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Call by British Ambassador

The British Ambassador called on me at 10.45 today, at his request. Indicating that what he had to say was on the instructions of his Government, he said that his authorities were disappointed and concerned about the misrepresentation and criticism of the current British initiative in Northern Ireland contained particularly in the Taoiseach's address at Bodenstown last Sunday. In the view of the British Government, it was unhelpful for us to continue to describe the Northern Ireland initiative as fruitless and inherently detrimental. He had instructions to draw attention to the purpose of the Northern Ireland legislation now being implemented, namely to transfer administrative responsibility to elected Northern Ireland representatives. In this connection, he drew my attention to a part of Mr Prior's speech to Belfast Rotary Club on 20 September, which reads:

"To the minority, I say this. The Assembly gives you a golden opportunity to make your voice heard. It ensures that if devolved Government is to return to Northern Ireland, powers must be devolved in a way that is acceptable to you. Westminster will accept nothing less. Your Irish identity is fully recognised and the Government is committed to maintaining and developing the links between the UK and the Republic."

I said that we found difficulty in accepting statements such as the one he had quoted at face value. The whole process of devolution depended upon the agreement of the Northern Ireland political parties and since this would evidently not be forthcoming, there was small point in emphasising what Westminster would or would not accept. I told the Ambassador that I had been reading before his arrival the manifesto of the Official Unionist Party which made it quite plain that they were aiming to restore majority rule in the North. It was evident that the various political parties entered the Assembly with views of how it should be used which differed widely from those of

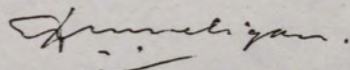
the British Government. We now gathered from various sources that the Assembly might last for some considerable time, perhaps even years, without reaching the report stage and the prospect of such a development increased fears on the nationalist side that those parties who would have taken their seats in the Assembly, including the Alliance Party, might agree on some sort of devolution package which the British authorities might in fact deem to have a measure of cross-community support. I observed further that efforts to reassure the SDLP now being made by Mr Prior had not been well prepared given the barring of Séamus Mallon and the psychological and political consequences of the way that matter had been handled.

I told the Ambassador that I would of course bring his representations to attention at the earliest moment, but I told him that criticisms which might be made here of his Government's proposals were based upon a full analysis of the concepts on which they were based, of their intentions and of their likely effects. I said that it was unlikely, to say the least, that our convictions in this regard would be modified by his démarche. I referred to the present activities of the Minister in the USA where he was essentially clarifying our viewpoint in the light of visits to America in the recent past by Mr Prior and Lord Gowrie.

The Ambassador said he noted that we had strong convictions on the point of his Government's proposal, but he had to say that there were equally convictions on the side of his Government and that in his view matters were not helped by public repetition of the different views. He went on to say that the election in the North would establish a new series of political facts, for instance by giving a representative mandate to seventy-eight politicians who he thought might use that mandate in constructive ways which at the present moment we could not foresee. On this point, I noted that this was to take an optimistic view of future uncertainties and said

that the existence of mandated representatives of the parties might not mean all that much in itself, especially when one considered that a number of front-rank members of the SDLP had declined to go forward for election, marking thereby a further degree of rejection of the Assembly than that of their Party as a whole. It would be wrong, I said, to suppose that on account of this stance those individuals would cease to hold the important and influential position within the SDLP which they did at present. The Ambassador remarked (not for the first time in my hearing) that they sometimes wondered in Belfast whether the SDLP would ever again be whole-heartedly prepared to fight an election.

The Ambassador then took his leave, after referring briefly to tomorrow's visit to Dublin by Dr Nicholas Scott, Parliamentary Under-secretary in the NIO.



D.M. Neligan

30 September 1982