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Resumed discussion of Opsahl Commission Report by Oireachtas Foreign Affairs Committee (6 Oct).

At its meeting this afternoon, the Oireachtas Foreign Affairs Committee resumed its discussion of the Opsahl Commission Report. Robin Wilson, Editor of "Fortnight" and one of the two founders of Initiative 92, answered questions from Committee members about the Report.

The Committee decided to establish a sub-committee to deal with Northern Ireland matters. The sub-committee was asked to give detailed consideration to the 25 key recommendations made by the Opsahl Commission with a view to enabling the Committee as a whole to finalize its views on the Report.

The following points of interest arose in the discussion.

Deputy Declan Bree asked whether there had been a British Government response to the Report. Mr Wilson mentioned that at the recent BIA Conference in Cambridge, which the Tanaiste had also attended, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had described the Report as extremely helpful (in unscripted remarks added to his address on the Saturday evening). It had also been agreed that members of the Commission would have a formal meeting with the Secretary of State and Minister Ancram.

Wilson commented that the level of interest in the Report had been considerably greater in the Republic than in Britain, a function of the general disinterest in the Northern Ireland problem on the part of British public opinion.

On the prospects for political talks, Wilson said that there had been some scepticism in the Commission about the chances

of a resumption of talks and that this had been reflected in the proposal for an "official Opsahl", to be established by the British Government in consultation with the Irish Government, in the event of a failure of the talks process.

In Wilson's view, developments since the publication of the Report had tended to vindicate the Commission's judgment. In particular, there had been the reported "understanding" between Molyneux and the British Government. The UUP leader was clearly unenthusiastic about talks. Writing in a recent UUP newsletter, he had said (i) that action was needed to demonstrate that NI was secure within the UK and would be governed in the same way as the rest of the UK; and (ii) that there should be an end to political "initiatives" and also to the concept of nothing being agreed until everything was agreed. The DUP, for their part, had made clear that they would not even talk in a bilateral mode with the British Government because of the Hume/Adams talks.

Wilson had been interested by the Tanaiste's emphasis in his BIA speech on the need for the two Governments to elaborate a joint approach to be put to the parties. (He quoted approvingly a number of passages from the speech which dealt with the role of the two Governments). The Secretary of State had echoed some of this thinking in his own remarks and had indicated that the two Governments might put together elements for an overall agreement which might be put to the parties. Wilson went on to suggest that the two Governments were effectively saying that there were ideas around (such as those in the Opsahl Report) which deserved attention and should be acted on.

On a Select Committee for NI, Wilson said that the view taken by the Commission had been that, while there was a democratic deficit at Westminster, the more important deficit was that in Northern Ireland. He agreed with those who suspected that

the Unionists were interested in a Select Committee not as part of wider arrangements but as a substitute for such arrangements.

Asked by Deputy Bree if he felt Southern politicians should talk to Sinn Fein, Wilson said that the Commission had not taken a position on that. On Section 31, he said that the Commission favoured the repeal of both this and the corresponding legislation in the UK. Deputy Proinsias De Rossa commented that Section 31 was counter-productive and that he hoped Minister Higgins would introduce revised terms which would enable Sinn Fein spokesmen to be interrogated on their support for terrorism.

Deputy Bree brought up the Commission's proposal for an inquiry into the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Wilson explained that, in view of the many submissions which had expressed anxiety about the Catholic Church's role, the Commission had taken the view that an independent academic inquiry might be one way of handling this matter. It had also considered that it might be useful to explore further the statement made by the Catholic Hierarchy to the New Ireland Forum.

A number of Committee members voiced scepticism about the proposal for an independent inquiry. Deputy Noel Davern felt that any inquiry should look also at the role of the Protestant Churches. The Chairman, Deputy Lenihan, noted that the Opsahl Report had dealt at one point with the latter. Wilson suggested that an unqualified historical apology by Protestant Church leaders for mistakes made in the course of the Northern Ireland conflict would have a very positive impact on Northern Catholics. He noted that Archbishop Eames had replied evasively when confronted with this idea during a discussion with the Opsahl Commission.

In one of the most impressive submissions received by the Commission, the former Presbyterian Moderator, John Dunlop, had described the NI problem in terms of a "double minority" (Catholics in NI and Protestants in Ireland as a whole). What was important, Dunlop had argued, was that the minority should believe that the majority were acting fairly. This idea had gone into the central Opsahl recommendation for giving each community an "equal voice" in Northern Ireland.

Senator Mick Lanigan asked whether the Commission had heard evidence from anyone in relation to Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act (whose terms he recited). He also drew attention to Section 65 of that Act which exempted the Freemasons from the provisions relating to unlawful oaths or assemblies. In response, Wilson said that the Government of Ireland Act had been superseded by the Ireland Act of 1949, the NI Constitution Act of 1973 and the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which had established the principle that there could be no change in NI's status without the consent of a majority.

The effect of this had been to render nugatory the claim of sovereignty over the whole island which the GOIA made. Wilson noted in passing that it was under Section 75 of the GOIA that the British Government had abolished Stormont and introduced direct rule.

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