down the Council of Ireland as it had been agreed at Sunningdale. In an effort to save the power-sharing Executive, they proposed, with Faulkner and the Alliance Party, that the Council of Ireland would not immediately be set up but that a Council of Ministers comprising seven members each from the administrations in Belfast would provide a forum for consultation, co-operation and co-ordination of action between the two parts of Ireland in relation to some economic and social matters and the human rights and policing roles agreed at Sunningdale for a Council of Ireland. Further steps towards a Council of Ireland would be taken only after a test of opinion of the Northern Ireland electorate. There is little doubt that the SDLP would again agree to accept a recognition of the Irish dimension along these or even less institutional lines if they felt that by so doing power-sharing were made possible. Indeed in the present mood of the minority community generally in Northern Ireland, it is possible that the SDLP - though they have not said it and are very unlikely to say it - would make considerable sacrifices in respect of the Irish dimension if they thought that by so doing they could achieve power-sharing. None of the likely UUUC "concessions" to the SDLP seem likely to approach real power-sharing however, and in the absence of any possibility of agreement on that issue they are unlikely to indicate any willingness to depart from their manifesto position of an institutionalisation of the Irish dimension.

3. The SDLP's position in the event of no agreement being reached on power-sharing has not recently been spelled out in detail, either privately or publicly. The following are the relevant extracts from the last formal statement of position issued in September 1974

"In view of the situation which would exist in Northern Ireland in such circumstances and the evident unwillingness of the loyalist population to accept the terms laid down by the Government and Parliament of the United Kingdom for the good government of Northern Ireland, we believe that it would be inevitable then that the fundamental basis of British policy towards Northern Ireland since 1920 would have to be re-examined.

... The basis of British policy has always been a guarantee to the unionist population of Northern Ireland that they could remain within the United Kingdom so long as a majority so wished. Implicit in such guarantees was the understanding that the same unionist population would accept and abide by the policies laid down by successive British Governments and Parliaments for the good government of Northern Ireland. In the new situation a majority of unionists, through their elected representatives, would have interpreted these guarantees as a licence to dominate the minority in Northern Ireland and deprive them of basic civil rights. In these circumstances, we believe that the unionist population would have foregone any right to such guarantees and (they) ... would have to be withdrawn.

If this new situation should develop, therefore, we shall call on the British Government to declare a new basis to its policy and to declare that it will remain in Northern Ireland only until such time as agreed institutions of government are established which allow the people of Ireland, North and South, to live together in harmony, peace and independence. The British Government should make it clear at that stage that it will use all its influence and power to bring about a situation in which Irish people of different traditions can build institutions of government to provide for the lasting peace and stability on this island and for new and harmonious relations with Britain itself. It should seek the full co-operation of the Government and Parliament of the Republic of Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland in achieving these objectives and should set in train the political and constitutional steps required to bring them about. Implicit in such a policy would be the ruling out of indefinite direct rule, an independent Northern Ireland, integration with Great Britain or a new partition of Northern Ireland..."

4. The SDLP has recently asked for informal discussions with the Government to work out a common position in the event of

developments based on power-sharing and an Irish dimension not materialising. In these discussions, they are likely, at least initially, to stick fairly closely to the September 1974 policy statement and to elaborate on it by saying that when the conflict between the loyalists and the British Government begins it will then be a matter for the British and Irish Governments to work out institutions of government for Northern Ireland and enforce them, if necessary by joint military action. This is the line being pursued particularly by Hume, probably with majority support at present within the Convention party and the Derry-dominated Party Executive, but if the position is maintained in a deteriorating political and security situation there may well be significant shifts from that position, particularly if it becomes manifestly unattainable. The influence of Currie, whose thinking is, like Fitts, more than ever dominated by his fears for the safety of the minority in East Ulster, in holding the party together and moving it towards a new fall-back position will be significant. It is extremely difficult to predict, however, what way the SDLP will move or even if it will manage to hold together and maintain its position in the minority community if the Convention fails. The party will obviously have considerable difficulty in maintaining its position if there is no devolved government in Northern Ireland or if there is devolved government by majority rule. If the British withdraw, the minority community, disillusioned with the constitutional political process, is likely to withdraw from politics and to a greater or lesser extent depending on the circumstances, acquiesce in the promotion of the nationalist cause by the IRA. If it becomes clear that the British are withdrawing but before doing so are attempting to leave behind acceptable institutions of government, the SDLP could well move towards support for an independent Northern Ireland provided the minority were given an entrenched position in government which position would be protected by the strongest possible internal and external guarantees. At various times over the past few years, individual SDLP leaders have privately expressed some support for this position though they have tended, since the fall of the Executive, to take the view that even in an independent Northern Ireland the loyalists will not share power or that, if they do, they will do so only for an initial period and no guarantees can be devised which would ensure that power-sharing would continue if the loyalists ever decided that they no longer wanted it.

#### The IRA

5. With the exception of a three-week period in January-February, the Provisional IRA has been on a ceasefire since 22 December 1974. The ceasefire arrangements were arrived at and are being maintained

through discussions between prominent Provisional leaders and senior officials of the Northern Ireland Office. The discussions will continue though, according to information given to us by the British authorities, their purpose is <sup>simply</sup> to explain British Government policy as outlined in various public statements by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. The Provisionals for their part claim that the discussions are concerned with a British declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland and this claim is supported by the recent statement of the Rev. Arlow who says that an undertaking to withdraw was given in February and that a British Cabinet Minister authorised him to reveal it. Whatever is going on at present between the Provisionals and the British, what is not in doubt is the Provisionals capacity and will to resume their campaign in Britain and/or Northern Ireland but more likely in Britain, if their demand for a declaration of intent is not conceded. The degree of tolerance and support in Northern Ireland and elsewhere of IRA violence will be influenced, among other things, by the policies adopted by the British Government, the activities of the loyalist politicians and para-militaries and the policies of the Government here but there is no reason to believe that, in the absence of agreement between the two communities on a form of government for Northern Ireland, the IRA will not be able to re-mount and sustain a campaign at least on the same level as that of 1972-74. The best prediction that can be made at this stage is that the ceasefire will, for short-term, tactical, reasons, be maintained but only until the Convention has reported and that immediately thereafter the IRA will concentrate its campaign in Britain unless it is satisfied that arising out of the Convention report the British Government will take decisions acceptable to the IRA.

#### The UUUC

6. The United Ulster Unionist Council which won 54.8% of the votes and 46 of the Convention's 78 seats was elected on a platform which contained five main points:-

- the maintenance and strengthening of the union;
- an increase in representation at Westminster from 12 to 21 seats;
- a democratically elected devolved regional parliament to be run by a majority system, with powerful all-party backbench committees;
- the restoration of democratic local government; and
- no institutional expression for the Irish dimension.

7. Since the election, representatives of the UUUC have made it clear both in public and in private conversations with officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs that they are not prepared to

compromise on the question of power-sharing with the SDLP at executive level. The most they are prepared to offer are "all-party backbench committees" which would be purely consultative and advisory, non-voting ministries in the executive or the appointment of minority representatives to heads of Department positions under majority ministers. While certain individual UUUC representatives see the need for winning the consent of the minority to whatever form of government is established there is no indication at present that any of them are prepared to offer anything which might win this consent. They are dominated by the fear that any member of the coalition who proposes a compromise on power-sharing will eventually find himself in the same position as Faulkner is now in, in that he would be seen like him to have compromised on the principles on which he was elected. In regard to the Irish dimension, the UUUC position is that under no circumstances can there be formalised links with the Republic but that if the Constitution is amended and satisfactory arrangements made on extradition they would be prepared to pursue a policy of good neighbourliness on matters of mutual interest.

8. The UUUC has always been very conscious of the fact that there is a strong likelihood that the British Government will not accept demands for a return to majority rule and may in certain circumstances withdraw from Northern Ireland. Their publicly stated fall-back position is that they will press for full integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom but a number of their leaders have privately indicated either that they do not think this solution is likely or that they think it would not be workable because of the attitude of the minority and the frustration that would eventually build up on the majority side if there was no devolved government. It is thought that a significant number of people inside the UUUC are now prepared to go for independence. The main proponents of the independence solution in the past have been Mr. John Taylor and Mr. Glen Barr. However, it is known that such influential Unionists as Mr. Harry West, the Rev. Martin Smyth and Mr. William Craig would all favour independence in certain circumstances and following the recent statement by the Rev. Arlow about the possibility of a British withdrawal, the feeling for the independence solution has gained considerable public support among loyalists. In particular the Rev. Paisley, who up to the present has been a strong integrationist (as a second option), has indicated that in his view in the circumstances outlined by the Rev. Arlow the Ulster majority would have no other option but to establish and defend their own government. This now means that every major loyalist politician in Northern Ireland has, over the past year, indicated either publicly or privately that independence



as an option is something they would be prepared to fall back on. Most of the UUUC politicians would seem to prefer a negotiated independence - implying agreement to power-share with the minority on the basis that the minority would be loyal to an independent Northern Ireland where they could not be loyal to a Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom - but there are clear indications that even within the UUUC and especially within the para-militaries there are elements who would if necessary be prepared to seize independence. A negotiated independence therefore is seen by many loyalists, though not necessarily with great enthusiasm, as the only possible benign solution that might prevent an almost inevitable civil war. It is worth noting that in private conversations with the Unionist Party element of the UUUC, the view has been expressed that in negotiations for independence, the power, position and even assistance of the Government of the Republic could be vital.

9. In assessing the strength of the UUUC, the possibility of its breaking up must be considered, if only to dismiss it as being unlikely. While it is true that there are differences of personality within the leadership, the cohesiveness of the Coalition over the past year has been impressive. It has not only withstood the attempts of the loyalist working-class leaders to establish a separate political identity, but has run and won election campaigns where agreement was reached on the nomination of candidates as between the three parties in the Coalition. The unity seems to lie in an awareness that if there was a split-up, the capacity of any one of the leaders on his own to carry through a policy that would be likely to succeed with the voters is extremely slim. For this reason they present the appearance of a monolithic structure and while on many issues Paisley's DUPP in particular is at variance with the other two parties (which are very close to merging) the present tripartite structure seems likely to last at least until the British Government announces its decision on the Convention's report.

10. An important aspect of any assessment of the UUUC is their links with the loyalist para-military organisations. There is now little doubt that the sectarian assassination campaign is politically directed and that the current wave of assassinations, to take an example, is designed to put pressure on the SDLP to be reasonable in the Convention negotiations. With the election to the Convention of, among others, George Green, the Commander of the Ulster Special Constabulary Association, Col. Brush, the founder of Down Orange Welfare, whose fellow constituency member, Herbie Heslip, is the number two in that organisation, Alistair Black of Armagh, closely connected with the Ulster Volunteer Service Corps,

Clifford Smyth, believed to be the main organiser of TARA, Glen Barr of the UDA, Hugh Smyth of the UVF and finally Ernest Baird the Deputy Leader of Vanguard, an ex-B Special, who has kept his links with that organisation's disaffected para-military grouping, some of the links between the UUUC and the para-militaries are clear. In addition, we are aware that Craig at the moment has particularly strong links with the UDA and would be prepared in certain circumstances to use the Protestant para-militaries to achieve his political objective. Significantly Craig has resisted all appeals to publicly condemn the Protestant para-militaries as has his Deputy Leader, Ernest Baird. While the UUUC may be prepared to try constitutional politics, they have the means and the methods to establish a different form of government in Northern Ireland, and it is not to be excluded that they would avail of those means in a situation where the British were either withdrawing or refusing the UUUC demands.

#### The Moderate Unionists

11. The performance of Faulkner's UPNI in the Convention elections was disastrous and has left them with very little hope of being a major influence on the future of the constitutional development of Northern Ireland. It is thought likely that the UPNI may even cease to exist as a party after the Convention. Its financial position is extremely precarious. Its organisation is in a shambles and what was left of it has been largely disbanded since the election. Faulkner's personal position is weak and even amongst his own supporters inside the Convention there is a strong feeling that if their future is to be ensured and if the UPNI and what it stands for as a party is to survive then Faulkner must go. The problem is that none of his four Convention members have shown any leadership qualities and in these circumstances the demise of the party seems inevitable. Despite this Faulkner himself remains optimistic and apparently believes that when it is seen that the UUUC policies are leading to a severing of the link with the United Kingdom either in the form of British withdrawal or in the form of UDI, the Protestant population will move back to him - of all the unlikely developments in Northern Ireland this seems the most unlikely. The policy of the UPNI is that there should be a strong regional government in Northern Ireland with a power-sharing Executive and with control of the police being vested in the Executive. Since the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement it is now determinedly against any formal institutionalisation of the Irish dimension. The Alliance Party has held its weakish position as a party of the moderate non-sectarian centre. It held on to its

Assembly strength of eight seats and increased its share of the total votes cast from 9.2% to 9.8%. Alliance's policies are identical to those of UPNI but unlike that party it has attracted both Protestant and Catholic membership though it should be pointed out that the eight seats it has won all lie east of the Bann. It is likely that in the event of a break-up of the UPNI party the more effective members of that party might well join Alliance and thus strengthen it further.

#### The Loyalist Para-militaries

12. Any assessment of the post-election situation in Northern Ireland would be incomplete without reference to the size and potential role of the loyalist para-military organisations in the future development of Northern Ireland. There are a number of loyalist para-military groups. In December 1973 the following groups (with estimated membership in brackets) joined together under the umbrella of the Ulster Army Council which is linked to the United Loyalist Central Co-ordinating Committee (Chairman, Glen Barr): Ulster Defence Association (25,000), Ulster Volunteer Force (1,500-2,000), Red Hand Commandos (100), Down Orange Welfare (unknown), Orange Volunteers (unknown), Ulster Special Constabulary Association (4,000). There are other groups such as TARA, the Ulster Volunteer Service Corps, the Young Militants, Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Protestant Action Force, generally having a small membership about whom very little is known but it is accepted that they are all indistinguishable from the above major groups or closely allied with them. By far the most dominant groups are the UDA and UVF. Andy Tyrrie, Chairman of the UDA, is the most important of the loyalist para-military leaders. He leads an organisation said by an RUC source at secret hearings in connection with the Strasbourg case to be formed on strict military lines with adequate arms. It is estimated to have an active membership of about 10,000 and an even greater potential in any groundswell situation in which the loyalists see themselves threatened. The main role of the para-militaries so far has been to provide the military muscle, particularly during the UWC strike, for the loyalist politicians but the para-militaries and Tyrrie in particular are obviously unhappy in this role. They feel that a greater influence and prestige is due to them at the political level. Their involvement in the 1974 UWC strike gave them a taste for power but the political experience of the loyalist politicians, notably Craig, has so far prevented the development of a separate para-military or working-class loyalist political movement. However, it is likely that in a situation where loyalist interests were threatened, the politicians and the para-militaries - and indeed the

UDA and the UVF which are currently engaged in a dispute revolving around protection rackets - would bury their differences and work side by side.

13. The para-military groups see their future role very clearly. Tyrrie, in the company of Glen Barr, recently made it clear in private conversation with an official of the Department of Foreign Affairs that in their opinion independence is the almost certain outcome of the present political impasse in Northern Ireland. Negotiated independence would be preferable but if not, there is no question but that independence should be unilaterally declared. Barr who is under the strong influence of Tyrrie, has recently announced that the Central Co-ordinating Committee has plans prepared for the formation of a provisional government and that they are quite confident of being able to run the country. Tyrrie, in the last few days, has publicly announced the reactivation of the Ulster Army Council with an integrated command structure under his overall control. This means that for the first time all the para-military groups (with the exception of the UVF which has temporarily withdrawn) are in a position to act in unison in response to a central directing authority. In a situation of either British withdrawal or loyalist defiance of an imposed Westminster solution, the loyalist para-military groups will at a minimum support the loyalist politicians who are also confident of the support of the RUC Reserve and the UDR. The attitude of the RUC is somewhat less predictable though there is little doubt that in many non-urban areas the RUC would also support the loyalist politicians.

#### British Attitudes

14. The formal position of the British Government, confirmed in September and November 1974 in joint communiqués following meetings between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister, is that they are still committed to a solution of the Northern Ireland problem firstly on the basis of power-sharing in government and secondly that "any enduring political arrangements must take account of the special relationship that exists between the two parts of Ireland. This Irish dimension will be the subject of further consultation between the two Governments and also with elected representatives in Northern Ireland". Both publicly and privately, however, British Ministers have been making it clear that "a serious situation would arise" if the Convention failed and that such a failure would be followed by "a radical re-appraisal of policy". In a recent message to the Taoiseach who had written to the Prime Minister urging that the necessary steps be taken now, especially in relation to the maintenance of essential services, to ensure that the British

Government could deal with any repetition of another loyalist strike in support of political objectives, Mr. Wilson wrote "we are well aware that, despite the best efforts of all those who wish it well, [the Convention] may not succeed. If it fails there may be damaging consequences". In a recent meeting with an SDLP leader, Mr. Wilson is reported to have gone further and to say that "if there is another UWC strike we will not be there to deal with it". In meetings between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, the latter has given no positive indication of what British policy might be if the Convention fails but he has firmly ruled out two options, viz. firstly total integration in the United Kingdom and secondly majority rule in Northern Ireland.

15. In discussing the future situation, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State has frequently emphasised the influence which British public opinion and, of course, M.Ps. will have on any decisions taken. He frequently refers to the troops out mentality and notes that while it has little support in Britain at present, future support could grow, especially in a situation of continuing political disagreement within Northern Ireland. Within the Parliamentary Labour Party, the small group of M.Ps., such as Kevin McNamara and Jock Stollard, who have generally been sympathetic to the SDLP over the past few years now seem to have very little influence in Labour Party policy-making on Northern Ireland and Rees has expressed himself as being worried not so much by the left-wing M.Ps. who support the Troops Out Movement but by what he calls the "Gladstonians" or centre group in the party who are in favour of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

16. On the Conservative side, the party is clearly at a transition stage and in recent meetings which the Minister for Foreign Affairs has had with Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Airey Neave no indication has been given as to what changes, if any, will be made in the party's Northern Ireland policy. A committee is being set up to examine the matter but it is unlikely to come to any conclusions before the autumn. Both Mr. Heath and Mr. Whitelaw have privately made it clear that they will ensure that the party continues to maintain the union between Northern Ireland and Britain and under no circumstances will allow a return to majority rule in Northern Ireland. Though there has been much speculation about it, there is nothing at this stage to suggest a formal link-up between the Unionists and the Conservative Party and both Mr. Neave and prominent Unionist M.Ps. rule it out. Some of the UUUC M.Ps. at Westminster are directing their attention at the Labour M.Ps. and seem to have had some success in presenting

their case to M.Ps. who might have been expected to be out of sympathy with the loyalist cause. The UUUC are clearly using their well-disciplined team of ten M.Ps. at Westminster to advantage though it is probable that the background of at least two of the ten, Paisley and Powell, are and will continue to be negative rather than positive features in projecting an image of reasonableness to their fellow M.Ps.

Department of Foreign Affairs

8 June 1975