

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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Current Political Situation in Northern Ireland

April, 1978

The Mason Initiative

1. Direct rule continues. The British Government position is that it is not their preferred form of government for Northern Ireland but it is emphasised that they shall continue to administer direct rule "wholeheartedly, positively and caringly" for so long as circumstances require. The last political initiative by the British was Mr. Mason's efforts, in November last year, to find an interim system of devolved government which would be a step on the road to full devolution and which would in the meantime bring a larger measure of local participation back into the government of Northern Ireland. Informal discussions took place in December between civil servants from the NIO and representatives of the Northern Ireland political parties but these discussions never got very far. The SDLP took the view, and conveyed it to the British just before Christmas, that the talks were not worthwhile because they could see no evidence of a change of heart in the Official Unionist Party on the issue of power-sharing and in these circumstances they said that it would be extremely detrimental to the political process to go into talks which were doomed to failure. An equally important factor in the SDLP decision was that they did not have any confidence in a British Government at a time when there was evidence of some collusion at Westminster between that Government and the OUP. The OUP attitude to interim devolution also was lukewarm and it seems highly likely that, if it had come to the point of decision, the proposals would have been rejected by the party. (The somewhat similar "Molyneux Plan" was overwhelmingly rejected as OUP policy in internal debates in January 1977). The British position is that their interim devolution proposals are still on the table and that they will happily resume discussions as soon as the main parties show interest. Neither the SDLP or the OUP see any point in a resumption and for all practical purposes Mr. Mason's initiative may be regarded as dead. The British maintain privately that the main reason for not declaring the talks officially dead is that such a move would give rise to strong pressure from unionists for the allocation of

additional functions to the 26 district councils or for the creation of a new upper tier of local government. It is known that unionists - and, more significantly, some Conservatives - see this as a respectable way back to majority rule and Mr. Mason is apparently afraid that if he pronounces his own initiative dead, the pressure for an initiative in the area of local government reform would be overwhelming.

SDLP

2. The most recent statement of SDLP policy is contained in the document "Facing Reality" which was adopted almost unanimously at the annual conference last November. The key passage in the document is as follows:

"The British Government should state clearly and unequivocally its long-term intentions. While remaining in Northern Ireland, it should promote reconciliation and an end to divisions between all Irish people, leading to the establishment of structures of government which allow both traditions in Ireland to flourish freely and to live together in unity and agreement .... The end result of such a policy, pursued rigorously and positively over the years would undoubtedly be an agreed Ireland; the essential unity of whose people would have evolved in agreement over the years; whose institutions of government would reflect both its unity and diversity... In the immediate future and as part of that long-term strategy, the British Government should, in conjunction with the Irish Government, initiate talks with a view to arriving at an agreed form of government for the North within the long-term strategy..."

3. Following the Taoiseach's RTE This Week interview and Archbishop Ó Fiaich's Irish Press interview in January, those within the SDLP, particularly Mallon, McGrady and Duffy, who have traditionally favoured a declaration of British intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland demanded a review of party policy and suggested that the party should henceforth involve itself in discussions only on the basis of all-Ireland as opposed to internal Northern Ireland structures and only following a British declaration of intent to withdraw. An SDLP group did engage in a policy review for a few weeks but

the result of its deliberation was to confirm the party's commitment to the "Facing Reality" document. This result demonstrated once again the firm grip which Hume and Currie have on the SDLP, a grip which Hume is so far managing to maintain despite his increasingly frequent absences from Northern Ireland on EEC business. In organisational terms, the party continues to thrive. The departure of Paddy Devlin has provided an opportunity for the party to organise properly in west Belfast for the first time, though only the next election will show how much of Devlin's support derived from his personal popularity rather than from a commitment to an SDLP label. There is no evidence yet that the new Irish Independence Party, co-chaired by Frank McManus and Fergus McAteer, is seriously challenging the SDLP as the voice of the northern minority. There must, however, be concern about the SDLP's long-term prospects in the absence of any local political forum and it is difficult to see all the party leaders staying in Northern Ireland politics unless there is a prospect of political development in the fairly near future. Political activity in the coming months will be confined to the battle for Westminster seats but it is unlikely that the SDLP will add to Fitt's seat unless the unionist vote is badly split.

#### The Unionists

4. The political vacuum since the end of the Convention has virtually wiped out the fringe unionist parties, such as Craig's Vanguard, Mrs. Dickson's UPNI and Baird's UUUP. The local government elections of May 1977 indicated that the political allegiance of the unionist community is crystallising around the OUP, led by West (about 53% of the unionist vote) and Paisley's DUP (24% of the unionist vote). At the same time the political and personal rivalries between the OUP and the DUP latent in the West-Paisley-Baird Coalition (UUUC) have risen to the surface, although both groups maintain their formal commitment to the Convention Report and their refusal to contemplate power-sharing with the minority. The OUP has inherited the traditional unionist political 'machine' and succeeded in winning back many splinter unionists (e.g. Craig's Vanguard). It is the key party in the unionist community and represents the mainstream unionist "establishment". Paisley's whole career has been characterised by

a sustained drive to expand his religious and political power-base by exploiting hard-line fears and rancours, and this inevitably involves competition with the OUP for Protestant votes.

5. Because of this rivalry the OUP began a process of dissociating themselves from the coalition during 1976. Paisley's involvement in the abortive Loyalist strike of 1977, which led to the formal break-up of the coalition, may have been an attempt to compensate on the popular level for the influence he was losing in the coalition. For some months after this strike Paisley devoted his energies mainly to his Church, which is largely the DUP in its religious aspect. He has now reasserted himself again in the political arena by demanding an electoral pact with the OUP for the Westminster elections under threat of opposing Official Unionist candidates in several constituencies.

6. Continuing British refusal to implement the Convention Report has generated different reactions within the OUP. All strands in the leadership seem agreed that power-sharing is too high a price to pay for devolution. One current of opinion, including the Westminster MP's under the influence of Powell, would probably welcome integration. A second attitude, typified by West and many rural Unionists, is that the party should sit tight in the hope that some future development, such as a Conservative Government depending on Unionist support, will give them devolution on their own terms. A third element, led by Smyth and Ardill, has shown a willingness to explore means of restoring devolved government short of institutionalised power-sharing and was the element most favourable to the recent Mason talks. On past performance however this group is unlikely to take any initiative beyond a cautious brokerage between different factions of the party. Fear of giving Paisley an electoral advantage, divided leadership and the traditional attitudes of the party all indicate that the OUP is unlikely to make any major move from its present stance of formal adherence to the Convention Report and a refusal of power-sharing. The party is likely to concentrate in the short-term on issues which can

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win support of all strands of the party, (for example the demand for greater powers for local government representatives) and on the business of party organisation and contesting elections. Their energies at present are very much focussed on the forthcoming British general election. (A note on the current situation at Westminster is attached).

Department of Foreign Affairs

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