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PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - m

- cc: PS/Ministers (L&B) - m
- PS/PUS (L&B) - O/R - m
- PS/Mr Bloomfield
- Mr Brennan - m
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Merifield
- Mr Chesterton - O/R - m
- Mr Carvill
- Mr Gilliland
- Mr Buxton
- Mr Lyon - m
- Miss Elliott - m
- Mr G Hewitt
- Mr D Barrie FCO - m
- Mr Bickham - m

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE CURRENT POLITICAL SCENE

The period between the loyalist and nationalist marching 'sessions' provides a convenient opportunity to assess the present mood of political parties in Northern Ireland and attempt to give some indications as to their likely future policies.

2. On the unionist side, although the level of 'civil war' hysteria has greatly diminished over the past 4-6 weeks, there can be no doubt that suspicions and fears about the possible implications of the Anglo-Irish dialogue remain very close to the surface. It is an open question as to whether the situation parallels that of 1974 and whether unionist politicians can persuade their supporters to take to the streets. At this stage widespread disorder appears unlikely but more selective action (eg the resurrection of the 'Third Force', strikes in key industries etc) remains a possibility. This is a key question and one which even Molyneux or Paisley would have difficulty in answering at this time.

3. However, the incidents at Portadown appear to have given unionist leaders pause, particularly in the case of Dr Paisley whose prediction of widespread civil disorder in the event of a re-routing or ban came to naught. But the subsequent establishment of the loyalist 'framework group' demonstrates that great unease still exists within the unionist community as a whole. The continuing presence of Sinn Fein in district councils has intensified their worries and concerns.

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4. It now appears that the leaders of the two main unionist parties are taking stock of the situation and looking for ways to re-establish and give added force to the recently renewed pact between them. Their overall objective is to avoid splits within the unionist position which they fear would enable the British Government to divide and isolate them. So much was apparent from Mr Molyneaux's remarks about the new loyalist umbrella organisation and Newsletter editorials have pointed to the need for unity within the majority community. The requirement for unity has been reinforced by the understandable reaction of disgust by several unionist politicians to the sight of protestant crowds assaulting the RUC and the actions of the 'Loyalist Committee' in Cookstown. Messrs Molyneaux and Paisley will now wish to contain the atmosphere and put themselves into a strong joint position to confront the British Government in the event of an Anglo-Irish agreement. To this extent, they are avoiding hysterical 'knee jerk' reactions to the series of press leaks about the content of a bilateral agreement. However, their failure to protest vociferously should not be taken as an indication that they are prepared to face up to the realities of an agreement and reluctantly be forced to acquiesce to it. It would be my view that the parties are using the present 'lull' to gather their strengths and begin to build up a solid organisation for the main battle which they see as taking place in the latter part of the year. (The additional factor of the traditional holiday period in Northern Ireland limits in any case the amount of activity which can be carried out during the latter part of July and the early part of August).

5. Unionist unity will be hard to maintain. Although Molyneaux and Paisley publicly renewed their pact on 11 July there are clear differences of approach between their parties. Criticism of the pact has been voiced inside the UUP by those who doubt the wisdom or the need to associate themselves too closely with the party they soundly defeated in the Council elections. Many UUP members have no sympathy whatsoever for the wild statements which have been made during the last few weeks by the likes of Sammy Wilson, Jim Wells, George Graham and Ivan Foster. Similarly, protestant paramilitary spokesmen have said that they are not prepared to be used by unionist politicians who have on previous occasions, signally failed to take their places 'in the front line'.

6. Unionists will be watching with great attention how the RUC handle the republican parades and demonstrations during the early part of August. In particular, they will wish to see the security forces taking a robust line with any potential NORAIID associated events. Our ability to prevent a recurrence of last year's Downes affair will be closely scrutinised as will our success or otherwise in dealing with Galvin - should he appear.

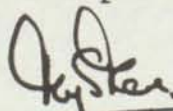
7. Whilst unionist politicians draw up their positions for the Anglo-Irish issue, the problem of Sinn Fein at district council level remains an open sore. At that level, unionists feel unable to avoid the need to continually attack and belittle Sinn Fein councillors. Although some of them recognise that this hands Sinn Fein a propaganda advantage and places the SDLP in a difficult position, they still believe that the only way to persuade Government to take action against Sinn Fein is to pursue the battle in the council chambers. Indeed, they fear that unless they continue to approach Sinn Fein in this manner the Government will interpret their acquiescence as a sign of unionist weakness. Even 'moderate' unionists such as Ray Ferguson and Willy Thompson (both of whom are prepared to see some kind of Anglo-Irish arrangement) are adamant that the main cause of unionist concern at grass roots level is the presence of Sinn Fein on the councils and not so much the fear of being sold down the river towards a united Ireland. Accusations of Government 'double standards' in relation to Sinn Fein will continue and intensify in the weeks ahead.

8. Although, as noted above, the wilder noises about the civil war have receded somewhat, it is noticeable that any action by Government is now regarded as being dictated from Dublin. This was most manifest at the time of the Portadown marches but even the early release of women prisoners from Armagh jail has been attributed by the Rev McCrea to pressure from the South. Any future action on our part will be looked at in this light, as will any statement or comment on Northern Ireland by non unionists (eg the reactions to Cardinal O'Fiaich's interview and the publication of the Liberal-SDP Report). This applies with even greater force to statements from the Republic.

9. On the nationalist side, the most noticeable feature has been the complete silence from John Hume. It has been left to Mallon to make the running on public order and security issues - even to the extent of introducing deliberately provocative motions in the Armagh council chamber. But throughout the party, one senses the feeling that people are awaiting the outcome of the summit process and that all will look to Hume to give them the necessary lead. It is unlikely that any Anglo-Irish agreement will be signed unless Hume has been convinced of its value.

10. If that should be the case, then there is little doubt that the party will rally behind him, whatever the misgivings of Seamus Mallon. If, however, the bilateral dialogue breaks down, then the SDLP will be in an extremely difficult position. So many hopes have been built upon a successful agreement. It will call for a great deal more energy and commitment from Hume within Northern Ireland if the party is not to drift into collapse. The differences within the SDLP at council level between their members in Fermanagh and Omagh and those in other parts of the Province have already been commented on by us and need no restatement. To rally and inspire the party in the event of a breakdown in the governmental talks will be a major task. However, in the face of predictable unionist triumphalism and 'I told you so' Sinn Fein attacks, I have no reason to believe that Hume would not fact up to the challenge.

11. Underlying the validity of the above analysis, is the security factor. A major terrorist incident in the next few weeks could further destabilise the unionist community and increase the chances of widespread disorder. In the longer term, the response of Sinn Fein/IRA to the summit will be of considerable importance. It goes without saying that Sinn Fein will rubbish a successful agreement and may well release any shackles on IRA activity. An unsuccessful summit might lead Adams to calculate that he would secure a greater prize by concentrating on his political arm to the detriment of the SDLP.



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