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Reaction to the publication of the Patten Report

13 SEP 1999

Presentation by Commission

1. Chris Patten's presentation of the recommendations at the press conference yesterday has been widely acknowledged as a powerful, authoritative performance, which served to launch the findings of the Commission on a very strong, impressive note. In his comments, he called for all those involved to look carefully and calmly at the recommendations and not to react hastily to them. Commenting that it was the most difficult assignment he had ever undertaken, he accepted that the history of the issue involved "two stories of pain". A resolution could only be found by focussing on the future and by coming up with a police service that was acceptable to both traditions. Stating that the recommendations were rooted squarely in the Good Friday Agreement, he robustly challenged those who opposed the report as to what they expected when they signed up to the terms of reference involved, and to bring forward their blueprint to meet the requirements of the Agreement.

British Government reaction

2. The first detailed response of the British Government was provided by the Secretary of State. In a strong performance at her press conference, she signalled the acceptance in principle by the British Government of the Patten recommendations, as we had been urging her privately to do. Importantly, she also put the focus of the consultation process on the implementation of the report, as provided for in the Agreement. Acknowledging the pain which some of the recommendations would cause, she asked all involved to study the recommendations closely. In announcing the period of consultation, she extended

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its length to November. slightly beyond the six weeks she had initially been contemplating. We understand that this was a last minute decision she had taken in light of the strong reaction on the unionist side.

3. **Prime Minister Blair** also welcomed the report. setting it in the context of international standards of policing and the future of policing in Northern Ireland. He highlighted the pain and suffering of RUC officers and their families, praising their bravery and saluting their sacrifices. Significantly, he pledged that the funding necessary to implement the recommendations would be forthcoming.

Reaction from the Parties

4. The reaction from the parties has ranged widely in the immediate aftermath of the publication of the recommendations of the Patten Report. The nationalist reaction has been generally - although not uniformly - favourable, while unionist reaction has been predictably much more hostile, without being perhaps quite as overwhelmingly negative as it might have been.

5. The **SDLP**'s preliminary reaction was presented by Séamus Mallon. In a powerful, confident performance on an issue which has been central to his political life, he mapped out the boundaries of the likely ultimate response of the nationalist community. Praising the thrust of the report as delivering on the mandate given to the Commission by the Good Friday Agreement, he believed that it had the potential to provide the kind of policing service which for the first time ever could "attract and sustain the whole community's support". He placed strong emphasis on the need to show sensitivity towards the undoubted pain that would be felt in the unionist community and within the RUC. However, he asked unionists to recognise the gain that the Patten report brought in terms of securing

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nationalist support for policing. Equally, he believed that for nationalists now the challenge was to grasp the opportunity to ensure that the "consensus and the consent which is inherent in the political dispensation is now translated into the field of policing which is so central to all our lives". While stopping short of confirming explicitly that they would be calling on nationalists to join the new service, he implied strongly that if Patten's recommendations were fully implemented, he would indeed be doing so. The SDLP would now be studying the report closely and in detail.

6. **Sinn Féin** had indicated privately to us before the publication of the report that their reaction was likely to be cautious, leaning negative. In the event, their initial response yesterday was, as Chris Patten suggested to Sec Gallagher, "cautious, leaning positive". While the report raises issues which will undoubtedly be very difficult in terms of selling to the republican constituency, it is clear that the Sinn Féin leadership is surprised at the radical and sweeping nature of its proposals. In their remarks yesterday, it was noteworthy that Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún were making comments such as "I want to be in a position to be able to recommend to republicans and nationalists to join the new policing service". While stating that the "jury was out" on whether the Patten report would lead to such a policing service, they indicated that the recommendations would be receiving close and detailed study. It is likely that the internal debate in the constituency will be robust and passionate, but there seems a stronger likelihood after yesterday that the outcome of that debate may well be a broad acceptance of what Patten has proposed (with all the implications that that holds for the wider process).

7. The **UUP**'s overall initial reaction has been predictably negative. David Trimble's comment about the 'shoddy' nature of the report has been seen as unwise (it is

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clear that there is something of a mutual personal antipathy between himself and Patten). Criticism of the report has focussed largely on the symbolic changes involved and on the financial implications of the implementation of the recommendations. Ken Maginnis has come out strongly also against the proposed amalgamation of the Special Branch and Crime Divisions (even though this amalgamation had already been put forward in internal RUC reform proposals). On a more positive note, the party has signalled that it will be giving careful consideration to the Report and has not rejected it out of hand. (Realistically, however, it is, of course, extremely doubtful that such consideration will lead to a more positive attitude to the issues of core concern to the party, such as the change of name etc.)

8. Predictably, the **DUP** have indicated that they will vigorously oppose what they characterise as the 'disbandment' of the RUC. However, in media comments, their spokesmen have not denied that there is a need for reform of the RUC, and some have even indicated that some of the recommendations might be a suitable means of carrying out this reform.

Reaction from the RUC

9. The **Chief Constable's** initial reaction was measured and constructive and could be important and significant in terms of determining the ultimate response of the RUC itself (and indeed perhaps in the broad unionist community). He focussed on the improvements which the implementation of the Patten proposals would bring to the force. He reiterated his usual emphasis on the security-linked nature of many of the recommendations, while allowing that the pain for serving RUC officers implied by some of the recommendations, such as the change in name and symbols, would be countenanced if it were to bring about the gain of acceptance

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by the entire community.

10. The **Police Authority** has also broadly welcomed the recommendations, saying that they reflected its own efforts to reform the RUC over the past ten years. The **Police Federation**, representing rank-and-file officers, however, has made more negative public comments, saying that the name change is an insult and that the service provided by the RUC is already excellent, that there are no no-go areas for the RUC, and that they are already as effective a police force as they could be. (It is likely, however, that Flanagan's remarks are more significant in determining the ultimate response of the RUC as an institution.)

Next Steps

11. The implementation process, and consultation on its terms, will now move centre stage. It will be critical that the British side move quickly on taking the process forward. We will be following up urgently with them on the range of issues involved.

Anglo-Irish Division

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