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SDLP Meeting with the Government

General political situation in Northern Ireland

British attitudes

1. The position of the British Government is that Mr. Mason's 'five point plan' is still on the table. (This proposes an Assembly elected by PR, exercising administrative responsibility in certain areas through a committee system and having a consultative role for legislation. It is envisaged that the system should allow for eventual progress to legislative devolution and that the minority would be protected through a system of weighted voting). Sporadic talks on the plan take place between the Northern Ireland Office and the four main political parties but no party has so far shown any signs/^{of} willingness to move from its basic position and for the time being at least it seems fair to regard the exercise as ritualistic rather than a serious negotiation. As far as it is possible to construe a policy from the statements of Mr. Neave, the main difference between the British Government and Opposition attitudes is that Mr. Neave's proposal for administrative devolution would be confined more closely to strict local government dimensions. While Conservative rhetoric in relation to the preservation of the Union etc. is perhaps more attuned to Unionist attitudes both positions can be summed up as a policy of containing violence on the lowest possible level on the security front and following a line of least resistance on the political front. This latter attitude is of course enhanced by the imminence of a British general election.

Unionist attitudes

The political vacuum which direct rule implies in Northern Ireland has created difficulties of organisation and morale for all the parties there. In the Unionist camp the coalition which existed between Paisley and the Official Unionists has broken up, due in part at least to the fact that the threat of power-sharing is now seen as more remote and to the reassurance which Mr. Mason's attitudes have afforded the Unionist community in relation to security. Much of the energies of unionism are given over to

rivalries between the two groups, particularly in relation to Westminster seats. Inter-unionist talks aimed at settling these are taking place, in particular under the auspices of the Apprentice Boys in Derry and these may lead eventually to accommodation between the OUP and DUP in some constituencies at least. In the Official Unionist Party the initiative has passed to the Westminster M.P.s who, under the influence of Powell, are working to promote integration. Those in the Unionist Party such as Craig or Smyth whose primary objective is the return of devolved government feel that they could not bring the Unionist Party as a whole to make the concessions on power-sharing necessary to bring this about. The Alliance Party has recently written to the SDLP, Official Unionists and the DUP proposing inter-party talks on devolution without preconditions. They got a positive response from the Official Unionists (who would be generally prepared to share power with Alliance, if the British would accept that as an alternative to power-sharing with the SDLP) but the reactions of the DUP and SDLP were dismissive.

SDLP position

The recent SDLP Party Conference showed that from an organisational viewpoint the SDLP is still in a relatively healthy state. From a policy point of view the dominant issue since the failure of the Convention has been the extent to which the Party should strive to keep open its options for power-sharing with the Unionists or whether it should emphasise British disengagement as a prerequisite for progress (which would obviously increase still further Unionist opposition to power-sharing.) The continued refusal of the Unionists to co-operate with the SDLP has greatly strengthened sentiment in favour of the disengagement approach. In 1977 the SDLP Conference adopted a compromise document called "Facing Reality" which called on the British Government to spell out its long-term objectives in relation to the North and to pursue a policy of uniting the people of Ireland in an agreed Ireland. At the 1978 Conference the party adopted the following motion on the Constitutional issue:

Conference believes that British disengagement from Ireland is inevitable and desirable; that it ought to take place as part of an overall political solution which would provide guarantees for both traditions in the North

and minimise the possible dangers in the political, security, economic and financial fields and that the British Government immediately after the Westminster election should call a quadripartite conference of the two Sovereign Governments in London and Dublin and representatives of the two traditions in the North with a view to finding a permanent solution to the Irish problem.

This motion, while accepting and endorsing British disengagement, also emphasises the dangers of precipitate withdrawal and focuses on the preparatory stages for disengagement which could presumably include any internal arrangements in Northern Ireland worked out in quadripartite talks^{and} which could prove acceptable to the two communities.

As part of the follow-up to the 1978 Conference SDLP representatives issued a statement (attached) on 6 December announcing the launching of a New Ireland Campaign "designed to harness the support of everyone in Britain, Ireland or elsewhere who have a positive interest in a peaceful harmonious and lasting settlement to the Irish problem". One of the objectives of the Party will be to raise the issue in Britain - no doubt they have the forthcoming British general election campaign in mind - and they are arranging early meetings with the British Labour and Conservative parties. The current visit to Dublin, during which they will meet representatives of the two Opposition parties as well as the Government, is to be seen in the context of this campaign.

Points likely to be raised

In their meeting with the Government the SDLP are likely to concentrate on giving the background to their new campaign and the thinking behind it (on the lines of the statement of 6 December). They are likely to express concern at the degree of comfort being afforded to the Unionists by the British Government, particularly in relation to extra seats at Westminster. They will presumably add some details of how they see their 'New Ireland' campaign developing, particularly in relation to Britain and the Irish-American community. They are likely to emphasise the advantages of this approach, including as a means of countering support for the IRA and they will no doubt endeavour to enlist Government understanding and support for their endeavours.

Apart from this principal item it is possible that the delegation will touch on a number of other SDLP concerns. These include:

- cross-border co-operation, where the SDLP are somewhat impatient with the pace of progress; *and possible implications of EMS.*
- security issues, in particular the "Ulsterisation" policy of increasingly using the Ulster Defence Regiment for security duties, in spite of strong doubts in the minority community about that force;
- the emergency legislation which the SDLP consider should be repealed in the interests of protecting the legal rights of suspects;
- the remand question, where inordinate delays are occurring in bringing suspects to trial in Northern Ireland;
- the H-Block issue, which the SDLP considers is being handled too simplistically by the British and in a way which is playing into the hands of the IRA.

Department of Foreign Affairs
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