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Mr Carvell

(44)

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NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND MR JAMES MOLYNEAUX MP IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON 9 MAY 1984

The Secretary of State had a meeting with Mr Molyneaux on 9 May to discuss political developments following the publication of the Forum Report and the publication by the Official Unionist Party of a document on administrative devolution called The Way Forward. Mr Needham, Mr Andrew and Mr Lyon were present.
Political Developments

Mr Molyneaux said that he had initially believed that the Forum Report, and the Government's published statement on it, had created a satisfactory climate. The Report had stated that there would be no unification without consent, and had virtually accepted that that consent would not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. The way therefore seemed to be clear for developing a solution within Northern Ireland in which all the parties could work together. Subsequent events had torpedoed that. The weekend press reports, in particular the views attributed to the Secretary of State, followed by the leak to the Irish Times of the report of the Forum Sub-Committee on joint authority had created a very unstable situation, particularly in the light of the forthcoming European Assembly Election Campaign. He hoped that the Secretary of State's weekend comments had not been a reaction to what he had said privately to the Secretary of State about the Government's response being the correct one.

Mr Molyneaux said that he was concerned that there was a misunderstanding of terms used both by the Irish and the British Government and that the effect was unrealistically to escalate demands and to raise suspicions. The Government would need to slap down the interpretation which from the Irish Times it seemed was being put on Joint Authority, involving changes in the RUC and the disbandment of the UDR. It was difficult to see what responsibilities a Council of Ireland could be given, even if it was established between London and Dublin rather than Belfast and Dublin, without infringing sovereignty. It might deal with

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tourism and some uncontroversial aspects of agriculture, but if it were to deal with matters like the milk quota, that would take Northern Ireland one step out of the United Kingdom. He knew that the Prime Minister had said on a number of occasions that an inter-parliamentary body was a matter for the two parliaments, but Dr FitzGerald saw a much more substantial role for the body, including legislative authority.

Mr Molyneaux said that there was therefore a good deal of confusion and suspicion. There was a fear that the Government were trying to act quickly in the hope that measures of shared authority which undermined sovereignty would not be noticed. There was a fear also that subtle changes in authority would erode sovereignty. He accepted the government's commitment to the constitutional guarantee; but he hoped that the Government might add to it a statement that they would not engage in any form of co-operation which would erode the constitutional position. Alternatively the government might make clear that while they would examine various proposals for co-operation, they would not accept any which involved any infringement of sovereignty.

The Secretary of State said that he believed the weekend press speculation had been unfortunate. But it did not change the government's attitude to the Forum Report. The problem was still to find ways and means within Northern Ireland of securing the support of the SDLP. This would involve an Irish aspect. But there was no intention to do anything to reduce sovereignty in Northern Ireland against the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. It was not easy, however, clearly to define sovereignty. In any event, a good deal of sovereignty for agricultural matters in Northern Ireland had been ceded to the European community. It was arguable that Northern Ireland agriculture would fare better if it made common cause with the Republic. It was true that an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary body was technically a matter for the parliaments concerned, but governments could influence parliaments. He might wish to consider providing a greater recognition to such a body acting probably between London and Dublin, but it would fall far short of infringing sovereignty. He could give no firm undertaking

that nothing would be done to erode the confidence of the majority in Northern Ireland since, in view of their sensitivities, that would be tantamount to an undertaking to take no action. He did not wish to preclude the UK Government from making sensible arrangements with the Republic which did not effect sovereignty in Northern Ireland. He had no intention, however of acting precipitately (it was not his political style) and he doubted if he would wish to say any more in public until after the European Assembly elections on 14 June. He was nevertheless deeply concerned about the security situation; the growing alienation of the nationalist community; and the prospect of the majority of nationalists being represented by Sinn Fein within the next year.

Mr Molyneaux said that it would further hasten the decline of the SDLP to encourage speculation about joint authority arrangements, whether within Northern Ireland or on an all-Irish basis. The Sunningdale arrangements had got the middle class unionist community up in arms; and it was inconceivable that the Republic would accept British interference in their affairs. Nor did he believe that minor concessions to Irish aspirations were a starter. These would aggravate the unionists and enrage Republican terrorists.

"The Way Forward"

Mr Molyneaux said that he was satisfied that the unionist document would be accepted by the Party. He believed it represented a reasonable way forward. It had already helped to reduce tension and had softened the attitude of the DUP. But the speculation following the Forum Report had made it difficult to take it forward. He had received a private message from Mr Hume that he was sincere when he said that he would study the document and Mr Molyneaux believed that Mr Hume meant rather more than that. He had not yet spoken to Mr Hume, but hoped to be in a position to do so in about a week's time. He believed some useful ground work could be undertaken in advance of the European elections since the SDLP could be trusted to be discreet. He had it in mind that, following their discussion, both parties should report separately to the Secretary of State and it would then be for him to decide what action to take.

Mr Molyneaux said that the party had considered suggesting administrative

devolution of such matters as agriculture and economic development, but they had rejected it since they believed that they would be held responsible for unpopular developments in both these areas without having the power to do much about them.

The Secretary of State said that he welcomed Mr Molyneaux's proposal to hold discussions with Mr Hume. He would be seeing Mr Hume the following day, and would let him know of their discussion. If it were possible for the two parties to come closer together, then the Government would certainly be ready to act. He had already made clear that he thought the unionist document was conciliatory and helpful in tone and largely in its substance. But he would be surprised if administrative devolution to the top tier of local Government would on its own be acceptable to the SDLP. The full Assembly or Council would still have an inbuilt unionist majority unless a satisfactory system of weighted majorities could be developed. One possibility which he hoped could be considered would be to combine administrative devolution of local government powers with some legislative devolution to enable the parties under the Secretary of State to have some say in running their own affairs.

The Secretary of State said that, while there was no immediate urgency, things could not be left too long. Both he and the Prime Minister were one in their concern about security, which could get worse at any time, and the economic problems. There was no prospect of attracting inward investment while the security situation was as it was; and at the same time the Treasury were questioning the size of the subvention to Northern Ireland.

The Assembly

Mr Molyneaux said that he had hoped that there would have been some early movement in establishing the Assembly reports committee. Mr Allen, the Unionist Chief Whip, had been prepared to attend the Assembly to move or support the motion for the establishment of the reports committee. He had believed this procedure had been agreed by the Chief Whips of each of the parties. He had seen Mr Kilfedder the Speaker of the Assembly, to offer help on these lines, but Mr Kilfedder had in effect rejected it. He seemed to have it in mind that he could appoint to the committee the four unionist

party defectors who had joined the Assembly.

The Secretary of State said that at present he believed it was more important for the Unionist Party to conduct its discussions with the SDLP than to concentrate on establishing the Reports committee.

Press Line

The Secretary of State said that the NIO would make clear that the meeting had been to discuss the Unionist party document 'The Way Forward'. They would say he had been impressed by the document and believed the ideas in it should be carefully considered.

Mr Molyneux said that for his part he would say that he had asked about weekend press speculation and had been assured that there was no question of any change in the constitutional guarantee.

J. M. Lyon

J M LYON

Private Secretary

9th May 1984

cc PS/SofS (L&B) - M
 PS/Ministers (L&B) - M
 PS/PUS (L&B) - M
 PS/Sir Ewart Bell - M
 Mr Brennan
 Mr Angel
 Mr Merifield - M
 Mr Carvill - M
 Mr Doyne-Ditmas - M
 Mr Abbott
 Mr Boys Smith
 Mr Reeve - M
 Mr Wood
 Mr Templeton - M
 Mr Bickham