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13

Confidential

Meeting with Mr. John Hume

1. I met Mr. John Hume in Dublin on 24 November. He had taken part (with Minister of State Woods) in the RTE "Frontline" programme the previous evening and was preparing also to participate in the Sunday "This Week" radio programme the following day. His statements on those programmes are important and he regretted that RTE television could not be received generally in N.I.

2. Regarding the events of the previous days Mr. Hume emphasised that regret, not criticism, was and would be the SDLP line on Gerry Fitt's resignation from the leadership and party. However he was aware that Fitt had had contacts with the NIO on Tuesday afternoon and on Wednesday (20/21 November) and had obtained an undertaking that participants in the proposed conference would receive payment. This had been mentioned by Fitt to selected members of the SDLP. Hume inferred that there had been other matters under discussion between Fitt and the British, and it was obvious that he felt relief at Fitt's withdrawal in the sense that his staying on might have proved seriously divisive in the Party. Hume made it quite clear that he wished to be the party leader and confidently expected to be confirmed in that post. He commented that with his involvement in Europe the development came at a bad time. He would lead directly and personally and would aim to impose an appropriate degree of discipline on members particularly as regards their public statements.

3. In immediate application of this intention he had taken steps on Friday morning to stop Séamus Mallon from attempting to meet the Taoiseach or Minister as he had announced. Hume explained this action on the grounds of anxiety to avoid any appearance, on the part of the SDLP, of seeking guidance from the Government in the present situation. He had noted the Taoiseach's position that statements critical of the Taoiseach and Government, notably those made by Paddy Duffy and Séamus Mallon himself misrepresenting our policy on the Irish dimension, would have to be withdrawn before any meeting could be arranged.

4. Hume's tactics in the coming days were firstly to see to his formal election as Party leader on Wednesday 28 November. He would then seek to take up Prime Minister Thatcher's invitation to meet the N.I. party leaders, which Fitt had declined, and would present to Mrs. Thatcher the SDLP view that the British working paper was an insufficient basis on which to hold the conference. The Party was favourable to participation provided the paper could be widened in scope. In addition to the objections previously emphasised by the SDLP to the British document, namely the exclusion of all reference to an Irish dimension and the reopening of debate on established gains like P.R. voting, Hume had found further matters of inconsistency in the document. There were contradictory references to power-sharing on the 1974 model (cp. paragraphs 4 and 32). He would raise all these points and intended to make play also with the general comments from neutral or even unionist sources about the biased nature of the working paper (e.g. in the Belfast Telegraph) and with Paisley's statement, reported in the Saturday papers, about an Irish dimension based on direct dealings between Dublin and Belfast. (In this connection Hume said he was impressed by Paisley's conduct in Europe and particularly mentioned his meeting Minister of State Andrews in a casual context.) He would thus try to save the conference but his fundamental purpose was to establish whether the British proposal was intended to be serious or not. Only Mrs. Thatcher could make that clear to him.

5. Having regard to the timetable in the week of 26-30 November, with the European Council meeting in Dublin, Hume regretted that the SDLP meeting to consider the leadership was not taking place until Wednesday 28th. I suggested that his visit to Mrs. Thatcher might be made before then as acting leader. I mentioned to Mr. Hume the attitude expressed to the Ambassador in London by Lord Elton and Mr. Shaw on Thursday (22 November) that rewriting of the working paper was impossible. Hume was naturally dismissive of this. He based his approach not only on the political imperative as the SDLP saw it but also on the grounds that the political contacts Atkins had been having since he took office, and which he described as the basis for the British proposal and for his optimism as to its success, had been in fact narrow, informal

and tentative. I remarked that we had been surprised, when Hume and Mallon last came to see the Taoiseach (8 October) that they had no knowledge of what had transpired between Atkins and Fitt. Hume confirmed this and said it was an important part of the case he would put to Mrs. Thatcher.

6. Regarding the Government's policy, Mr. Hume did not conceal that he was unimpressed by the Government statement of Wednesday 21st and indeed by the stance of Minister of State Woods on television the previous evening. Were we to be mere observers of the scene? I said that of course this was not the case but that, publicly at least, there were excellent reasons for adherence to the principles of our position and avoiding tactical debate. Hume himself had said he hoped to take part in a conference, assuming that the British were serious. Would the chances of the conference taking place be enhanced if we were to join in the assault on the working paper? I mentioned in confidence that I had expressed criticism of certain points of the document at official level to the British Embassy - they could have no illusion that we regarded the paper as satisfactory as such. On the Irish dimension, which Paddy Duffy had been criticising us about, I said Hume knew our position very fully. The Taoiseach had referred to a conversation he had had with Hume at Waterville on the topic. For us an acceptable form of devolved administration was an immediate priority, not a final aim. Our statement of 21 November - like that of 26 October after Atkins's original announcement - reaffirmed explicitly our entire policy on Northern Ireland as stated by the Taoiseach in the Dáil on 17 October. This policy of course included the declarations of an open desire for reconciliation with unionists and the call to the British to declare their interest in the coming together of all the Irish people in peace. Hume said that was fine but when would we start pressing demands for these aims? Had we not missed a chance to do so in the recent discussions about security? These were questions the SDLP rank and file were asking. I emphasised the balanced nature of the agreed package on security cooperation. Referring to the present tactical situation, I asked Hume would he wish us without further delay to make public criticisms of the British working paper. He replied no, conceding the justification for our present stance. If

the conference collapsed definitively he would expect us to "wade in". At this stage Hume said it would be his policy not to attack the Government publicly and to prevent anybody else in the party from doing so. Hume confirmed, when I asked, that the SDLP would pursue their policy for a quadripartite conference when or if the present British proposal collapsed.

7. In the course of some general conversation about the state of the SDLP after Fitt's departure, the main point to emerge was the view on Hume's part that Fitt had systematically exaggerated the "coalition" analysis of the party. If one looked at the leading SDLP figures in Belfast (O'Hare, O'Donnell, Hendron, Feeney) they were in no sense socialists with a deficient commitment to nationalism. Fitt alone justified this description. Hume clearly felt that, if only in an organisational sense, Gerry Fitt would be missed and he was not looking forward to assuming the task of leading the party from his European Parliament base.

D.M. Neligan

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26 November 1979