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Recent Unionist Contacts

1. I travelled to London and Belfast on 8-10 February and made informal contact with a number of unionist personalities, with a view to ascertaining current attitudes on the unionist side. I spoke to Mr. William Craig, M.P., Mr. Harold McCusker, M.P., Mr. David Trimble and Mr. John Laird on the political front and to a number of non-political people in Belfast including Canon Eric Elliott. The following is a summary of their remarks:

2. Mr. William Craig

Craig showed some initial reluctance to meet me on the grounds that recent statements by the Government indicated that they were not interested in reconciliation in Northern Ireland. I assured him this was a misconception and that there would be a very definite interest in Government circles in having his views on the current situation. He agreed to see me on this basis.

3. His assessment of the current situation was rather gloomy. He saw a general hardening of attitudes across the board in Northern Ireland, in many ways back to the postures of 1968-69. He said the statements by Archbishop O Fiaich and by the Taoiseach and the renewed upsurge of violence were contributory factors to this.

4. On the question of violence I suggested to him that the unionist reflex of attributing the upsurge of violence to Southern elements was somewhat unhelpful and misleading. There were sustained contacts with the British on policing issues and the latter had evinced every satisfaction. Craig said he failed to understand this. The current violence in South Derry was due to nine IRA men from Donegal and one of the principal endeavours of the Northern Ireland security forces was to ensure that they didn't get back across the border. He had heard also that IRA elements were surfacing again in a very open way, in border areas, in particular in Clones. He was also inclined to believe that the dismissal of ex-Commissioner Garvey was linked to this kind of issue. I think he accepted that he was mistaken on this latter point but his conviction on the former points remained unshaken.

5. I asked him whether he saw any chance of political progress in Northern Ireland. He doubted that anything would happen before the next election. The forthcoming British budget would give an indication whether the general election would be in Autumn (his own guess) or next year. He had little doubt the conservatives would win. He thought Neave unlikely to be given the Northern Ireland portfolio. Somebody like Ian Gilmour was more likely. He saw no alternative to direct rule at present. The SDLP was in total disarray and growing more set against any internal Northern Ireland arrangement. He accepted that unionists had to take some blame for this and reminisced for some time on his voluntary coalition proposal. He still felt that the best approach would be for the British to enact legislation for a devolved system of government, reserving the right to transfer power until they were satisfied that a coalition was sufficiently broadly based. It would give the parties an incentive to negotiate. He did not expect either the Conservative or the Labour parties to adopt this course, however.

6. On the Taoiseach's interview I said that there had been a very widespread feeling in Dublin that the reaction to it was greatly exaggerated, perhaps deliberately so. Craig said that he had been impressed at the indignation it had aroused in Westminster, among both parties. One of the objections he had was that it risked provoking into action Protestant paramilitaries who had been dormant for some time. He spoke strongly about growing marxist influence among the Protestant paramilitaries. (He has, however, frequently been alarmist on this in the past). In reply to my point that the Taoiseach was perhaps the only one trying to address a long-term problem of future instability and violence which everyone admitted existed, Craig said that the basic dividing line was between consent and coercion. Whatever the intention, Unionists saw the Taoiseach's call for British withdrawal - or even a declaration of intent - in the coercive category. He said that he personally was not partisan as between political parties in the South (which I think is probably true from previous statements of his) but it would not now be possible for him to have public contacts with the present Government without political damage to himself. He thought the Government should be aware that a gesture would be needed to overcome the suspicions entertained by Unionists, dating back in some cases to the late

sixties and early seventies. The signing of the European Convention on Terrorism would be such a gesture. He brushed aside the question of constitutional difficulties on this issue by referring to the opinion of legal experts of the Council of Europe whom he had questioned on the issue and who considered that there were no such difficulties.

7. We had some general discussion on current events in Northern Ireland. He thought that the current Paisleyite challenge to Official Unionist candidates (including his own position in East Belfast) was not to be taken seriously since if a seat was lost to Nationalist or Alliance candidates Paisley would have to take the blame. He had not been surprised at the defeat of the Unionist amendment against PR in the European elections. He thought that the Unionists might specifically instruct their voters to transfer to Alliance. He spoke strongly of Harry West's qualities as a European candidate, particularly for the farmers' vote. I got the impression that he considered a West-Craig ticket the ideal Unionist one from all points of view.

8. Mr. Harold McCusker M.P.

McCusker was preoccupied with the recent Paisley letter to West, which demanded an electoral pact between the DUP and Official Unionists which would have meant the Official Unionists ceding among others McCusker's seat to a Paisleyite. (The Unionist majority in the Armagh constituency is substantial but contains more Paisley/Baird votes than Official Unionist ones). Paisley had apparently hoped for West's help, but West had shown the letter to McCusker who had promptly leaked it to the press, on the grounds that a showdown with Paisley on this issue had better take place now rather than in the excitement of a general election campaign. He believed that Paisley would have to back down on the issue and felt that he was perhaps going through the motions to quieten some of his lieutenants (including the Rev. William McCrea, the likely candidate for Armagh) who were chafing at the lack of political openings at present. McCusker thought Paisley was beginning to intensify his political activity and would be raising his profile at Westminster and elsewhere.

9. McCusker had heard the Taoiseach's radio interview. He coupled it with the Archbishop O Fiaich statement (which he said had more impact in the North). The general impression he had was that both represented a reversion to the attitude that the Unionist community could be disposed of irrespective of their views. When I tried to put the matter in context he said that nuances were lost on the mass of the unionist population. The message they retained was that the British were being asked either to abandon them or force them into a united Ireland. He spoke strongly of the reservoir of hatred which existed on both sides in Northern Ireland - on the unionist side to an extent he would not have considered possible four or five years ago. Anything which fostered the sense of being threatened played into the hands of the Protestant paramilitaries and extremists.

10. On the Westminster scene he said Labour were losing interest in the relationship with the Official Unionists. In private conversation he had found Powell less vehement against the Tories recently. He thought that Labour would eventually follow the Tories in accepting a upper tier of local government in Northern Ireland. He felt that there was perhaps an exaggerated fear of integration in the South. The present set-up could give Northern Ireland a breathing space. He saw no possibility of devolved government at present since apart from other difficulties the statements by Archbishop O Fiaich and the Taoiseach would force the SDLP further "into the green".

11. He said the important thing for the South was not to see the Northern Ireland issue in abstract terms but in terms of people. He thought it was significant that not a single unionist voice protested at the visit of the Northern Ireland Office Minister, Don Concannon to open an exhibition in the RDS earlier in the week. Co-operation of this kind was valuable both for its own sake and for the growth of understanding it brought with it.

12. Mr. David Trimble

David Trimble who is a lecturer in law at Queens was formerly a Vanguard Convention member. He is numbered among the rather limited number of young intellectual supporters of political unionism and is likely to be given a fairly active backroom role when Vanguard completes its return to the Official Unionists. Trimble said that this process was virtually completed and that the only significant Vanguard member who refused to return was Glenn Barr, whom even a personal visit from Harry West had failed to convince.

13. He thought there was a hardening of opinion in Northern Ireland on all sides. The security situation looked threatening again. He understood the current incendiary devices were quite sophisticated. They contained a small charge of explosives and an inflammatory mixture of petrol and polystyrene in a professionally milled metal case. The metal case which was capable of inflicting sharpnel injuries acted as a deterrent to the dismantling of the devices. All this involved a considerable degree of organisation, a workshop etc. and he thought that the lull in Provo. violence in the latter part of the last year could be explained on part by preparation for this.

14. He said that notwithstanding this very many unionists were inclined to link the recrudescence of violence with the interviews given by the Taoiseach and Archbishop O Fiaich. He accepted this might appear absurd but it was rationalised that the statements boosted IRA morale and gave them further encouragement for their campaign of violence. He felt that there was a kind of logic in this attitude since the ultimate implication of refusing the principle of unity only by consent - which he insisted underlay the Taoiseach's interview and the Minister's Sunday Independent interview - was violence against the Northern Ireland majority. He disagreed that Mason's reaction to the Taoiseach's interview had been intemperate and said that it had been essential to allay unionist fears that there had been a "deal" between the Taoiseach and Mr. Callaghan.

15. We had some general conversation on the current political scene. He too was inclined to be dismissive of the Paisleyite threat to the Official Unionist candidates. He mentioned that Paisley had a weight problem and showed signs of suffering from overwork. He thought Kilfedder was losing a lot of support among unionists in the Lagan valley, but was not clear on the reasons for this. West's leadership of the party seemed free from threat for the time being. The Rev. Smyth was the only one who could challenge him - he could have the leadership for the asking, but he was temperamentally incapable of the confrontations this would involve, in particular with Paisley.

16. John Laird

John Laird, former OUP Convention member and Hon. Treasurer of the party is currently running a PR firm. He thought there was a general "square one" mentality about Northern Ireland at present. He said the Taoiseach's interview had created a lot of indignation both in regard to the reference to Amnesty - although he expressed appreciation that this particular question had been put in context later - and in regard to British withdrawal. He thought that such a call, dissociated from any attempt to "come with a bunch of flowers" was bound to be offensive. He suggested the Government might at least spell out the precise details of the package it was offering, what safeguards it would offer Northern Protestants etc. When I asked him whether there was any offer he would not automatically shoot down in flames he said jokingly he personally might consider 100% control of Dublin. More seriously he said that whatever his own doubts about the possibility of Dublin putting together a sufficiently attractive package for the Northern unionists the first stage was one of credibility and this would undoubtedly be lacking without some acceptable definition of unity.

17. We had some general conversation on the current scene. He felt that the price for devolved government was too high and direct rule would continue. He thought the unionist personnel at Westminster would be very similar after a general election. Craig's only problem in East Belfast was to obtain the Official Unionist nomination - he implied there might be some resistance to him among local OUP officers there. Paisley was finding life difficult in

a direct rule situation and was showing signs of the strain. He thought the control of Ballymena Council did more harm than good to Paisley since people could now see Paisleyism in action. He mentioned that this would be tested in Ballymena soon since one of the DUP Councillors was terminally ill and the resulting by-election would be decisive for Paisleyite control of the Council

Canon Eric Elliott

18. Canon Eric Elliott is a Church of Ireland Rector in South Belfast. He frequently represents Archbishop Simms in ecumenical seminars etc. and is generally a fairly prominent opinion-former in the Church of Ireland. He was particularly dismayed at the renewed killing of UDR personnel. Whatever gloss the IRA put on it these were, he said, sectarian killings which struck at the Protestant community, and were seen as such rather than as a blow against the security forces.

19. Canon Elliott was very critical of the recent statements of Archbishop O Fiaich and the Taoiseach, particularly the former. He said that for the more liberal Protestants who were trying to disengage their own clergy from political involvement Dr. O Fiaich's statement came as a setback. Canon Elliott linked the Taoiseach's radio interview with his interview in the Irish Times last December on the question of the constitution. He said that he personally was not a unionist, but he would not be happy to come under a Dublin Government without any change in existing circumstances. He said that while the whole establishment of the Presbyterian Church was Belfast oriented, the Church of Ireland was much more conscious of its all-Ireland status. There was a current of opinion among some younger Church of Ireland members in Northern Ireland which was ready to contemplate Irish unity as a long term solution. He would hesitate to say that these could be numbered in hundreds, much less thousands. Nevertheless they should not be ignored. If the trend was to be encouraged two things were necessary. One was complete firmness in the South on the security issue (Canon Elliott made it quite clear that he did not personally entertain doubts on this score, but pointed to the almost instinctive suspicions in the unionist community generally).

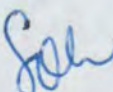
The second was a need to spell out what unity involved. He thought the emphasis on British action was unwise, since the direct rule situation was sowing a deep dislike of the English in many unionist minds, and for the South then to invoke them as an agency to pressurise unionists was bad psychology. What he had in mind was a prestigious committee consisting of representatives of political parties, leading academics (he instanced Sen. J.A. Murphy and Professor Beckett of Queens) economists etc. who would formally define the concept of unity and its implications. This should not be done for unionist hardliners, who would probably not cooperate, but for those Northerners, like himself, who were open to the principle of Irish unity but needed to be able to argue its merits in a concrete way, and above all demonstrate conclusively that it did not involve a mere take-over from Dublin. I suggested that since the standard unionist thesis was that all talk of unity was bad there would be objections raised to such a committee also. Canon Elliott said that it was a fact of life that Irish unity was part of the area of discussion anyway. It was a question of substituting a positive concept of unity for the rather threatening concept which now held the ring, if only by default.

General Impressions

20. While making allowance for the natural tendency to state anti-Dublin grievances in strong terms for my benefit, I was nevertheless struck by the sharpness of attitudes I met with, in contrast, say, to similar contacts last autumn and winter. Part of this is attributable to despondency or anger at the renewed violence. To judge by the comments made to me there seems also however to be a persistent tendency to interpret the statements of the Taoiseach and Archbishop O Fiaich (which were invariably linked in the minds of the people I spoke to) as moving away from the principle of unity by consent and consequently to view them as an increased threat to the unionist community.

21. I felt certain internal lack of direction was also noticeable on the unionist side. The mood among the unionist population in general seems as far as one can judge to be an overwhelming desire

for a return to some kind of normal life, which translates as anger against the renewed violence and a certain weariness with politicians on all sides, including their own. The politicians I met showed a kind of resigned acceptance that neither a return to Stormont nor a power-sharing devolved government was possible at present and that the British Government would make no move before a general election. Among the Official Unionists, who in terms of holding parliamentary seats, are the best placed to benefit from the direct rule situation, there appears to be a growing willingness to accept this. (Even Craig, one of the most committed devolutionists, gives signs of coming round to this view). The main concerns of the politicians I met seemed directed towards the Westminster and European Parliament elections. There was less jubilation than I expected about recent Conservative moves - there is still a great suspicion of both Neave and Biggs-Davison among very many unionists - but there did seem to be a feeling that it was only a matter of time until the Labour Party followed the Tories on the question of an upper tier of local government. While the Official Unionists may well drift to an integrationist stance by default, they are likely to hesitate to make this a clear policy objective in itself, however, since there is still sufficient ambivalence among unionists towards direct rule for advocacy of it to be doubtful electorally, all the more so since the Paisley/Baird factions, who suffer most from lack of political openings under direct rule, would exploit it to blame the Official Unionists for unpopular British decisions such as comprehensive education etc. The more likely stance for the OUP is a de facto acceptance of direct rule, the promotion of issues such as the upper tier of local government (common ground for both devolutionists and integrationists) with continued lip service for some time at least to the prospect of an eventual return to majority rule devolution.


Sean O Huiginn

13 February 1978

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