

PUS/L/2317

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NOTE FOR THE RECORD



Distribution: Those present

Mr Doyne Ditmas

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

① SW E/3/1
 ② POL. 2/3

1. PUS led a general discussion on Political Development, in Stormont Castle on Wednesday 9 March. A list of those present is at Annex A. The papers at Annex B were circulated beforehand as background material but were not studied in detail during the discussion. PUS set the scene with a brief introduction then invited Mr Blatherwick to give a tour d'horizon and Mr Bloomfield to give his impressions. Thereafter, the meeting did not follow a pre-arranged pattern.
2. In introducing the meeting, PUS said that he had called it because it was about time to take stock of progress on the political front. In particular, it seemed an appropriate time to look back at the progress that had been made on the objectives contained in the White Paper (Command 8541) and to look to the future to see how things might develop both in the Province and in the South. In some ways it was not a propitious time for such a review given the uncertainties surrounding the timing and result of the General Election.
3. There was very little sign of significant movement in the Republic. The Taoiseach had asked to see the Prime Minister for an hour in the margins of the European Summit later this month, more or less just for the purpose of developing personal relationships, but had been told in reply that the Prime Minister would prefer to limit the meeting to about 20 minutes.
4. So far as the Assembly was concerned, the Government had made clear at the time that the Northern Ireland Bill was going through the

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House last year that the first phase could well be a protracted one, perhaps lasting two or three years. Nor had they assumed that Stage 2 would necessarily be reached. As a general assessment it seemed fair to say that the Assembly was pretty much at the stage now that we might have expected it to be and certainly its future was not without some promise. The Secretary of State personally might have hoped that it would have developed further than it has, but nevertheless the progress that it has made should not be made light of and, in any case, it was right that he should have had high hopes for it.

5. PUS then invited Mr Blatherwick to give a short personal assessment of the current state of play within the parties and in the Assembly and of how things might develop in the foreseeable future. Starting with the DUP, Mr Blatherwick thought that they were generally content with the way that the Assembly had developed. Paisley had never really expected devolution and would probably settle for the Assembly going gently along in more or less its present form for a year or two. If it did this it would continue to give him a foundation from which to look for gains from the OUP and would moreover help to prevent HMG developing too much of a relationship with the South. Despite all this, the future was not entirely bright for Paisley. He could expect people at some stage to start asking how long the DUP could go on without pushing for devolution. Mr Blatherwick's guess was that they would try and stick to it for the foreseeable future and Paisley would continue to act responsibly.

6. The Alliance Party he thought were beginning to get over their initial linkage with the DUP which had not been an entirely satisfactory one. The key feature of their policy was that they would not agree to devolution without power sharing. They might however at some stage be prepared to countenance majority rule, but only if power sharing had been offered and turned down. They would be happy to see the Assembly carry on pretty much in its present form for a while.

7. The situation within the OUP was more fluid than ever with both McCartney and McCusker having recently torpedoed themselves

as contenders for the leadership. For the time being Molyneaux was firmly on top. However, there was considerable pressure within the party for the Assembly to work - pressure which stemmed from a considerable following in the country - and Molyneaux's aim for the time being was to avoid a split developing within the party or a challenge to his leadership being made. There were one or two signs of late that the party was becoming more and more committed to making phase one work.

8. On the Assembly, Mr Blatherwick said that the dominant feature on the negative side was of course, the absence of the SDLP. Also the conduct of business had not always been entirely satisfactory; there had been occasions (like the FEA debate) when debates had been marred by sectarianism and bigotry. On the positive side, the DUP were acting responsibly (though the rift with the OUP had become far more pronounced), Alliance were stronger, and the OUP were now beginning to realise that they could no longer have their own way on matters. They were also beginning to register the meaning of the terms for devolution contained in the 1982 Act. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the political process had got under way again in the Province. Individually and collectively the elected representatives had begun the business of political dealing and trading.

9. Looking at the position of the Nationalist politicians, they had clearly suffered greater losses than gains. This was apparent from Mr Edis's paper. The SDLP had got themselves progressively further out on a limb until they were left with nothing but their idea for a Council for a new Ireland. They were now having to face up to some very difficult questions - could they continue to survive as a party outside the Assembly? - could they compete with Sinn Fein? - could they rely on the support of the Republic? (Hume was not at all confident that they could). Hume must have been thinking that unless the SDLP could raise its profile, its supporters would start to drift away to either Sinn Fein on the one hand or the Alliance on the other. Alternatively, the party faithful might simply switch off because the SDLP was simply not producing the goods. On a theoretical, but over-

pessimistic analysis, the SDLP could face a split into pro and anti Assembly wings. Realistically though, we should not be too quick to write them off; they have in the past shown the ability to adapt and be flexible when circumstances required. In the longer term it might turn out to ^{have been} be useful that they were now being confronted with these salutary questions.

10. Drawing his analysis to an end, Mr Blatherwick concluded that the situation now with the Assembly was pretty much as we might have expected. There were bound to be problems with it, but we should not make too much of these. It was working, and providing a level of democratic check on Government in the Province. It was requiring people to negotiate political trade-offs and the parties were beginning to realise that sensible decisions could produce rewards. So, further constructive development should be encouraged. So far as the SDLP was concerned, the best way for Government to help them would be to help the minority community generally, by letting them see that there are ways of making progress through constitutional means. It would help the SDLP's confidence if Ministers were to take opportunities to emphasise that the conditions for devolution in the 1982 Act mean what they say and will be adhered to.

11. PUS was in broad agreement with Mr Blatherwick's remarks and thought that speculation about the pace and style of future political developments would be difficult until the timing of various factors became clear. It remained to be seen when the General Election would take place and what the implications of the result would be. It was also as yet unclear how, and at what pace, the Council for a new Ireland would shape up. The SDLP would obviously want to give it a fair wind before they countenanced any other proposals. Hume had said that it would need at least six months to get to grips with its work, if indeed it got going at all. It would be very difficult for Fianna Fail and Fine Gael to settle their differences to a degree which would allow them to come to the conference table with the SDLP. Looking ahead it would be very important for the Assembly to still be in business when the Council for a new Ireland resolved itself, one way or the other.

12. PUS invited Mr Bloomfield to give his assessment of the

current situation, Mr Bloomfield thought that the wider framework was about as difficult as it could be because all the major interests in the political equation were drifting apart. In Westminster, the bi-partisan approach was breaking down; Fianna Fail and Fine Gael were miles apart in their respective views of progress with the North; and in the Province there was uncertainty caused because no one particular political grouping felt itself to be in a safe majority. The Protestant community was torn between the OUP and DUP, the minority between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. In this rather bleak situation, the only real option open to Government was to cherish the Assembly which represented the only tangible expression of political development in recent times.

13. Overall, the Assembly was working better than the departments might have expected, and, although the Committees were creating a lot of work for departments, they were on the whole proceeding in a responsible, courteous and considerate fashion. From DED's and the IDB's point of view, problems seemed likely to occur over individual cases. The IDB had already declined to be forthcoming with information on certain cases. However, each committee seemed to be functioning as a cohesive unit and there was no evidence to date of divisions along party lines within them. He concluded that it would be very unwise for Government to contemplate action on any other front which might damage the Assembly; in particular, the shopping list of special measures to support the SDLP contained in Mr Blatherwick's paper of 3 March carried with them, if put into effect, the possibility of adversely affecting the Assembly.

14. He thought that perhaps the most promising development of late had been the public attitude of the Church in its unequivocal condemnation of violence. The arrival of Bishop Cathal Daly was clearly important in this respect. From the Government's point of view it would obviously be helpful if this attitude were to continue and, so far as it was possible to do so discreetly, Ministers should be seeking to reinforce it.

15. On the SDLP, he thought that the party faithful would be justified in asking what the party had done to secure the advance of the minority through constitutional politics. The short answer was very little. Part of the problem was that Sinn Fein were very

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astute at securing credit for tackling local problems even when the credit was really due to other parties or to Government. Certainly the Government should be less reticent in future to claim credit for its activities, especially when real progress on, for example, housing, had been made. Unemployment remained the key factor. Mr Bloomfield did not think that, arguably useful though they may be, changes in for example the Flags and Emblems Act would do much to inspire the local man in West Belfast. He was far more likely to be worried about social conditions and unemployment. The fact was that no economic progress would be likely so long as Northern Ireland's exceptional difficulties continued to be tackled by conventional means. This being so, the opportunities for exploiting the disaffection that stemmed from poor social conditions were, and would remain, considerable.

16. The meeting then focussed its attention specifically on Sinn Fein as Mr Edis highlighted the main points in his paper. He said that it represented the best estimate that could be made at the present time of Sinn Fein, given the many imponderables involved. However, more than anything, it demonstrated that the Provisionals were united as an organisation in their desire to make further progress on the political front. This was a new development which had arisen since the Assembly elections. Their immediate and concerted goal was to do well at the forthcoming Westminster elections, though this did not mean that their violent activities would come to an end meantime. They were preparing themselves for the elections in an enthusiastic and businesslike way and were deeply engaged in local recruiting campaigns, setting up party organisations at local level, and no doubt preparing the ground for extensive personation. It was easy enough for them to involve themselves in community politics; often this entailed little more than speaking out on issues of local concern without actually doing anything.

17. Sinn Fein saw the Assembly as irrelevant except in so far as it made life difficult for the SDLP whom, like HMG, they were trying to undercut in order to generally destabilise the Province. However, it was important not to overstress their capabilities; they were not invincible. They would not, for example, succeed

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in rallying the entire Nationalist community behind them or anything like it, and they would find it difficult to repeat their successes in the Assembly elections. Although they were carefully registering new people onto their voting lists, there was no sign that they were making inroads into the Nationalist, as opposed to the Republican, community. On the other hand, the manner of their success in the Assembly elections showed that their leaders were realistic about what they could expect to achieve. It seemed fair to say that any success, however limited, at the Westminster elections would be enough to encourage them to continue to pursue their joint policy. It was not unreasonable to suggest that one of the reasons why they had shifted the balance in favour of the political aspect of their joint policy was that the violent one was failing to make progress. For the moment they were being carried forward by their electoral success.

18. Concluding his assessment of Sinn Fein, Mr Edis said that when it came to the battle for the hearts and minds of the minority community, there was only limited scope for intervention by Government in support of the SDLP. The Church was an important factor and would be listened to though it would not in itself be able to turn the tide against the Provisionals. He thought that more effort should be put into convincing the Church and the minority community at large that Government genuinely cared about the minority and was doing everything it could to ensure that the administration of Government was fair to all. He saw this as being more important than trying to take special measures to prop up the SDLP. In the meantime Belfast would remain the key area for Sinn Fein, their electoral base, and the only seat they could be almost certain of winning was West Belfast where Gerry Adams looked unstoppable.

19. Taking up Mr Edis's analysis of Sinn Fein, Mr Brennan agreed with him that the balance should be in favour of Government seeking to improve its posture in relation to the minority community generally, rather than making a special effort to support the SDLP. He said that there were a number of strategic considerations to which thought would have to be given before the future policy on political development could be settled, particularly bearing in mind that at some point in the near future we would probably have

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a new Secretary of State, experiencing Northern Ireland for the first time. A number of considerations would have to be addressed before a policy could be put before the new Secretary of State. For example, should officials plan on the assumption that the split between the OUP and DUP was now a permanent, irrevocable feature or should they take account of the possibility of a coalescence between the two at some stage in the future? Should thought be given to the possibility of the time being reached when Ministers would have to say to the Unionists that they must show greater flexibility, other wise the guarantee would be withdrawn? Or, from the opposite perspective, should the time be contemplated when Ministers might lose patience with the SDLP and consider opening up the 1982 Act to majority rule? These last two points could be formulated into messages which Ministers might want to consider sending out to the parties, perhaps in the run up to or shortly after the election. Our thinking would necessarily be influenced by the final timing of the election.

20. The meeting then discussed in greater depth the possibility and desirability of the Government taking special steps to support the SDLP, bearing in mind that any such efforts could well have adverse effects on the Assembly and cause the Unionists to panic and bolt. It was generally accepted that the Assembly must be kept going but thereafter, it was largely a matter of judgment as to whether, if special efforts were made to help the SDLP, these would prejudice the survival, or the atmosphere in, the Assembly. On the one hand, it was argued that the Government must do all it could to support the Church, the moderate people in the minority community and the generality of SDLP members, so as to prevent Sinn Fein getting a greater foothold. If the subversives were allowed to predominate, there would be a danger of people thinking of them as the main spokesmen for the minority view and, moreover their emergence would effectively put a block on our relations with the Republic. Thus Government support for the SDLP was perhaps as much an obligation as a political desirability. Certainly everything should be done to stop Sinn Fein claiming political credit, as Mr Bloomfield had suggested, but we had to go further than this and try to positively help the SDLP.

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21. In this latter context, Mr Merifield floated the idea of setting up an Economic Forum to which all the parties could be invited and which would create an opportunity for the SDLP to be seen to be actively engaging in useful, constitutional politics with central government. It would be difficult for the parties to turn down an invitation because of the importance of the subject matter. However, reservations were expressed about the proposal. Firstly, the Unionists in the Assembly would say that the Assembly was now the right place to discuss this sort of issue. Secondly, it would be difficult to have such a forum without it actually being in a position to deliver something. Given the present economic climate and the total absence of any likelihood of a significant economic upturn in the foreseeable future, there seemed no possibility of this.

22. On the other hand, there were those who argued that supporting the efforts of the SDLP could not be our only preoccupation. Why should Government busy itself supporting the SDLP when the party was so vociferous in its condemnation of the Assembly? Moreover, before Christmas the Secretary of State had invited Mr Hume to let him have a list of things that he could do to help, but, despite prompting, Hume had never responded. So why should Government make all the running when the party did not seem interested? It was noted that whilst Ministers could exercise a direct influence over the Assembly, this was not the case with the SDLP. It might or might not be the case that the party was robust and flexible enough to save itself from extinction, but it was pretty certain that Government could not do it. Any efforts by Government to support the SDLP could only be of marginal assistance. It was not just that they were incompetent politicians, but it might even be the case that the SDLP's role as a party was now defunct.

23. Discussion of the SDLP led into the drawing of comparisons with Sinn Fein. The latter were regarded as more astute and enthusiastic at becoming involved in community politics. Curiously, their success had been achieved despite the fact that Sinn Fein's political policy was one which it was hard to

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believe anyone could support. After all they stand for something in political terms which very few people in the North or South would ever be likely to find acceptable - namely the creation of a 32 County, Socialist, Marxist state.

24. The following ideas about how the SDLP might be supported selectively by Government were discussed:-

(1) Personation It was totally unsatisfactory that Sinn Fein should be employing widescale personation as a means of improving its electoral position. One way of putting heart into the SDLP would be to take measures to stamp it out.

(2) Security Committee Ministers should keep a careful eye on the Security and Home Affairs Committee because it seemed likely that pretty soon it would start putting forward ideas which firmly reflected the Unionist viewpoint. If they did this it would be a significant departure from the attitude of the other committees which, thus far, had avoided bias and sectarianism, and, it could be argued, would probably not have reached significantly different decisions had the SDLP been participating in them. Thus, as soon as the Security Committee stepped out of line, the Secretary of State should not hesitate to draw it up short.

(3) It would help the minority's perception of the Assembly and counteract a drift towards a "Unionist Assembly", if Ministers were to repeat openly the requirements for cross-community support in the 1982 Act and the unacceptability of sectarianism. The view was expressed that the minority were unhappy and confused about the Assembly and felt threatened by it. Above all they wondered whether an old style Stormont would return. It would help the minority if the Secretary of State would continue to make clear that it would not.

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(4) The Government should consider supporting the Church in its present stand against violence, though this would necessarily be have to be done in a sensitive way and in a manner which would not undermine the Church's credibility or the impact it was making.

(5) It would be of significant benefit to the minority community generally and also to the SDLP if economic measures could be taken to help ease the social conditions in areas which were predominantly of that persuasion, especially West Belfast. The chances of finding any effective measures were however remote. Conventional methods had been tried and failed. The fact was that Northern Ireland could only develop as part of the wider UK economy because it was not self-supporting. Also, on a global scale the pool of mobile industry which might be attracted to Northern Ireland had shrunk dramatically in recent years. It was now no longer the case that the incentives to invest in Northern Ireland were not sufficiently attractive; it was simply that mobile industry was not there. However, this being so, there was no reason why the Government should not at least make the greatest possible effort to be seen to be sympathetic to the concerns of areas like West Belfast, to show that it cared and that it was willing to consider unusual measures. It was noted that the present economic initiative contained no specific proposals for areas like West Belfast. Perhaps consideration should be given to declaring it an Enterprise Zone.

25. Mr Boys Smith drew a connection between progress on the Anglo/Irish front and the level of political expectation in the minority community in the North. He explained that this was a comparatively quiet period so far as relations with the South were concerned and that, from the South's point of view, this was how they would like it to remain until the election. This suited HMG. The level of expectation on the Anglo/Irish front was therefore relatively low at the moment, but, of course, was likely to increase dramatically once the election was out of the way and (presumably) the Taoiseach tried to pick up the unique relationship which had lain dormant since the end of 1981. So, the minority's attitude and expectations were likely to change once Anglo Irish relations began to pick up after the election.

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26. PUS drew the meeting to a close after a couple of hours. He explained that the Secretary of State would be holding a meeting on political development shortly after Lord Gowrie returned from leave and that the discussion had been valuable preparation for that meeting.



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18 March 1983

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