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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

27 February 1976

Secretary  
Department of Foreign Affairs

For the attention of Mr Gearoid O Broin

During the course of a long conversation on Wednesday night with Harold McCusker, the UUUC's Chief Whip at Westminster, the point came across quite clearly that many members of the Official Unionist party have for some time been very disillusioned about their position and role in the UUUC and would wish at an early stage to reassert the party's position as the authentic voice of Unionism and hopefully regain their traditional hold on the overwhelming majority of loyalists. Many indeed, including McCusker, now saw no reason, with the ending of the Convention, why the Coalition should continue in being and they hoped that this general view would receive its first vague and tentative endorsement at a specially convened meeting of Official Unionist Convention Members and MPs in Belfast on Saturday (28th). The meeting had been called and arranged by McCusker and would be chaired by Jim Molyneaux. As indicated, however, the move away from the Coalition would be a gradual one and, although McCusker was vague on this, I formed the impression that Saturday's meeting would most likely be of the kite flying variety.

If the Coalition did break up, this would probably mean the departure from the scene of Baird's party, whose members would either opt out of politics or be subsumed by the Official Unionists or - perhaps more likely - by the DUP. I might mention here that McCusker thinks that Baird is quite mad and that overall his influence, though fairly limited, is completely negative and unhelpful.

As regards Vanguard, McCusker does not believe that they have any hope of attracting support from the other Unionist parties and that Craig in private is being wildly over-optimistic about the potential strength of his group. Craig's great mistake was not to have waited until the day following the debate on the Convention Report at Westminster to float his proposal for emergency coalition. His views on Westminster's attitude to the Report would be seen to have been vindicated and he might well have attracted substantial support. Even quite recently, a prominent member of DUP had said to McCusker that, if the timing had been right, he would have been prepared to lend his support to the idea of emergency coalition, as least until he saw how it worked out.

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McCusker then went on to talk about the Alliance proposal for a middle tier structure - the Council of State - between Cabinet government and the Committee system. The UUUC had been very interested in this idea and had gone so far as to have secret meetings with Alliance about it. They would envisage the Council, which would be composed of all parties, having widespread powers, perhaps even including security powers. He was not in a position to be more specific, however, as the talks had not developed, principally due to Alliance insisting that the Committee Chairmen would have administrative powers. However, in principle, they had been prepared to be very flexible on the Council's powers and, in addition, would have been happy to compromise on the size of the Cabinet.

Other points made by McCusker which may be of interest were:

- (a) Merlyn Rees had said to him on Wednesday that there would be "no more Constitutions". McCusker emphasised that this was not just a normal expression of exasperation but that the Secretary of State's tone clearly indicated that he had got instructions from the Prime Minister to forget about salvaging anything from the Convention or its members for some time to come.
- (b) The UUUC expected Mr Rees to be moved soon but had no idea who his successor would be. Their clear preference, however, given that rumours in the House had been suggesting either Bill Rodgers or Roy Hattersley, would be for Rodgers. Hattersley, they felt, was too clearly associated with the united Ireland cause.
- (c) They thought the SDLP had made a basic mistake in using security as a bargaining point. This made negotiations with the party much more difficult for Unionist politicians, in particular given the need to carry their electorate with them. It was unlikely in any event that the Government would consider handing back security responsibility to Stormont for a considerable time to come.
- (d) John Taylor's recent movements from position to position on policy had done his credibility no good and he was now held in very poor esteem within the party.
- (e) Finally, McCusker spoke in glowing terms of our handling of the Stagg funeral. He had been astounded by our stand and had found it particularly welcome and reassuring as it showed what Governments could do if they wished. In Northern Ireland, by comparison, the whole



structure of law and order had collapsed and on the very day that we were humiliating the Provos at Ballina, twelve of them were operating a road block on the Newry-Dundalk road north of the border, where in fact they shot dead one of his constituents.

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