

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Downing Street Meeting, 5 March 1976

General Approach

1. The indications are that, following the second report from the Northern Ireland Convention, the British will make it clear that

- direct rule will continue;
- the format of direct rule will be reviewed in June/July this year;
- the elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Convention will no longer be regarded as public representatives. Only the 12 Westminster MPs from Northern Ireland (10 UUUC, Gerry Fitt of the SDLP and Frank Maguire) will be recognised as public representatives;
- Northern Ireland will be treated in exactly the same manner as any other part of the United Kingdom. It will not receive any special favours nor will it be dealt with in a punitive manner;
- there will be no immediate referendum;
- there will be no local Northern Ireland advisory or consultative body.

2. As far as the Northern Ireland political parties are concerned, the SDLP, UPNI, Vanguard Unionists (led by Craig), NILP and Alliance will go along with the British, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The attitude of the major loyalist grouping, the UUUC, is not so easy to predict but it is most likely that, though some of them, notably Baird's UUUM, may make threatening noises, the vast majority in the UUUC, led by Paisley, will also accept indefinite direct rule from London.

3. In as far as the reaction of the para-military groups can be predicted, it seems that both the Provos and the loyalist para-militaries will continue their campaigns of violence, at least on the present level which is now resulting in almost as many deaths as in 1972 when 467 were killed. The Provos may feel the need to step-up their level of activity - not only will it have become clear that their ceasefire of a year following a four-year campaign has not achieved the British declaration of intent to withdraw but local issues (e.g. the phasing out of special category status in Northern Ireland prisons or an increase in British Army activity) may in effect decree an increase in the level of the campaign, at least in sporadic bursts. On the loyalist para-

military side, not only is there the likelihood of a response to the Provo campaign but there is also the possibility that the general frustrations of loyalists with direct rule, together with the reaction to local issues similar to those facing the Provos, may in any event lead to loyalist para-military violence or a loyalist campaign of civil disobedience along the lines of that mounted on the minority side in 1968-71.

4. It is possible to be reasonably confident that the SDLP will survive as the main political representatives of the minority community in the next few years. An efficient party structure has been created in most parts of Northern Ireland and there seems to be a general satisfaction in the minority community with the policies and leadership of the SDLP. There will, of course, be difficulties, including possibly defections or departures from the party but overall there is no reason to believe that the SDLP will not be ready to represent the minority if and when another negotiating opportunity presents itself. On the loyalist side, the position is less clear. Some members of the UUUC have doubts about their present tactics which have in effect brought about an end to local politics and ensured that the loyalist position is represented by a small Westminster group dominated by Paisley. There are several indications that Northern Ireland unionists are not prepared to have Paisley dictate their politics to them forever and that what is likely is an evolution of the political situation on the unionist side to the point where a bloc will emerge which will reflect the wish to have a devolved government in Northern Ireland. As time goes on - indeed some observers think it may now be the case - unionists will move towards accepting that the price to be paid for devolved government is a system of sharing power in government. The firmer the British Government demonstrates that this is the only form of devolved government Northern Ireland will be given, the more likely it is that the idea will be accepted sooner rather than later. (There is nothing to suggest that Paisley will ever accept any form of power-sharing and the evolution on the unionist side will therefore have to be one where Paisley and his supporters are isolated from what will hopefully be the more moderate unionist mainstream.)

5. Given the above analysis, it is unlikely that any political initiative in the immediate future can hope to succeed. In the immediate future direct rule must therefore continue and the British should be given every assistance, particularly in the security area,

to make direct rule as tolerable as possible in Northern Ireland. There is unlikely to be any major divergence between the British and ourselves on this fundamental point but it is important that it should be formally established. It would also appear important to establish for the record that Britain favours devolved government in Northern Ireland when agreement is reached between the representatives of both sections of the community on the sharing of power in such a government. A reiteration, on the lines of the Taoiseach's recent Dalkey speech, that any agreed institutions which have the full support of the representatives of both sections of the community will ^{also} have our full support might also be useful.

6. Two immediate issues relating to the Northern Ireland political situation which may arise are

- (a) the need to recognise the special position of existing locally elected representatives now serving in the Convention. Not only does the continuation of local political activity depend significantly on them but if they are allowed to disappear completely, the next attempt at an agreement on devolved government will be that much more difficult. (Recognition of the special position of the Convention politicians also implies - though the Taoiseach may also wish to make the point specifically - disapproval of any political dealings with para-militaries, particularly with the IRA which also presents a serious and related threat south of the border.) In addition to recognising the special position of Northern Ireland elected representatives, there is the related question of keeping local political activity alive. An advisory council, a consultative council, a greater local council or the continuation of the present Convention in some form are all ways through which this might be achieved but in the present unclear situation in Northern Ireland, the Taoiseach might press the principle rather than any specific proposal. There is no enthusiasm in either the UUUC or SDLP at the moment for participation in any local forum which they see as a cosmetic and largely irrelevant adjunct to direct rule. Their attitude may, however, change fairly quickly and our best line at this stage would be to aim for acceptance of the principle. The details can be worked out later, primarily between the British and the Northern Ireland political parties;

(b) the idea of a referendum in Northern Ireland on power-sharing has been mooted but does not seem to be much favoured by the British, at least at present. There are divided views on it in Northern Ireland, both within and between the political parties and there is certainly no convincing evidence that it would break the current deadlock. There would appear to be no advantage in the Taoiseach's pushing the idea with any enthusiasm though the possibility of using the mechanism of a referendum to break the deadlock at some future date should not be excluded.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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