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Report of the 92nd Annual Conference of the Conservative Party,

Blackpool, 7-10th October, 1975

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General

This year's Tory Party Conference was a tremendous personal triumph for the party leader, Mrs Thatcher, and must have finally put paid to any hopes Ted Heath may have held about winning back the leadership of the party. In fact Mr Heath, who only attended the Conference for one day and did not speak in any of the debates, tarnished his image somewhat by showing himself in private conversation with journalists to be a bad loser. Following his surly attitude at the Conference, and in particular the strong rejection by the party of a proposal for electoral reform, which might have provided a way back for him via a coalition of the centre, even the former Prime Minister's closest friends were believed to be urging him to make a gesture of reconciliation to Mrs Thatcher, thus paving the way for his return as Shadow Foreign Secretary, perhaps at the reshuffle after next.

While the Conference was significant in that it confirmed Mrs Thatcher's position as leader and all but restored party unity, which had suffered considerably under the strain of two election defeats and a leadership contest within twelve months, it was not (and this was as a result of a conscious deliberate strategy) important in a policy or doctrinal sense. The demands of the delegates were undoubtedly for policies to the right of those of the Heath government and, for instance, in the debate on electoral reform, a whole succession of speakers called for an all-out onslaught to halt the drift to the left and to end the fashionable talk about coalitions and proportional representation. Likewise, some of the most enthusiastic applause of the Conference greeted demands for the return of birching and of the death penalty. The platform party (undoubtedly realising the risk it could run of being

misrepresented as anti-welfare, anti-union and of being insensitive to the wishes and needs of ordinary working people, particularly on unemployment), while it showed some sympathy with the mood of delegates, refused to enter into precise policy commitments and was extremely chary of burdening itself with specific proposals of unproven practicability or electoral appeal. Lord Hailsham, Jim Prior and Reggie Maudling, for example, all succeeded in replying to markedly hard-line debates without seeking either to stem the tide towards the right or to re-enforce it. Hailsham in fact did not even refer to the demands from the floor for the return of birching and of the death penalty. Some attempt was however made to ensure that the party did not take up a negatively hard line on the Government's anti-inflation policy and both Sir Geoffrey Howe and Willie Whitelaw appealed to the Conference, in the national interest, to support the Government's measures and not attempt to destroy them as the Labour Party had done with the anti-inflation policies of the last Tory Government.

It is perhaps interesting to note that Mrs Thatcher did not mention either Europe or foreign affairs in her address to the Conference. In his speech on Europe, Reggie Maudling opposed the Government's position on the recent executions in Spain.

Six motions on Northern Ireland, which had been submitted by constituency associations, appeared on the Conference agenda, but none was selected for debate. Nor was the subject chosen by those attending the Conference, who have the opportunity to ballot for resolutions which they wish to see slotted into two vacant spaces in the timetable. Instead, delegates selected motions dealing with Tory tactics at the European parliament, and with the continual erosion

of individual freedom, for discussion.

At the pre-Conference press conference on the Monday, Sir John Taylor (Chairman of the National Union Executive), when asked whether the Conservative Party intended to define its policy during the week towards Northern Ireland, and "if not why not", parried the question by pointing out that only six resolutions on the subject had been submitted (out of 1,462 on the agenda). He added that there could be an emergency motion before the end of the Conference "but this emergency has been going on for quite a long time".

The mood of the Tory Party towards Northern Ireland has changed considerably in the past five years and is now largely one of doubt, of uncertainty and of distaste for the violence there rather than, as previously, a position of unquestioning support for the "Ulster Unionists". There is also considerably less antipathy than in the past towards the Republic and indeed on some issues (our security policies, the attitude of the Government to the kidnappers' demands in the Herrema case, and the decision of the Government not to recall the Ambassador from Madrid) the Government's approach is greatly admired. Two years ago I was being constantly asked to justify the Government's record on issues as far removed as the burning of the British Embassy and Irish neutrality in World War Two; such hostile questioning was absent from this Conference.

The Official Unionist Party was represented at the Conference by a ten man delegation, led by the party's leader, Harry West. The Embassy was represented by the Press and Information Counsellor, Mr Dermot Gallagher.

Northern Ireland at the Conference

There were six resolutions on Ulster on the agenda (see Annex A), as well as three on "Citizens of Eire" (see Annex B) but, as pointed out above, these were not selected for discussion. The Northern Ireland resolutions consisted of two in support of power-sharing, two calling for the re-establishment of the links between the Conservative and Unionist Parties, one urging increased representation for Northern Ireland at Westminster, and one calling for the defeat of the IRA and the death penalty for sectarian murderers. The three citizenship motions called on the next Tory Government to remove the special privileges enjoyed by citizens of the Republic in the UK.

The absence of a debate on the Northern situation was raised on Tuesday in the debate on the freedom of the individual, by a delegate, Mr Barry Porter of Berkenhead, who said that he agreed that individual freedom under the law was an essential element of democratic society. There was however a whole section of the population to whom this debate was academic and didn't mean a damn thing. "They have the freedom to be stopped and searched, to be imprisoned without trials, to be shot and bombed. Ulster has no freedom as we understand it".

He was ashamed to read the headline, "Tories ignore Ulster", in a paper that morning. "This country and this party ignores Ulster at its peril." In Ulster we have on our own doorstep the contemporary dilemma of modern democratic governments. How do we defeat the terrorist bent on political end? If the terrorists win in Ireland they can win here. It has already started in London, Birmingham and Guildford. Those are English towns and cities, not remote villages in Ireland. I speak as an Englishman. I know that the Irish are difficult and exasperating. There are times when I wonder at their mental processes, and they must bear their own shame and responsibility for

their own present difficulties. If the British Government says that terrorism cannot be defeated and that the spread towards the concept of Irish devolution cannot be held, that murders can be tolerated, that immunity of arrest can be given to the leader of such murderers, what conclusion can be drawn? Only one, that political ends in this country can be achieved by the bomb and the bullet".

Mr Porter went on to say that the next time it would be the cause not of the IRA but of the Tartan Army and the International Marxists. There was no glib answer to the problems of Ulster. Mr Whitelaw had said at Brighton in 1971 that it would be a long hard struggle: "how long and how hard I do not think any of us realised".

Mr Whitelaw has gone some way in achieving some degree of political activity in Ireland acceptable to all sides, but I have no doubt that it is still the duty of the party at its conference, when the eyes of the country are upon it, "to state and restate that in no circumstances will the peoples of Ulster, catholic, protestant, jew or gentile, cease to be part of the UK unless the majority of them wish it".

Harry West placed his name on the list of those requesting to speak on the debate on the authority of parliament and the rule of law. He was not called by the Chair, however, probably at the instigation of Airey Neave who had indicated in private that a speech from Mr West could prove embarrassing, particularly as he would not have a right of reply.

Tory - Unionist links

This did not really arise during the Conference except in a somewhat oblique reference in the opening statement at the first session by the Chairman of the Party Organisation, Lord Thorneycroft. In a reference critical of suggestions of electoral reform and coalition government, he said that "the mixture of Liberals and Scottish

Nationalists that provides a 30 or 40 difference between the Conservative and the Socialist vote in the House of Commons is virtually worthless as a barrier to the Socialist measures which are churning through the House of Commons at the present time. The object of that middle block is not to defeat the Government; it is to stay in the House of Commons and that is of very little help to us". It was generally thought afterwards that Lord Thorneycroft was also referring to the UUUC MPs but, out of deference to the Unionist delegates at the Conference, fudged the reference. Later in the same speech, he said, in a reference to Conservative unity, that there had been times when the Tories had been divided "about great issues upon which honourable men could honourably hold different views: the great issues of free trade, of imperial preference, of home rule for Ireland (the hand-out, as distinct from the verbatim, referred to the "Irish question".) No such issues to-day exist".

Following the Monday Club meeting on the Friday, which was addressed by Harry West, Andy Sheppard of RTE and myself had a discussion with the Conservative's Deputy Spokesman on Northern Ireland, John Biggs-Davison. To a question from Sheppard as to the likelihood of Tory-Unionist links being restored, Biggs-Davison said he hoped they would at some stage but that this was not possible in the foreseeable future because "the Unionist Party is in complete chaos". It is thought also that a two hour meeting between Harry West and Airey Neave did not take this question any further.

UUUC and Unionist pamphlets distributed at Conference

There were three official Unionists leaflets (see Annexes C, D and E), dealing with the Northern Ireland economy, terrorism and devolved government in Northern Ireland, being distributed from the Monday Club stand during the Conference, together with a UUUC pamphlet (Annex F), supposedly written by Clifford Smith, on "Security in Northern Ireland".

The UUUC pamphlet caused some controversy at the Conference, in particular its claim that the Catholic Church, the SDLP, the AOH, the GAA, most newspapers printed in the Republic, RTE, a large section of the British national press, BBC and ITN either practice, or are sympathetic to, subversion (i.e. "to bring a regime into disrepute, to cause a loss of confidence on the part of the ruling establishment, institutions and government and to provoke a breakdown of law and order"). Because of its reference to the Catholic Church, the pamphlet was withdrawn from the Monday Club stand. It might be added that the Chairman of the Monday Club, John Biggs-Davison, who is himself a Catholic and is of course the Tory's Deputy Spokesman on Northern Ireland, seemed to be quite embarrassed about the whole affair.

The pamphlet, which contained a foreword by Harry West in which he said that it "provides an essential background for all who are concerned to see the restoration of democratic institutions and the rule of law in this part of the UK", also referred to terrorism on the protestant side but said that "this is trying, illegally and using similar methods to the IRA, to protect the state against terrorism. There is every reason to believe that it would wither away if the major threat of the IRA was decisively defeated". Of the Republic, it said that although Dublin states that it only wishes to a united Ireland/come about by consent, rules out the use of force and condemns the action of the IRA, "it wages a continuous campaign of subversion and the IRA receives massive support and to a considerable extent operates from the Irish Republic. In general, it can be said that the opposition of the government of the Irish Republic to the IRA is confined to its threat in the south and, while condemning its methods, it gives considerable support, especially by its extradition laws, to its campaign in the North".

Willie Whitelaw, in private conversation, was appalled at the tone and content of the pamphlet and spoke in glowing terms of the calibre of the SDLP and in particular of its leadership. In an interview with Kevin Healy of RTE, he came out strongly in favour of power-sharing but said, in reply to a direct question on the matter, that it would be difficult to refuse to agree to demands for integration if the Convention failed to produce an agreed solution.

Brian Faulkner article in Cross Bow

In the Conference (October) issue of Cross Bow, the journal of the Bow Group, Brian Faulkner has a short article (Annex G) on "What Ulster needs". In this he argued that the priorities for the British Government must be (a) to give a clear undertaking about the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, (b) to recognise the aspiration of the minority for a United Ireland and to make provision for them to play a part in government and (c) to end violence by restoring the rule of law and to cease having any truck with any para-military bodies. The priorities for Northern politicians, on the other hand, must be to produce quickly proposals for a devolved government in Northern Ireland which gives responsibility at the top to people from both main sections of the Community.

Reference to Northern Ireland in Mrs Thatcher's address

The references to Northern Ireland in the address of Mrs Thatcher to the Conference were written by Airey Neave who told me on the previous Wednesday that he felt sure Dublin would welcome her intention of emphasising the duty and the need to protect both communities in the province. The following is the text of her remarks on the North:

"The first duty of Government is to uphold the law. If it tries to bob and weave and duck around that duty when it's inconvenient, if government does that, then so will the governed, and then nothing is safe - not home, not liberty, not life itself.

There is one part of this country where tragically defiance of the Law is costing life day after day. In Northern Ireland our troops have the dangerous and thankless task of trying to keep the peace and hold the balance. We are proud of the way they have discharged their duties.

This Party is pledged to support the unity of the United Kingdom. To preserve that unity, and to protect the people Catholic and Protestant alike, we believe that our armed forces must remain until a genuine peace is made.

Our thoughts are with them, and our pride is with them too."

Monday Club meetings

There were two meetings of the right-wing Monday Club during the Conference, one on the Thursday on "Democracy endangered" and the second, following Mrs Thatcher's address on the Friday, on Northern Ireland, with Harry West as the guest speaker.

The platform party at the Democracy endangered session consisted of John Biggs-Davison (Chairman), Patrick Wall MP, Lady Sneyd, Clive Buckmaster and Jonathan Guinness. In reply to questions on support for the Ulster Unionists and on access to the Republic, Jonathan Guinness said that the attitude of the Tory Party was equivocal and that this attitude caused the split in the Unionist party at the February 1974 election. There were hard feelings which the minority had been penalised. The split was not social or economic but was also one of

to the people of Northern Ireland, we are with you but there is no good to be gained in keeping down the minority. Obviously talks and changes have to take place but these have got to come from the grassroots and not be imposed from the top, which is where Terence O'Neill went wrong.

Lady Stephenson said she agreed with Jonathan Guinness' analysis. There had been a lot of grievances but these were being put right. The destruction of Stormont was most foolish as it was easy to destroy but very difficult to rebuild. The troubles did not spring entirely from Irish sources but were fuelled from outside. Patrick Wall MP said they should back the Ulster unionists but blame them for their discrimination against the minority. The SDLP were frightened people and so were useless and did not count. If they compromised, they would be shot by the IRA. He also agreed that citizens of the Republic should be stopped from having free access to the UK but not now. They needed and were getting the cooperation of the Republic. This was through the Gardaí and not the Army though that would come. Both governments faced the same danger and ^{should} cooperate more to prevent the establishment of a 32 county Communist state.

In introducing the Chairman of the following day's meeting (John de Vere Walker, the Deputy Chairman of the Ulster Group of the Monday Club); John Biggs-Davison said that the latest bomb in London was part of the war waged by the enemy within against democracy throughout - and he said he was using the term intentionally - the British isles as a whole. The front line was however still in Ulster though we would fall or fight as a country as a whole. He was glad the Unionist delegation was at the Conference, adding personal to historical links. He warmly welcomed Margaret Thatcher's reference to the unity of the UK and despite past mistakes and

misunderstandings he believed we have to rebuild our Unionist Conservative links in Northern Ireland. The Monday Club was loyal to loyal Ulster. While the Tories supported the Government against terrorism, they had the duty to criticise, warn and urge the most effective measures on our present temporary rulers.

The basic text used by Harry West is attached as Annex H. It is in fact strongly critical of the security policies of the British Government and in particular the fact that "the Government is unashamedly in cahoots with terrorists and murderers".

In opening his remarks, Mr West said that the Unionist Party was of necessity right of centre. Mrs Thatcher's speech that day had been of tremendous importance to us, as we were beginning to wonder where we wanted and did we belong. Mrs Thatcher's remarks were very heartening but, from the Northern Ireland point of view, there was just one unfortunate phrase, which he had to refer to in order to keep the record straight. He wished to object to the reference in the speech to keeping the balance and wished to say, lest there be any misunderstanding, that it was not a matter of holding the balance. You cannot keep the balance between the thugs and the decent people of Northern Ireland. The difficulty was not a division between two communities but an element within one community which was trying to destroy our lines.

In reply to a question on the withdrawal of troops, Mr West said they needed to develop their own internal security forces. We had the only land frontier in the UK and, while most people here felt the troops were holding the balance in the North, we saw them defending the realm along a border which was wide open for the traffic of explosives and arms, both into the North and perhaps over here. He added that he himself was rarely stopped by the security

forces on his trips five times a week from Belfast to Fermanagh.

He was next asked if he didn't feel that not agreeing to share power was weakening other parties, such as the SDLP, and encouraging terrorism. He replied that this was a matter of honour and integrity. They had gone to the electorate on the 1st May and pledged only to have people in a future Northern Ireland Cabinet who upheld the constitution, who would support strong measures of law and order and who would not want to bring them into a united Ireland. To put it in simple terms, you don't invite a guest into your house if he tells you before he comes that he is going to burn you out.

The next questioner asked about his attitude to voluntary coalition. He replied that there had been some mention that the UUUC might take the SDLP into a voluntary coalition until the present crisis was ended and Mr Craig, a colleague of his, had floated this idea. A member of the SDLP had however told them in no uncertain terms that they were not prepared to come into a coalition on a voluntary basis, but as of right on a permanent basis. They were part of the UK, and if the British system was good enough here it was good enough for Northern Ireland. Power-sharing had in any event failed before and there was no reason to think it wouldn't fail now. Government must represent the will of the people and not be set up by contrived measures.

There was considerable applause for the next questioner who asked why there were so many splinter groups in the North. He said he objected in particular to Paisley blowing his top off every so often and added that, though a Protestant, he went to a Catholic social club. Mr West said they had greater unity in their ranks than ever

before and their divisions had been caused by the misguided policies of a British government. He was then heckled about sectarian murders which he said he couldn't control; they were on both sides and he condemned them. The battle however was between those who wanted to maintain the UK and those who wanted a united Ireland.

Asked about the value of declaring a state of civil war so that both sides would know who they were fighting, he said that if civil war broke out many innocent people would be slaughtered. We will work to ensure it doesn't break out. It was then pointed out to Mr West that the situation in the North was unlike that in Britain, as the problem there was that the ruling party never changed. He was asked if there was any possibility of replacing religious by economic groupings. He replied that it was a matter of being pro or anti union. Many Roman Catholics supported him and they were prepared to give the minority so much power, via a Committee system, that some felt this would make government impossible. However, internal government would be better than government by remote control.

On policing, he was asked if a new police reserve, similar to the B specials, would have the trust of the minority as many Protestant terrorists might join it. He said that if a firm hand had been laid on the terrorists at the beginning sectarian murders would not have arisen. There was a police reserve at the moment and they had urged greater participation of Catholics in it but it was the Catholics who, by not joining it, were making it a sectarian force. He had repeatedly asked the leaders of the SDLP to come out in support of the troops and the security forces. But some of the leading political figures in Northern Ireland were guilty of instigating trouble at the beginning - another reason for not given them seats in Cabinet.

The final question asked why Enoch Powell had been accepted in Northern Ireland and what part he was playing there. Mr West said that Powell was a most brilliant man and a tremendous speaker and he felt he would be of great assistance. Admittedly, he wanted to get a seat and he had told them that he couldn't affiliate to any party in Britain and that the Unionist Party was the only party he could identify with. The Unionists had been the subject of propaganda and false pictures for many years, which had been accepted in a good many cases in Britain and needed to be put right. He thought Powell would be able to put the record straight and also felt he would be helpful in the House. Also, but for his mistake on two occasions in telling people to vote Labour, he would have been helpful to the Tory party.

Mr West received polite but not very enthusiastic applause and his reception, and the tone of the questioning, was in marked contrast to, for instance, the rapturous reception Bill Henderson, and in particular his anti-Dublin line, received at the 1973 Conference. In addition, West made a bad error of judgment in criticising Margaret Thatcher's speech which had gone down extremely well with the right of the party. The meeting, although some of the questioning must have come from non-Monday Club people, was a further indication of the gap that has grown between the Tories and the Unionists over the past few years and the distaste that has pervaded much of the Tory ranks for the violence and the unwillingness to compromise that they associate with some of those either in or close to the Unionist party.

The McWhirter pamphlet

A pamphlet published by a tiny fringe extreme right-wing group known as "Self-Help", which has as its Chairman, Ross McWhirter (who with

his brother, Morris, compiles the Guinness Book of Records) was circulated at the Conference. This included (see Annex I) a form calling for tough identification procedures for citizens of the Republic in Britain. Jonathan Guinness, the former Chairman of the Monday Club, who is in favour of identity cards for everyone, told Aidan Hennigan and myself that the form was far too selective and was most unfortunate.

Some points from Conversations

(1) After the Harry West speech. John Biggs-Davison told me he thought West made a poor speech and, in his rejection of coalition government, contradicted his own point about British standards and practice. Biggs-Davison was also quite disappointed at the West line on coalition government, said he hoped Craig could gather support and added "this (i.e. coalition government) is what we want".

(2) John Wallace, on the other hand, did not see Craig winning very much support and, in any event, felt the SDLP had been let off the hook by the Paisley rejection of further talks on a coalition. He thought it would be impossible for the SDLP leadership to sell it to their rank and file Convention and party members.

(3) Peter Utley is still quite convinced that Merlyn Rees wants Northern Ireland to opt for independence and when he put it to the Secretary of State recently that all the signs were that this was his strategy, Mr Rees replied: "you say I'm doing it, I say its happening".

(4) Finally, Chris Ryder of the Sunday Times also told me that he accepts that the British are working for independence and that the

Secretary of State, when he saw him two weeks previously, "didn't deny he was churning towards independence". Possibly of more weight however, given that the Secretary of State would be unlikely to bare his soul to Ryder, is the fact that, according to Ryder, Jamie Flanagan (whom he is very close to) believes that this is Mr Rees' strategy.

D A Gallagher

October 1975