

1968/29

CONCLUSIONS OF A MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD  
AT STORMONT CASTLE ON WEDNESDAY, 23RD OCTOBER, 1968, AT 10.00 A.M.

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PRESENT:- The Prime Minister  
The Minister of Commerce  
The Minister of Finance  
The Minister of Home Affairs  
The Minister of Health and Social Services  
The Minister of Education  
The Minister of Development  
The Minister in the Senate

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ALSO PRESENT:- The Attorney-General  
The Chief Whip

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The Secretary to the Cabinet  
The Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet

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The Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

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POLITICAL ASPECTS OF RECENT EVENTS

On further consideration of his Memorandum of 14th October, 1968, the Prime Minister informed his colleagues that he had now received from Mr. Harold Wilson a date and an agenda for the coming meeting at Downing Street.

In the subsequent discussions, Ministers generally agreed that the most detailed possible briefing should be prepared on each item of the proposed agenda, and that this material should be reviewed by the Cabinet before the meeting took place.

The Prime Minister again reminded his colleagues of Northern Ireland's great financial dependence upon the central Exchequer, while the Attorney-General pointed out that Westminster retained full legal powers to legislate for Northern Ireland, even in relation to transferred matters, and that the convention of non-interference without consent might not hold if it came to be widely felt that responsibility for "peace, order and good government" was not being discharged in an acceptable way. The Minister of Finance expressed alarm about the evident hardening of attitudes towards Northern Ireland at Westminster, but the Ministers of Commerce and Home Affairs thought it unlikely that Mr. Wilson would proceed to any extreme course which would be wholly unacceptable to majority opinion in Northern Ireland.

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In a discussion of the local government franchise, the Prime Minister informed his colleagues that he would be meeting that afternoon a deputation of Unionist Members from Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone who would, he understood, press for a guarantee that the franchise would not be changed. The Minister of Home Affairs added that in present circumstances a proposed change could have disastrous political repercussions, and that he would propose to hold to his consistent public position that local government reform must precede any examination of the franchise. The Minister of Commerce suggested that Mr. Wilson might be told that they had no dogmatic views on the franchise; evidently it could not be changed in the short term, but for himself he did not share the reservations, which, he understood, some members of the Party felt. The Attorney-General thought it likely that Mr. Wilson would ask whether they accepted the principle of "one man, one vote", and he was not at all sure that the Party as a whole would oppose this, if given a clear lead by the Cabinet.

The Minister of Commerce returned to the suggestion, which he had made at the previous meeting, that a time-limit should be set for the reform of local government, but the Minister of Development doubted the feasibility of this, given the intense difficulty of finding any generally acceptable pattern. The Chief Whip, however, agreed that local government reform was the crux of the problem, and that a time-limit should be set.

The Minister of Home Affairs asked that further consideration should be given to his earlier proposal for some form of Development Commission for the Londonderry Area. He realised that this would create problems, but it could help to cope with a very special situation, and was consistent with the Government's general approach. The Minister of Development expressed doubts about the acceptability of this solution in Londonderry, but the Minister of Home Affairs felt that a wide spectrum of commonsense opinion there could support it. The Minister of Commerce added that the Government - in relation to this issue and the franchise - might have to consider their own line and hold to it firmly even if this was not acceptable to all local opinion.

The Chief Whip reiterated his view that the only immediate and dramatic step open to the Government was a major effort to tackle the Londonderry housing situation. Housing generally was recognised as the paramount social problem, and the Ministers going to Downing Street clearly ought to have some positive proposals to discuss, if they were not to be placed wholly on the defensive. The Minister of Finance agreed that something concrete would have to be offered, if they were not to be faced with a Royal Commission or other form of intervention. The Minister of Home Affairs, however, said he could not agree that Mr. Wilson should be allowed to tell them how

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to act. Although they should go to the meeting in a co-operative spirit, clearly they must be responsible to their own electorate, and Mr. Wilson could be relied upon to appreciate this. Intervention would provoke a constitutional crisis and a massive uprising of the loyalist community. The Minister of Commerce agreed that any attempt to impose a solution by way of a Royal Commission or otherwise would lead to wholesale chaos and virtual civil war. Devolutionary government could not be conducted if they were to consider these serious issues under a threat of duress which he did not believe would materialise. The basic issues were jobs and houses; and if unacceptable obstacles were being placed in the way of the housing programme, it might well be that they should consider remedies such as a wider use of the Housing Trust. Much would depend upon the structure of re-organised local government and its functions.

The Minister in the Senate asked what was the present view on Special Powers, and the Minister of Home Affairs replied that he had been actively considering the possibility of putting such powers into "cold storage" in the next Session; but clearly this would be inopportune in the present atmosphere.

Discussion was adjourned at this point. It was agreed that briefs on the topics listed for the Downing Street meeting should be prepared urgently, so that the Cabinet might consider before the meeting the strengths and weaknesses of the case on each issue. The Ministers concerned undertook to furnish briefs as soon as possible to the Cabinet Offices for circulation.

*Lucienne O'Neill*