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Hugh Swift

Minister's meeting with Mr Airey Neave, 14th February 1979

The Minister met Mr Neave for 45 minutes at the Embassy.

The Minister opened the meeting by giving a summary of the discussion he had had with the Secretary of State.

Mr Neave replying, said he shared Mr Mason's view that an initiative is not possible at this stage. He said that it is difficult to ascertain the mind of the parties in Northern Ireland. For progress consensus is necessary. Since the parties won't talk to each other he was thinking of a Royal Commission. He agreed that there is a certain amount of evolution and that this is likely to continue but he felt it would be wrong to hurry it. He thought that Mason was being a bit ambitious in regard to "the road to Stormont". This would be difficult to achieve. The Secretary of State should be advised by a responsible expert who would carry out a real study. The NIO would say that they know it all but he did not agree. The political parties in Northern Ireland were not well regarded. Outside people - the peace people. Churches - should also be heard. This was the way he was thinking and he would advise Mrs Thatcher accordingly. The Opposition could not do otherwise - with whom could they deal in the parties.

The Minister said that he agreed generally with Mr Neave's perception. No dramatic developments could be expected immediately of a new Government. Time would be needed to examine options. However, he would like to see an evolution in attitudes and the possibility of development. His party had researched very thoroughly the possibilities. These could not be useful before an opportunity was created to discuss them. He had therefore suggested to the Secretary of State that all the parties in the UK should conduct an analysis.

Mr Neave indicated that the parties would do that.

The Minister made the point that if the SDLP were weakened to the point of irrelevance then extremists would benefit. Mr Neave commented that while the SDLP is in an indeterminate stage it was difficult to get their cooperation.

The Minister referring to cross-border/^{economic}developments in the North made the point that EEC funds were additional ^{and} but there was no adverse effect on economic developments elsewhere.

The Minister then told Mr Neave of the remarks he had made to Mr Mason regarding the latter's categorisation of Northern Ireland parties as "moderates" and "extremists".

At this point Mr Neave repeated his point about the appointment of an impartial figure to examine the situation. He remarked in passing that the OUP had been furious at being described as moderates. There followed some comments on moderates in Northern Ireland, whose views are not fully reported. Both the Minister and Mr Neave referred to encouragement they had received from the attitude of Church leaders.

After Mr Neave had again referred to his idea of setting up an impartial enquiry the Minister said that the timing was important; he hoped for some indication of possible developments by the end of the year.

The Minister then went on to inform Mr Neave of the discussions with Mr Mason on security, the H-Block and the situation in the USA. Mr Neave was critical of the lack of action to counteract Provisional propaganda on the H-Block for several months. The leaflet was not enough; he would like to see more TV time used in Britain and also greater publicity in the US.

The meeting concluded with an exchange regarding border cooperation. Mr Neave said that when he says that he would like improved cooperation, or that the border is being used by terrorists this does not imply criticism of the Irish Government. The Minister invited Mr Neave if he had concerns on particular points to convey them to him.

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