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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS GROUP



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Note of a meeting held on Wednesday 11 February 1987

Present: Mr Burns (Chairman)
 1. Mr Bloomfield
 Mr A W Stephens
 Mr Chesterton
 Mr Elliott
 Mr Gilliland
 Mr Spence
 Mr Kirk
 Mr Bell
 Mr G Hewitt
 Mr McConnell
 Mr Rickard)
 Mr Priestly) Secretariat

Present Political Situation

1. Unionist opposition to the Agreement remains constant. Notwithstanding tactical differences between the parties and some resentment at the behaviour of the unionist leaders amongst responsible unionist opinion, a deep sense of hurt in the unionist community remained.
2. The UDA policy document represented less of a change in policy than at first appeared. UDA opposition to any Irish dimension or to the participation of nationalists in government remained. The UDA appeared nonetheless determined to pursue their initiative, which was in part aimed at enhancing their own profile.
3. The Alliance Party remained in a difficult position as a result of its qualified support for the Agreement. Mr Cushnahan was increasingly concerned by the immobility of the SDLP. There was talk of re-evaluating the Agreement unless the SDLP became more generous.

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4. The SDLP continued to underestimate the extent and strength of unionist opposition to the Agreement. The party had slowly shifted its emphasis from the demand for results towards stress on the existence of the Agreement itself. The party might be a restraining influence in the event of a Fianna Fail government in the Republic.

5. Sinn Fein remained confident and prepared to foment further instability. Sinn Fein candidates were now actively working in their respective constituencies and the party was expecting to retain the West Belfast seat.

6. In the Republic the Government's working assumption was that Mr Haughey would be the next Taoiseach. His attitude to the Agreement - particularly in view of his hostile approach to Article 1 - was difficult to predict. But there might be rough water ahead.

7. At Westminster the Government remained committed to the Agreement.

The Government's Current Policy for Northern Ireland's Internal Political Development

8. Within the framework set by its commitment to the Agreement, the Government continued to urge unionists to return to dialogue, with the promise of sensitive operation of the Agreement. Devolution remained its preferred option for internal political development.

Policy Development

9. In discussion the following points were made:

- (i) it was necessary to draw a distinction between medium-term policy development up to the UK election; and longer-term possibilities for the post-election period;

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- (ii) the central problems remained the apparent reduction in acceptability of direct rule in the post-Agreement period, and the further diminution in the prospects of devolution;
- (iii) a purpose of the Agreement has been to increase nationalist acceptance of Northern Ireland institutions. Its effect so far had been to alienate the unionist community without bringing the whole of the nationalist community on side. It therefore remained important to take measures in the interest of the nationalist community. But equally, such measures must be justified on their merits and not simply the result of Irish pressure through the Conference;
- (iv) in practice, the extent to which the SDLP could be forthcoming was limited by the insecurity of their electoral position vis-a-vis Sinn Fein;
- (v) in the medium-term, the most useful development would be change in the political climate. In the longer-term, it was necessary to identify the conditions most conducive to devolution, and to consider how these might be brought about; and at the same time to develop a strategy for increasing the acceptability of direct rule.

Tactical Issues

10. In discussion of Mr Spence's paper of 9 February on local government, the Group noted that there was a need to back DOE(NI)'s successful tactical management of the unionist campaign of disruption with a coherent long-term strategy for local government. The paper suggested options of a fundamental review of local government, or a series of less radical measures. The timescale for either would, however, run past the UK election. The Group agreed that Mr Spence should take the lead in examining the less radical option more fully.

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11. The Government's response to the unionist petition would be negative. But at the same time, we should not appear to undervalue the opinions represented. We should also reemphasise the Prime Minister's offer of talks.

12. The Group noted that Mr Burns would be advising the Secretary of State against Mr Cushnahan's suggestion of a round table conference summoned by the Prime Minister; this manoeuvre was designed by Mr Cushnahan principally to embarrass the unionists. It was noted that the Consultative Paper on declaration of non-violence might issue shortly.

Action Arising

13. In the light of further discussion, it was agreed that:

(a) Mr Elliott and PAB should, in consultation with others as appropriate, prepare a paper to go to Ministers within the next two to three weeks. This should examine ways in which the Government might seek to moderate unionist reaction to the Agreement; encourage the SDLP to be more forthcoming; and generally lower the political temperature. This should take account of the Secretary of State's decision to proceed with a "policy restatement" document ;

(b) Mr Chesterton and CPL should prepare:

(i) further advice for the Secretary of State on the handling of the UDA document;

and in slower time

(ii) a paper outlining the conditions which would be most conducive to devolution after the UK election, and suggesting ways in which the Government might help create these conditions;

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(iii) a paper to identify the changes to direct rule - particularly aimed at increasing its acceptability - which might be needed if it were to become a more permanent arrangement in future;

(c) Mr Spence in consultation with DOE(NI), PAB and CPL should develop proposals for improvements in the structure of local government, on the lines of those set out in paragraph 11(1) of his paper of 9 February. Paper should be given a very limited circulation, and the exercise kept strictly confidential.

Date of next Meeting

14. The next meeting would take place at 10.00 hours on 13 March in the Conference Room, NIO(L). The meeting after that would be on 7 April, in Belfast.

Paul Priestly

PAUL PRIESTLY

CPL

17 February 1987

Distribution: those present
 PS/PUS (L&B) - M
 Mr Watkins (L&B) - M
 (personal)
 Mr S Hewitt - M