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To:

From:

Mr Murray perhaps you could take a copy & return to me
CONFIDENTIAL

SDLP talks with Prior

SDLP Leader, John Hume accompanied by Mallon, Hendron and McGrady met on Monday afternoon with Prior who was accompanied by Gowrie. The talks lasted 2½ hours and were concerned with a possible political initiative by the British Government in Northern Ireland.

I met with Hume yesterday in Dublin at his request (he was in transit to Brussels) and he conveyed the following:

His overall conviction remains that Prior is motivated principally by ambition to be seen to deliver some political progress with a view to strengthening his base in the Tory Party for the next leadership contest.

Much of the discussion was taken up with the notion of "rolling devolution", whereby power would be devolved to an elected assembly in Northern Ireland on a piece meal and agreed basis subject to weighted majority decisions of the assembly. Hume told Prior that he could see nothing in this for SDLP as it would be extremely difficult to "sell" to the Party's supporters at this time. Neither the SDLP nor the minority in general could confidently envisage Unionist support for devolution of power in those terms; Unionists had hitherto failed to acknowledge that there are two identities in Northern Ireland and, until they did, the minority could not be confident that they would voluntarily share power on any basis. In those circumstances it would be very difficult indeed for the SDLP to face into an election without any clear guarantee of power-sharing in such an assembly.

Hume put it to Prior that the circumstances he (Hume) would wish to see would be institutions which would permit him to encourage young men in the Bogside to put on the uniform of the RUC. He believes that this particular image and all that it entails made a strong impression on Prior.

Towards the end of the session, Prior made two points which Hume found valuable and on which he would like to have our thinking before going back to the British in two weeks from Monday last:

1. Prior said he would like to have from the SDLP some ideas as to how best the interests of persons in Northern Ireland whose primary self-identification was Irish could be promoted in the Anglo-Irish framework. Hume undertook to come back to Prior with suggestions in two weeks.

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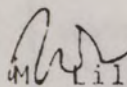
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2. As an alternative to the "rolling devolution" concept, Prior suggested for consideration a system of "separation of powers" whereby the executive would be headed by him (Prior) and institutionally separate from an elected assembly. The executive would not be confined to Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office (as had been envisaged in an earlier kite-flying exercise by Gowrie) but could contain nominees either from within the assembly or from outside it who in some cases might exemplify the Irish identity element. Again Hume said that he would give Prior his reaction within the same deadline.

In asking for our thinking on these two ideas, Hume specifically requested that we should not raise them unilaterally with the British before the SDLP has an opportunity to respond.

Hume told Prior that a political initiative, to be acceptable to the SDLP, should be clearly a constituent part of the Anglo-Irish framework and represent progress in it.

He said to me separately that the question of security was not discussed with Prior. He would, however, wish the Taoiseach and Ministers to be aware, as he had indicated to them earlier, that he placed considerable store by the concept of an All-Ireland Court now under consideration. He said that, if implemented, this could well permit the SDLP to fully support the RUC which would be a major breakthrough in community relations in Northern Ireland.


M. Lillis.

13th January, 1982.

c.c. Taoiseach, Mr. Nally, Mr. Kirwan, Mr. Hourican.
DFA: PSM, Mr. Donlon, Mr. Neligan.
Attorney General.
Special Adviser.