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Visit to Northern Ireland

28/29 October 1982

L. I met during the course of my visit Rev. Martin Smyth, OUP, Mr. Frank Millar, OUP, Mr. John Cushnahan, Alliance Party, Dr. Joe Hendron SDLP and Dr. Weir and Rev. Cobain of the Presbyterian Church.

2. I met Rev. Smyth at Glengall St., which was badly damaged in an INLA attack on 19 October. He was in a confident mood and more than once referred to the extent of the OUP victory on 20 October. He clearly sees the OUP as having the dominant and decisive voice in political developments in Northern Ireland.

3. When I queried Rev. Smyth on his party's attitude to the Assembly he vehemently made the point that the OUP was not "setting out to wreck the Assembly". They considered the initiative to be unworkable but would participate and demonstrate its unworkability. He felt that the position of Presiding Officer should be filled by the OUP (rumours are circulating that Molyneaux wishes Smyth to be appointed to the post). He was critical and dismissive of the Alliance party's efforts to promote their preferred candidate (John Carson). Once a Presiding Officer has been appointed a standing orders committee will be formed and the Assembly adjourned (for 2/3 weeks) until it reports. Other committees will then be formed and work will begin on the preparation of a report on a preferred form of devolved government. Rev. Smyth felt that the DUP would cooperate in preparing a report along the lines of the 1975 Convention document with perhaps minor modifications. This report will then be put to the British and Rev. Smyth recognises that it will be rejected. He hinted that this might be the point when the OUP will try to bring the Assembly to a conclusion. He referred to the danger of having a completely negative forum in existence which will spend all its time criticising the British government. The Assembly could not provide the normal politics of government and opposition. In addition the economic situation was disastrous and unless more money was forthcoming from the British it would get worse.

The electorate could begin to blame the Assembly for failures and lack of progress over which it had no control. Rev. Smyth said that Mr. Prior at his recent meeting with him had displayed absolute determination to go ahead with the Assembly. He felt however that it should not last more than a year but that in order to "save face" Prior would do his utmost to keep it going.

4. Rev. Smyth felt that the PSF vote was not that surprising. The latent support for PSF had always been there and had been boosted by a younger and disenchanted generation coming on to the electoral register. The media particularly the British media had overdone their reaction helped by Adams being declared elected first. Rev. Smyth said that he respected the outcome of the ballot box and that he would accept PSF's right to go to the Assembly or to conduct constituency business with the Northern Ireland authorities. His party would of course have as little to do with them as possible. He stressed however that the PSF result should not be over dramatised and was critical of the way Prior had refused to meet them. Prior should have said he was consulting the four main parties and let PSF make the running if they wished to put views forward.

5. Rev. Smyth said that there was a great deal of antagonism in his community to the Irish Government. The South in his opinion was moving further away from the North and Great Britain. He felt that we had done everything possible "to woo the nationalist" community away from what could have been a constructive political development in Northern Ireland. He saw the proposed Council for a New Ireland if set up as an "insult to Ulster people and the British Government." I referred to the intransigence on the Unionist side and the insistence on majority rule and opposition to any Irish dimension. Rev. Smyth naturally disagreed and seemed to envisage a role for the minority as a loyal opposition which could be given a role in governing at levels up to but not including ministerial level.

6. Rev. Smyth maintained that the OUP was a united party and that there would be no splits on policy. He conceded that there were differences of opinion but that these would be

resolved within the party. He claimed that OUP assembly members were conscious of their strengthened position and that as the largest group in the Assembly could consolidate their dominant position on the Unionist side. The election of H. MacCusker M.P. as deputy leader on 30 October can be seen as an effort to weld both sections (devolutionist and intergrationist of the party together).

7. Frank Millar, press officer, OUP had the following points to make:

- (a) he confirmed that Martin Smyth was the leadership's candidate for the post of Presiding Officer. He said that the Alliance Party had made clear informally that they would oppose him but could support John Carson. If the OUP did not come up with a "moderate" compromise candidate it could result in the DUP obtaining the post
- (b) Molyneaux's action in calling for all Assembly members to meet and discuss a resolution making control of security a prerequisite for participation in the Assembly was taken without consultation with other Assembly members and is indicative of Molyneaux's state of euphoria over the election result. The OUP subsequently amended the resolution to simply call for control of security and presented it to Mr. Prior on 1 November. Mr. Millar saw the Molyneaux move as an effort to halt the Assembly on the security^{issue}. He felt correctly as it turned out that the party will not allow him to boycott the Assembly at this early stage;
- (c) on Paisley's fairly moderate stance, Mr. Millar felt that Paisley liked the idea of the Assembly providing a platform for permanent opposition to a variety of British government policies. Paisley would do this utmost to keep the Assembly in being;

- (d) Mr. Millar saw the Assembly developing on the lines outlined by Martin Smyth and coming to a stalemate on a Unionist proposal for devolved government. The Assembly could not work and after it failed there would be calls for increased powers for local government and perhaps the setting up of some form of regional council;
- (e) on the PSF vote, Millar felt that this vote had always been there but the fact that it had been so clearly expressed could have grave implications for the security situation. Both he and Martin Smyth said that there were elements on the Protestant side who now felt that the Catholic community had supported terrorists and that they were therefore justified in waging war on that community. The situation could easily escalate into a campaign of tit for tat killings. Polarisation between both communities was now greater than ever;
- (f) Mr. Millar failed in his first electoral contest to get an Assembly seat in South Antrim by less than 200 votes and has been asked to run an OUP office at Stormont for the duration of the Assembly. The NIO has reluctantly agreed to provide facilities at Stormont for an office which will be staffed during normal working hours and when the Assembly meets.
- (g) the INLA bomb at Glengall St., on 19 October was placed on the window-ledge of the room occupied by Mr. Millar. When the bomb was discovered both Molyneaux and Martin Smyth were in the room with him. All would have been killed if the bomb had not been discovered.

8. Mr. John Cushnahan, Alliance was pleased with his election performance in North Down particularly in getting more first preferences than Robert MacCartney who was seen as a threat to the Alliance vote in the constituency. He felt that it had been a good performance by his party and thought that they should have taken another seat in South Belfast if

P.R. had been properly utilised. The following are the main points made by Mr. Cushnahan:

- (a) the OUP position will be decisive on how long the Assembly lasts. He felt that sooner or later the OUP will bring the Assembly to a halt. He felt that the pro-devolutionists are strong enough to ensure participation for several months at least. Mr. Cushnahan was critical of the arrogance and over-confidence being displayed by the OUP since their election victory. It boded ill for any compromise in their approach to the proposed report on devolved government which the Assembly will prepare. He confirmed that the Alliance Party were opposed to a hardline candidate such as Martin Smyth for Presiding Officer and that this view had been made known to the OUP. He hoped that a more moderate person such as John Carson would be proposed;
- (b) he was adamant that the Alliance Party would not compromise on the power-sharing issue and would not do any deals with the OUP or DUP unless power-sharing was offered to and rejected by the SDLP;
- (c) Mr. Cushnahan felt that standing orders could be drafted quickly and sub-committees appointed by early December.;
- (d) the Alliance meeting with Mr. Prior had not been of any substance as both sides were anxious to avoid discussing Assembly business. Alliance had pressed for an early starting date but got the impression that 15/16 November were the dates in mind. Mr. Prior gave an impression of absolute determination to press ahead with the initiative. He was in a relaxed mood and did not appear to be unduly perturbed by the election result. He also made clear that he expected to remain at his present post at least until the Westminster elections;

(e) like everybody else I met, Mr. Cushnahan was not unduly surprised by the PSF vote. Everybody knew that a large section of the minority held strong views and did not vote if candidates were not standing who shared their viewpoint. PSF had also been helped by a younger and generally unemployed generation in areas such as West Belfast. He felt that the British media in particular had over-reacted. The Alliance party were opposed to consultations with PSF unless they renounced violence and felt that Mr. Prior instead of rejecting consultations out of hand with PSF should have put the onus on PSF to reject violence;

(f) the Alliance Party are opposed to the idea of a Council for a New Ireland feeling that efforts should be concentrated on bridging gaps between the two communities within Northern Ireland first. Mr. Cushnahan said that his party was not opposed in principle to an Irish dimension but felt that it should focus on practical cooperation and in developing cooperation between the two governments and between North and South. He thought that the parliamentary tier could be helpful in this regard and said that his party would participate in the parliamentary tier if it was established.

9. Dr. Joe Hendron, SDLP said that the Assembly members of his party would meet on 1 November to discuss tactics and to appoint spokesmen on the various issues. He was concerned about the departure of Michael Canavan and Paddy Duffy feeling that it would be difficult to find people as well qualified as they are in their particular specialities. Canavan in particular had been an excellent spokesman on law and order and he wondered whether some arrangement could be arrived at to retain him outside the Assembly group.

10. He was cautious in commenting on party tactics prior to the 1 November meeting but did refer to the proposal for a Council for a New Ireland as being a "bit gimicky" but that the SDLP needed some initiative to maintain support and credibility. Dr. Hendron was anxious that the Council idea if pursued should have the support of both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. However

for real progress to be made it required the cooperation of the two governments and parties in the North leading preferably to a conference which could resolve the issue once and for all. A revitalisation of the Anglo-Irish process was necessary.

11. On the PSF success Dr. Hendron felt that faulty tactics on his part had been responsible for the outcome in West Belfast. He had split the constituency in three sections and allowed Mary Muldoon to focus on the area where he was strongest in an effort to spread the vote. He would have been better to concentrate on a higher first preference vote himself. In addition personation by PSF accounted for at least 25% of the vote. The PSF campaign had numerous election workers, plenty of funds and employed a certain of intimidation in collecting ballot cards from various homes and older people on their way to the polling booths. It was a most unpleasant campaign from a personal point of view with many abusive phone calls and threatening letters. His family had been greatly frightened and upset by it. Dr. Hendron has for the first time in his career applied for a gun licence and with RUC assistance selected a weapon. He felt that the result of the election had to be acknowledged and that the PSF were entitled (much as it galled him) to a hearing but that they should be challenged at every opportunity on their support for violent methods. He felt that the PSF call for a conference of all parties opposed to the initiative and the IIP call on nationalists members to resign their seats would be rejected by the SDLP.

12. Dr. Hendron was gloomy on the prospect of winning the West Belfast seat in the next Westminster election. While he felt that he could put up a better performance than in the Assembly election, the situation would be complicated by the fact that Gerry Fitt would probably run also (if he did not contest he would lose out financially under whatever rules apply to outgoing members at Westminster).

13. I had a conversation with Dr. Jack Weir and Rev. Robert Cobain, information officer, Presbyterian Church. They gave me the attached copy of the resolutions passed by the government committee of the Church on 28 October. The following are the main points made by them:

- (a) the Presbyterian Church are urging those elected to the Assembly to try and work the system and eventually bring about devolved government. Dr. Weir expressed the fear that if London and Dublin press the majority community too hard that there are some Unionists who would advocate a take over using their election to the Assembly as a mandate. I expressed scepticism on this point but Dr. Weir insisted that there were people thinking along those lines who despaired of the British approach;
- (b) the PSF vote had stirred into action a hard core of people in the Protestant community who were motivated by blind hatred of the Catholic community and Dr. Weir feared a pattern of sectarian assassinations could now develop again;
- (c) Dr. Weir felt that one had to acknowledge that the PSF had obtained a limited mandate through the democratic process while continuing to press them on their stance on violence. It was "healthy" in some respects that this vote had come out and displayed the support which people always felt had been there. He thought that Prior was foolish to have dismissed PSF rather than putting the pressure on them to renounce violence or own up to their murderous tactics;
- (d) Dr. Weir felt that the Council for a New Ireland proposal could intensify divisions on the island even further. Both communities in Northern Ireland were further apart than ever and it looked as if the situation was going to get even worse.



Martin Burke

1 November 1982

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