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ATTITUDES OF NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL PARTIES TO THE
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

This note summarises the views of the major political groupings in Northern Ireland on the Constitutional Convention since the publication in July of the White Paper "The Northern Ireland Constitution".

2. No major grouping in Northern Ireland appears to be strongly in favour of the Convention. The proposal for the future system of government in Northern Ireland contained in the White Paper in March 1973, followed by the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, received in general qualified approval from all sides in Northern Ireland, at a time when many politicians and their followers genuinely sought reasonable political compromise: but the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives alike have not greeted the proposal for a Constitutional Convention with the enthusiasm which so many gave to their new Constitution in 1973. Many have pre-judged the Convention either as irrelevant or, worse, as a forum for hectoring Loyalist intransigence which would further divide the Northern Ireland community. A closer look at the attitudes of the parties, however, suggests that the political outlook is not wholly bleak.

3. UUUC

Some members of the Unionist Party privately concede that the UUUC refusal to take part in discussions with other political parties until after the Convention elections was aimed primarily at securing early elections. Now that it is widely believed that the elections will not be held before March 1975, they would lose face by participating in such discussions. It appears that a number of Unionists are prepared to adopt a reasonable line. Mr Laird, for example, has recently said privately that the UUUC were conscious of the need for

some flexibility during initial discussions at the Convention. In a recent conversation Mr Enoch Powell said that there was a strong reaction against the whole Stormont-type of Constitution. Nobody wanted it and he did not think that the Constitutional Convention would recommend its return.

4. In a recent speech, Mr John Taylor indicated a harder Unionist line. He said that the Unionists would attend the Convention to develop a settlement which maintained the union with Great Britain, dismissed the idea of a Council of Ireland, and involved the elected representatives of the minority in policy-making committees within Ministries, but not in executive government. Mr Taylor has said privately that he does not see any possibility of agreement at the Convention within the 'parameters' set by HMG. His hope is that if the Convention fails, as he believes it will, there will be further discussions between the Loyalists and the SDLP to agree on a programme which would lead to a negotiated independence.

5. Meanwhile Dr Paisley and Mr Craig have continued to be less positive than many of their Unionist colleagues in the coalition. Dr Paisley made the robust declaration at the end of November that if a Loyalist coalition did not obtain a strong majority in the Convention "The cause of Ulster will be lost and our whole future put in jeopardy". The Convention, said Dr Paisley, must produce "a blueprint that will give us a united Ulster within the United Kingdom". Mr Craig has said little in public about the Convention but remains of the view that power-sharing with the SDLP is unacceptable because as Republicans they do not recognise the unity of the State.

6. SDLP

The SDLP's attitude has been less clear than that of the Loyalists. The Party gave a muted reception to the July White Paper, welcoming the realities dealing with power-sharing and the Irish Dimension but describing the Convention as merely "a British plot to provide a cloak of respectability to a Loyalist takeover". The Party has tried repeatedly to secure firm commitments on power-sharing and the Irish Dimension. Their insistence on pre-conditions strengthens Loyalist

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determination not to have a political solution imposed by Westminster. Thus Loyalist and SDLP intransigence does not result in any concessions, which, in the Summer of 1973 were forthcoming but rather encourages reciprocal intransigence. The Party has argued consistently against early elections. At a recent meeting Mr Fitt suggested that the elections should now be postponed or put completely in cold storage. Mr Devlin, in a statement following The Queen's Speech, suggested that HMG should "kill dead" any thoughts of these elections. At the same time the Party Secretary, Mr Duffy took the somewhat optimistic view that the SDLP could gain 25 seats in the Convention, an improvement by 6 on their representation in the Assembly. Some SDLP members felt at the end of November that SDLP participation in the Convention could not be taken for granted and that in any case the Convention would almost certainly fail.

7. UPNI

In the early months following the collapse of the Executive Mr Faulkner's Unionist Party of Northern Ireland had little time for the Convention. It regarded the July White Paper as being "vague and of little value." The UPNI was opposed to early elections mainly because it needed time to create a new strong Party. In September Mr McLachlan was optimistic about UPNI's chances in the Convention elections but the General Election results in October suggested that the Party had not so far made any noticeable impression on the electorate. Despite the General Election results and its earlier attitude to the Convention, the Party is now in a more positive mood and announced at the end of November that it would field candidates in all areas of Northern Ireland for the Convention elections. Lord Brookeborough thinks that by February UPNI might well win twelve seats.

8. Alliance Party

The Party welcomed the commitment to power-sharing and the Irish Dimension, although it regards the constitutional claim by the Republic as a formidable barrier to a political solution in Northern Ireland. Alliance has not changed its attitude towards the Convention since July. Like UPNI, it is opposed to early elections because the Loyalists would gain a massive majority and would then try to force through a Convention report which would be unacceptable to the minority parties

and, indeed, to Westminster. The Party feels that this could lead to an independent Ulster following withdrawal by HMG.

9. Sinn Fein

Both Official and Provisional Sinn Fein have little regard for the Convention. It is likely that Official Sinn Fein will put forward some Republican Clubs candidates but it is almost certain now that the Provisional Sinn Fein will not do so. The Provisionals are anxious to demonstrate that any Convention for which HMG has responsibility is irrelevant to the needs of the Irish people.

10. Reactions to the Government's Discussion Paper "Constitutional Convention - Procedure" published on 20 November suggested that at least some political leaders in Northern Ireland accept that the Government is determined to hold the Convention and is looking to the Convention to take the lead in shaping the future system of government for Northern Ireland. Mr Molyneaux, in particular, speaking as leader of the UUUC, took a positive line and Mr Fitt, although despondent about the current Northern Ireland situation in general, did not develop the SDLP's earlier theme that the Convention was irrelevant to the needs of the Province.

11. Following publication of the Discussion Paper, the Clerk to the Assembly has approached the Party leaders in Northern Ireland to find out whether they are prepared to discuss at the present time their views on procedure for the Convention. Mr West saw no objection to this proposal and favoured the idea of an informal "Planning Committee" to discuss preparatory arrangements for the Convention. He said that he personally felt very gloomy about the prospects for the Convention in view of the "conditions" (power-sharing) already laid down by HMG. Captain Ardill, Chief Whip of the Unionist Party, has since confirmed that his Party would take part in talks. Dr Paisley feels that there would be no harm in preliminary discussions but thinks that his Party might wish to hold separate discussions with the Clerk to the Assembly rather than join with other parties. Mr Craig's initial reaction was

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that any planning discussions were "premature" because the Convention would not last more than eight weeks and accordingly elaborate preparations were unnecessary. Neither Mr Faulkner nor Mr Napier saw any objections to the proposal for talks although Mr Napier argues that unless all parties take part in these talks they would be of little value. Mr Bleakley, the sole NILP member in the Assembly, is willing to co-operate. Mr Fitt has also said that he would gladly take part in such talks.

12. CONCLUSION

It seems likely that following the proposed planning discussions with the Clerk to the Assembly, each of the major political parties will contest the Convention elections. It is also probable that the parties will take their seats and that the Convention will get under way. It would be unwise to speculate further at this stage.

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