

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Current Political Situation

Northern Ireland Conference

The present conference between political parties in Northern Ireland was organised on the basis of a British working paper on the Government of Northern Ireland, published in November 1979. The Working Paper described the task of the conference as 'to establish the highest level of agreement on how to ... (transfer power within the UK) ... in ways which will best meet the immediate needs of Northern Ireland'. The Working Paper excluded from its scope either a return to the old Stormont arrangement or to the arrangements of 1974 (power-sharing executive).

Of the Northern Ireland political parties, Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Alliance Party agreed from the outset to take part in the conference. Molyneaux's Official Unionist Party (OUP) refused to participate and remain hostile to the conference. The SDLP agreed to participate only after Mr. Hume had obtained agreement on a number of points, leading to the establishment of a second-level conference, which also reported to the British Cabinet, and dealt with matters outside the scope of the Working Paper, e.g. the 'Irish dimension', relations with Europe, security matters.

The conference, which began on 7 January, adopted a circular agenda i.e. parties could range over the points of the agenda without definite commitment to agreement on any point until agreement was reached on the main issues as a whole. The conference heard submissions from the three parties involved. The Alliance Party has advocated a system of committees, the Assembly to elect a Chief Executive from their number by alternative vote and a panel of chairmen and members of the committees by means of separate PR (STV) elections. The Irish dimension would be catered for by ad-hoc arrangements. Both at the conference itself and through a series of papers submitted to the parallel conference, the SDLP put forward demands for executive power-sharing and a strong Irish dimension, and has drawn attention to difficulties relating to security and the economy. The DUP presentation, put forward on February 28, ruled out power-sharing and insisted on majority rule, the minority involvement being confined to

backbench committees. (There has been some debate within the OUP about the wisdom of absenting the Party from the conference, but this is to some extent related to the last election for leadership, and shows no signs of leading to a willingness by any significant strand of the OUP to compromise on the basic issues.) Having exhausted all avenues of discussion the Secretary of State adjourned the conference on 24 March.

After lengthy consideration by a sub-committee and the full British Cabinet, a further discussion paper was published by the Secretary of State in July 1980. This contained two options for devolved government: one of a partnership nature with representation in an Executive in proportion to party strength and the other a form of majority rule with a committee system and a "Council of the Assembly" which would have power to delay or veto legislation.

The DUP responded by ruling out option 1 and agreeing to further discussion on option 2 with the intention of removing the proposed blocking or safeguard measures. The OUP have been extremely critical of the Discussion Paper proposals. Mr. Molyneaux prior to meeting the Secretary of State on 1 August 1980 said that there was no point in proceeding with the current negotiations. He would prefer the Secretary of State to concentrate instead on improving the machinery of government in Northern Ireland and to strengthen local government powers. The SDLP welcomed the principle contained in the discussion document that any new institutions of government must have the support of the minority and also emphasised the recognition by the British Government of the unique relationship between the people of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic. The SDLP however are convinced that the Atkins initiative has failed and that the way forward is to hold a quadripartite conference. Mr. Hume stated on 1 October that there is "no possibility whatsoever of political agreement in Northern Ireland on the basis of the two options that have been put forward by the British Government". Although the Alliance Party initially welcomed the discussion paper and option 1 in particular and see in it a basis for progress, they have recently begun to accept that progress will not be made at this stage on the basis of the Atkins proposals.

The Secretary of State has not reconvened the conference but is at present holding the second round in a series of consultations with each of the main political parties in Northern Ireland. It is generally accepted, although this is not admitted by the British, that there is little hope of agreement being reached on any of the options put forward in the July discussion paper. On 7 October Mr. Hugh Rossi, Minister of State at the N.I.O., emphasised however the determination of the British Government to continue with its policy of trying to find agreement between the local parties on new political institutions in Northern Ireland. While the British Government was not working to a specific deadline he expressed the hope that it would be able to bring in legislation in the forthcoming Parliamentary session. The possibility of increased powers for local government in Northern Ireland or greater integration was ruled out by Mr. Rossi in his speech on 7 October.

The Taoiseach while not being entirely dismissive of the Secretary of State's efforts has in his most recent speech on 5 October pointed out that the recent proposals have failed. The Taoiseach has sought to break the deadlock by calling on the British Government to declare its interest in encouraging Irish unity by consent and by seeking to raise the problem to a new inter-governmental level involving representatives of the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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