

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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for PA Alliance & SDLP & Prior initiative

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Visit to Northern Ireland 2/3 March 1982

1. While on a visit to Northern Ireland to introduce Mr. E. Smyth to some of our contacts involved in human rights issues in N.I., I took the opportunity to have discussions with Mr. John Cushnahan and Dr. Joe Hendron in relation to the meetings which their respective parties have recently had with the Secretary of State.

2. The Alliance Party met Mr. Prior yesterday and had a discussion lasting two hours on the proposed initiative. The main points of interest to emerge were as follows:

(a) Prior said that the initiative would have to have a stronger Irish dimension (at the last meeting involving the Alliance Party ^{he had said} there would be no Irish dimension!). This would be done by referring in the White Paper to the need to recognise the two traditions that existed in N.I. and by agreeing to the setting up ^{the parliamentary tier of} of the Anglo-Irish process at a relatively early date involving members of the new Assembly. Individual Assembly members would be able to participate in the parliamentary tier without the need for agreement or approval of such a course of action by the Assembly itself. The initiative for establishing the tier would however remain with the two parliaments in London and Dublin. The Alliance representatives while agreeing on the need to recognise the two traditions opposed the early establishment of the parliamentary tier as this would lead to strong Unionist (OUP and DUP) opposition to the proposed initiative;

(b) Mr. Prior hoped to transfer some powers immediately after the establishment of the Assembly. He still seemed to envisage a voluntary coalition type of arrangement which would involve the OUP, Alliance and SDLP. He mentioned Commerce, Social Services and Agriculture as the three areas he had in mind and implied that each party mentioned above would provide one Minister for each of the Departments concerned. The Alliance Party remains extremely sceptical that the OUP will come into any such arrangement;

(c) The Westminster Parliament and not the Secretary of State would be given power under the new legislation to approve or disapprove of the transfer of the powers involved which had already been agreed by 70% weighted majority in the Assembly. Mr. Prior seemed very firm on the question of a weighted majority pitched at 70%;

(d) Mr. Prior hoped to publish the White Paper before Easter and asked to have a further meeting before that date with the Alliance Party;

(e) Mr. Cushnahan said that his party had raised the question of providing a Bill of Rights for N.I. Mr. Prior while agreeing that it was a good idea said that it would have to wait until a later date. There would be enough on hand for the present in getting the new initiative legislated for;

(f) the Secretary of State concluded the meeting with the remark that he would have to have the agreement of both communities in N.I. to his proposals before he would go ahead with his initiative. The Alliance members present did not take this remark as being completely serious.

3. The SDLP as we know met the Secretary of State on 26 February. Dr. Hendron said that the following points emerged in their discussion.

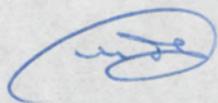
(a) Mr. Prior was much more positive in relation to the Irish dimension. He said that the parliamentary tier could go ahead at a relatively early date although it would still be up to the parliaments concerned to take the initiative on the matter. Members of the Assembly would be able to participate as of right (not subject to Assembly veto) in the parliamentary tier. The White Paper would contain strong references to the need to recognise the Irish identity. The SDLP delegation while pleased that there had been some movement by Mr. Prior to recognise their problems, pointed out that words in a White Paper did not necessarily mean any real movement;

(b) on the other matter which the SDLP had pressed at their last meeting (slowing-down the speed at which Prior is moving on the initiative) there was no change on the British side. Mr. Prior said that he hoped to publish his White Paper before the end of March and to hold elections in the Autumn;

(c) Mr. Prior also mentioned to the SDLP his proposal that three ministries should be transferred to local control as soon as the Assembly has met. He remained firm on 70% weighted majority as the way in which powers would be transferred.

(d) Dr. Hendron referred to press reports at the weekend and the Sunday Press article in particular which purported to give SDLP views. I said that we had seen the reports and were surprised at the reference in the "Fergus Hall" report to a letter from the Taoiseach to Mr. Prior. Dr. Hendron said that he had not been aware that the letter had been referred to. "Fergus Hall" was in fact Eamonn Mallie of Downtown Radio who had had contact with SDLP members on Saturday night last. Dr. Hendron regretted that the letter had been referred to and said this had not been done by Hume or himself. He then said that he felt Mallon was out to scuttle the initiative on the basis that it was better to take a hardline and hold out for better proposals (federal or confederal arrangements) in due course. Dr. Hendron's personal view was that N.I. was in such total economic and social chaos with widespread poverty that the SDLP and other parties would have to compete in the election and try and work the proposed system. Otherwise they would be selling-out their position and letting the Provos in. However the SDLP was in a very difficult position in trying to sell the package to its traditional supporters. Power-sharing was not on offer and the Irish dimension was a weak one (nice words on the Irish identity in the White Paper and a parliamentary tier which would only be a talking shop).

The SDLP would be considering its position carefully over the next two weeks and would again meet Prior before the White Paper is published. The constituency representatives will meet on 10 March and make recommendations to the Executive which meets on 13 March. The SDLP will also have contact with the government installed on 9 March. Finally Dr. Hendron mentioned that John Hume had told Mr. Prior at the end of the meeting that "he did not feel hopeful" about the SDLP being able to work the initiative that was being proposed".



Martin Burke
3 March 1982

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