

CONFIDENTIALGOVERNMENT POLICY ON THE MINORITY

1. Northern Ireland has undergone a major convulsion since 1968. The normal constitutional channels for dealing with political matters have been circumvented, as street demonstrations, British Government intervention and the force of outside public opinion have been used to persuade the Northern Ireland Government to adopt new policies. The reform programme will be virtually completed when the major items of Central Housing and local authority reorganisation are carried through. At this juncture the Government faces a decision in principle about its relations with the minority. Does it revert to an attitude where the minority is regarded with hostility, as an enemy to be opposed on every issue, or does the Government accept fully that the minority, in spite of the fact that it may genuinely desire the ending of Partition, should be treated both with fairness and firmness as an integral part of the Northern Ireland community?

2. By its actions in relation to the Reform Programme, the Government has clearly shown that it wishes to follow the second alternative not only in the present situation but in the years ahead. A reversion by the Government to an attitude of hostility would effectively block any constitutional channel for the resolution of major grievances and would result in an inevitable return to the streets with unforeseeable effects upon the present constitutional arrangements. Such an attitude would also discredit the elected representatives of the minority and would eventually undermine the whole institutional framework of the State.

3. Because the Government has determined upon a course of conciliation, this should not be taken to imply that the representatives of the minority will suddenly become more responsible and more in tune with Government thinking. A sizeable number of people still do not accept the validity of the State. How large the number is is uncertain but the important point is that the majority believe it to be large. This attitude is seen as provocative and threatening by even moderate Unionists. Unionist fears are in turn heightened by acts of violence against the State, by the facts of the population trends and by the often hostile and bitter attitude of the Republic. A further difficulty is that large numbers of Roman Catholics positively distrust Unionist Government and this applies not only to Central but, and perhaps even more forcibly, to local administration. While there can be no compromise with the first view the second in the light of Cameron and the Reform Programme for example is at least understandable. The trouble is that many Unionists tend to regard distrust of Government/^{as} synonymous with absence of allegiance and treat the minority accordingly.

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At best there is considerable mutual distrust. These are real difficulties but they serve to enhance the arguments for a thoroughly consistent Government policy towards the minority aimed at dispelling this distrust and at securing a greater degree of consent for and acceptance of Government policy by the minority.

4. If the Government's decision in principle is to adopt the course of conciliation and consent, then there are some legacies of former attitudes and some weaknesses in legislative and administrative procedures which are inconsistent with this principle and require to be remedied. The most important issues here are the recognition which the Government accords to the minority and its representatives, and the role which the latter are able to play in the process of Government.

WHO REPRESENT THE MINORITY:

5. The minority is not a homogeneous group and it is impossible to find any one person or institution who can confidently be said to speak for the minority. There is the Roman Catholic Church, there are the elected representatives and there are "non-political" laymen. It would seem that at least for the present the Government would need to open clearer channels of communication with all three, but there are firm grounds, however, for believing that the Church is no longer regarded by many laymen as the authority to speak for Catholics on secular matters. It would seem advisable also not to discredit the democratic process by dealing directly with non-elected bodies such as CCDC, although it may be valuable to establish contact with members of such bodies in their individual capacities. All in all the circumstances seem to suggest a fresh examination of the Government's relationship with the elected representatives of the minority.

THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE MINORITY ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES:

6. In the case of the minority elected representatives the question of mistrust is particularly obvious. Too often it is the negative aspect of Government - law and order - which is most apparent to them and with which they become more or less obsessed. So long as the Government keeps them at arm's length there seems little prospect of any change in this attitude and their behaviour in Parliament. Government representatives are in the main seen by Opposition Members as being drawn from a group or class with whom they have little or no affinity. The gap between "them" and "us" must be bridged in some way and if the present attitudes preclude this then some

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experimentation is necessary. At the moment Opposition Members do not participate sufficiently in Government either at electoral or nominated level. This is a major source of grievance and trouble. More participation would it is felt bring reassurance and in turn a more realistic attitude to the need for compromise.

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PART II

RECOGNITION OF OPPOSITION ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES AND METHODS OF INCREASING THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF GOVERNMENT.

1. Recognition of an Official Opposition

It is suggested that the Government approach the Social Democratic and Labour Party and enquire whether it wishes to become the Official Opposition, on the basis that the leader of the Opposition would be paid a salary on an equivalent basis to the leader of the Opposition at Westminster (ie that of a Cabinet Minister).

2. Advance warning of new policies and legislation

It is recommended that Departmental Ministers should be required to discuss new policy departures and proposed legislation with their Opposite numbers in the Opposition a few days before public announcement. The aim would be to inform the Opposition of the purpose and content of the new measure and to discuss its merits with a view to ascertaining the views of the Opposition so that any constructive comment could be met with an equally constructive response. It is recommended also that Government Backbenchers be brought into consultation also. There are four reasons: first, because it could be helpful to them to understand in advance what a Minister is proposing; second, it could be helpful to the Minister to have a few Backbenchers briefed in advance; third, it would forestall any back-lash against what might seem to be favoured treatment to Opposition Members; fourth, they could assure themselves at first hand that the Minister was not doing a deal with political opponents but merely extending Parliamentary courtesies to them. Thus, each Minister might work towards having a Parliamentary Panel, let us say, consisting of two Government supporters and two Opposition, with whom he might meet once a week and discuss forthcoming business.

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The position of the small parties, the Protestant Unionists, the Nationalists, the Northern Ireland Labour Party and Republican Labour as well as the existence of a number of Unionist MPs not in receipt of the Whip complicates the matter. It is suggested that Ministerial consultations should usually take place with two official backbench Unionists in receipt of the Whip, one SDLP shadow Minister and one other member not in receipt of the Unionist Whip.

It is essential that the scheme should have a basis of genuine consultation and - within the proper limits of party rivalry - should carry some real prospect of co-operation eg in accepting reasonable Notices of Motion, amendments to Bills etc from whatever quarter including Opposition.

3. Select Committees

Clearly the establishment of a system of Select Committees would increase the degree to which Opposition MPs participated in the formulation of policy. The issue however is a very broad one affecting Parliament's whole method of operation and accordingly it is to be considered as a separate issue.

4. Contact on Constituency matters

MPs often feel aggrieved, when Departments initiate developments in their constituencies without informing them of the details. The first the MP knows of the new development may be when a constituent complains to him. It would give Opposition and backbench MPs a greater feeling of involvement if Departments were required to inform the local MP of any new development they were proposing to undertake in his constituency. This would tend to establish or improve relationships between Opposition MPs and the Civil Servants responsible and as such would tend to give the MPs a greater feeling of involvement and participation.

5. Parliamentary attitudes

In general, the Government should try to encourage a more responsible attitude on the part of the Opposition, by accepting constructive amendments, by providing time and offering support to useful Private Bills, by acceding where possible to Opposition requests on the arrangement of Parliamentary business.

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6. Implementation and Publicity

It is recommended that the Government make a start on items 1, 2, 4 and 5 immediately. No immediate publicity effort should be made to bring these changes to the notice of the general public through the normal media. The creation of an Official Opposition and the recognition of its leader would automatically attract publicity and at a later date it could be made clear in an ad hoc moment that these new procedures were in operation.

7. An Opposition Minister

? There might be a case for considering the appointment of a Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Community Relations, drawn from the ranks of the Opposition. This would follow a precedent set in Holland but would be a bold innovation for Northern Ireland. The proposal would need to be examined in considerable depth and would have to be treated as a separate issue.