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Northern Ireland Conference and General Political Situation

The recent 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 U.K.) ... 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 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 1980, 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 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 drew 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. Having

exhausted all avenues of discussion the Secretary of State adjourned the conference on 24 March 1980.

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. Molyneux 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 on strengthening 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 also made clear their view that the Atkins initiative had 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 begun to accept that progress will not be made at this stage on the basis of the Atkins proposals.

The Secretary of State did not reconvene the conference but held a series of consultations with each of the main political parties in Northern Ireland. No further progress was made in these discussions and it is generally accepted that there is now no prospect of any

acceptable agreement among the political parties emerging from the "Atkins initiative". If anything a greater degree of polarisation in the attitudes of both communities is now evident than before the Northern Ireland Conference began in January 1980. This has not been helped by the H-Blocks crisis. In the aftermath of the "clothes concession" by the British Government the four Unionist parties (OUP, DUP, UUUP (Baird) and UPNI) issued a joint statement condemning the move. Loud calls were made for the Secretary of State's removal with some DUP members stating that no further discussions could be held with the British Government while Mr. Atkins remained in office.

At the recent OUP Party Conference delegates were divided between the traditional stand of a return to majority rule and greater integration with Great Britain. There are indications that the integrationist lobby within the OUP is gaining ground. Attitudes towards the Republic and the policies of the Irish Government have also hardened. The DUP maintains its view that a majority rule administration should be set up without any blocking powers for the minority. The DUP and OUP are strongly opposed to any role for the Irish Government in the decision-making process on Northern Ireland. The increasing hostility on their part can be gauged from the decision by both parties to oppose courtesy visits by district councillors to the South. The DUP recently suspended the Mayor of Larne, Roy Beggs, for joining in such a visit.

On the other hand the SDLP at its party conference (8/9 November) while reiterating its commitment to partnership in Northern Ireland recognised that due to unionist attitudes no progress was now likely on that basis. The SDLP called instead for the setting aside of the British guarantee and the establishment of a constitutional conference involving the two sovereign Governments and the representatives of all major political parties in Northern Ireland. The conference would provide the forum in which the necessary negotiations for a "new Ireland" could take place.

The British Government while it is now fully aware of the virtual impossibility of setting up a devolved administration in the context of the "Atkins initiative" remains publicly committed to attempts

Irish Citizens in British National Elections
British Citizens Resident in Ireland

to find agreement between the Northern Ireland parties on new political institutions. The British Government will over the next few months be considering how "to create arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland that will better meet the needs of all its people" (Queen's speech, 20 November). The idea has been mooted in the media that elections might be held next year for an advisory assembly which could be developed step-by-step. This possibility has however been strongly opposed by the OUP, DUP and SDLP and does not appear to be a viable option. Increased powers for local government in Northern Ireland or greater integration have also been ruled out by spokesmen for the British Government.

It is apparent from recent contacts at official level with the British that they are now pessimistic on the prospects for setting up a devolved administration or local assembly and that further attempts in this direction have been postponed until next year. The Northern Ireland political parties will be preoccupied in the first half of 1981 with the May district council elections and the British authorities may indeed feel that it will be possible to postpone their next move until after that date.

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The British side has been in a number of contacts, at various levels, between the two sides over the last six months. The British were told that while the subject was not one of constitutional implications, we were pressing forward vigorously an intensive inter-departmental examination of the proposal. More recently they have been asked to answer queries from them, that our examination was still not complete and that the matter would be a political decision. It was indicated that decisions could be taken in time to make a firm statement of intention from the British Government meeting but that this was not completely excluded. We have also adverted to the fact that the timing of any legislation here would be influenced by progress with legislation pending in Westminster on British nationality law (see below).

The British attitude is that they have no wish to apply pressure to make the change involved, that they recognize there are difficulties but that they would welcome the change. They see it as being helpful in defusing speculation as to the fact that Irish citizens resident here might be franchise in all elections in the U.K. Such opposition is voiced mainly on the Right Wing of the Conservative Party. The matter is topical in Britain. It was raised following publication last July of a White Paper on British nationality law. This foreshadowed a more