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SDLP - Policy

Present SDLP policy operates on the basis that the Atkins proposals have no future. The SDLP Constituency Representatives concluded at their meeting on 12 July that agreement on the Secretary of State's proposals was impossible because the Unionists had rejected them.

Mr. Hume has however specifically welcomed the statement of principle in the White Paper that any new institutions of Government which the minority cannot accept as its institutions will not bring stability and will not be worth having. He also welcomed the recognition in the White Paper of the unique relationship between the people of Britain and Ireland and the need to further that relationship. Mr. Hume links this aspect to the agreement between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister to hold regular meetings and the SDLP views such meetings as part of the further discussions envisaged by the British Government.

In the meeting between the SDLP and the Taoiseach on 17 July Mr. Hume felt that the next step forward should be to convince the British that they cannot simply maintain a guarantee to the unionists which has them "frozen in their intransigence" but that they should look realistically at and encourage a new political line up in Ireland. If such active British consent could be achieved then the next step should be quadripartite talks with three items on the agenda namely Northern Ireland, the North-South relationship and the Irish-British relationship.

This approach is generally in line with the policy of the Irish Government which seeks a modification of the guarantee and the involvement of the two governments and the communities in Northern Ireland in discussions which would lead to a lasting solution. In achieving these objectives there may however be tactical differences in approach between the SDLP and the Irish Government. In particular the SDLP have stressed

to us the acceptance by British officials such as Stowe that the Atkins process is finished and that we are now into a new phase. Mr. Stowe however and other British officials have made clear to the London Embassy their view that the Atkins process will continue for some time yet and have implied that the negative attitude of the SDLP on this issue is encouraged by the Irish Government. In these circumstances we would need to be careful in order that the Irish Government does not receive blame for the eventual failure of the Atkins initiative.

In the long term other differences of approach may be revealed. If the discussions envisaged above take place, the Taoiseach has made clear his willingness to be flexible and to go a long way to meet the wishes of the majority community in Northern Ireland. It is likely that the unionist tradition in Northern Ireland would wish at a minimum to maintain the present six-county area in whatever new structure (e.g. federal) emerged. The SDLP and ^{particularly} certain strands within it (such as Seamus Mallon and Paddy Duffy) would not be agreeable to this.

The SDLP in the policy document approved at their last Annual Conference in November 1979 called on the Irish Government to "clearly demonstrate that it is prepared to accept the sacrifices involved in real unity, including the social changes which will demonstrate that Irish life is not dominated by any one section or tradition". In private contacts the SDLP have also stressed the need for the Irish Government to prepare and spell-out its position on the three dimensions mentioned earlier. From our point of view it would not be in the interests of the Irish Government to reveal publicly its position prior to the possible opening of negotiations. Mr. Hume at the meeting with the Taoiseach on 17 July appeared to accept that the positions prepared privately by the SDLP and the Irish Government should not be revealed at too early a stage but we should be

conscious of the fact that if the British Government fails to accept our proposal for discussions in a wider context after the failure of the Atkins initiative the SDLP may then revert to suggesting that we make our detailed position publicly clear in an effort to move the situation forward.

Finally it should be borne in mind that the SDLP having virtually dismissed the Atkins initiative (Mr. Mallon has indicated to us that the SDLP could not now accept a power-sharing administration in a purely Northern Ireland context) feels very dependent on the Irish Government for future progress. A continuation of direct rule or increased powers for local authorities could be very damaging for the SDLP and it will therefore exert maximum pressure on the Irish Government in order to achieve our roughly similar objectives. Our tactics and that of the SDLP may not always be the same particularly if the British Government will not take the fundamental decisions which we seek

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