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OAC M2

OFFICIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Official Advisory Committee was held in Stormont Castle at 4 pm on Friday 4 December.

Present

Dr J A Oliver (acting Chairman)
Mr J Parkes
Mr K Shimeld
Mr W Slinger
Mr J L Semple (Secretary)

1. Minority recognition and representation OAC3

The following points were made in discussion of this paper.

(a) The Government needed to decide upon its basic philosophy in relation to the minority. Did it consider itself at war with the minority or did it believe in treating it fairly, firmly and openly? At present the Government's attitude was not clear. This was exemplified in the position over minority representation on public bodies. The accusation had been made that Catholics nominated for public bodies were not sufficiently radical but the Cabinet had only given a very grudging acceptance to a proposal that Opposition MPs should be asked to submit a list of names. If the Government did desire to improve its relationship with minority new initiatives were undoubtedly required. It had to be recognised that in the final analysis, the Government did not rule with the consent of all. Accordingly unless new lines of communication could be built up within a constitutional framework to allow the minority greater participation in government, frustration might lead to more extreme minority leadership and a possible renewal of street activity with inevitable consequences for the future stability of Northern Ireland and the present constitutional arrangements.

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(b) If a new initiative was to be taken, it would be best directed towards the elected Parliamentary representatives of the minority rather than through Cardinal Conway or organisations such as the Central Citizens' Defence Committee. It was felt that new initiatives might not make any great headway with the Cardinal at this juncture, while recognition of CCDC would give this body a status, which it did not merit and would tend to undermine the position of the democratically elected representatives.

(c) If communications with Opposition MPs were to be improved, this would require a recognition that the nature of the Opposition had changed and that its objective was not simply the overthrow of the Northern Ireland Government. This would for example require a different attitude by the Government towards constructive Opposition amendments, and towards Opposition requests on the arrangements for Parliamentary business. Only in such an atmosphere would new initiatives have a chance of success.

(d) The new initiatives might take the following form:

(i) advance consultation on the part of Ministers' with Opposition MPs on new Bills and new policies which the Government intended to bring before the House of Commons

(ii) advance warning to Opposition MPs of matters affecting their constituencies.

It was agreed that it would be better simply to introduce these new methods of consultation, without any public announcement.

(e) It was recognised that Ministers' might dislike these new measures because of the possibility of a backlash from their own backbenchers and because the Opposition could make it difficult for Ministers' by acting irresponsibly. It was felt that the first difficulty might be overcome if Government backbench MPs were also consulted on new policies and given advance warning on constituency matters while the second might to some degree be met by informal

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discussion about the new methods of communication with the Opposition.

(f) It was agreed that two further papers should be prepared; the first on the general question of dealing with the minority; the second on the practical methods whereby communications with Opposition and other MPs might be improved.

2. Problem Areas OAC 5

The Secretary outlined the proposals in this paper. The aim was to ensure that the Government and local authorities gave these areas the priority which they merited in the provision of services and, secondly, to place a helpful civil presence on the ground in these areas as a prelude to a return to proper policing and acceptance of Government authority. It was suggested that a special agency drawn from appropriate Central Government and local authority departments might be established to review the problems of these areas and to ensure that certain new functions were undertaken within them. On the policy side an analogy might be seen with the special Committees set up for large new industrial projects.

Dr Oliver pointed out that many of the functions mentioned would in fact remain with local authorities after MacCrory and the Government might be put in an awkward position if Belfast Corporation refused to take action. It was pointed however that in certain instances eg street cleaning, finance might be made available to the local authority under the Urban and Rural Improvement campaign in the form of 100% grants and that the Government would thus be in a strong position to put pressure on the local authority. It was generally agreed that there should be some way in which the Government could be kept informed about the state of these areas.

It was agreed that the matter should be further investigated.

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3. Next meeting of the Committee

The next meeting of the Committee will be at 1 pm on Wednesday, 9 December in Sir Harold Black's room, Stormont Castle.

Ministry of Community Relations
STORMONT

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