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23 MAR 1988

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Note of a meeting held on Wednesday 9 March 1988

Present: Mr Burns (Chairman)
Mr A W Stephens
Mr Chesterton
Mr Miles
Mr Spence ✓
Mr Daniell
Mr Wood
Mr J McConnell
Mr N Hamilton
Mr Bell
Mr Masefield
Mr Kirk
Mr Rickard (Secretary)

Apologies: Sir K Bloomfield

Agenda Item 1 - Recent Developments

Unionists

1. The unionist parties were talking increasingly about the possibility of devolution. The 'young turks' on the DUP-dominated panel advising the leadership were keen to make progress, and suspicious of Mr Molyneaux's apparent lack of enthusiasm. Certain churchmen remained interested in playing an 'intermediary' role between the parties. There was, however, no real chance that the unionists would respond to Mr Haughey's offer of talks; their temporising response reflected merely a concern to project an image of flexibility.

Nationalists

2. The SDLP appeared to be trying to shift its ground in face of the new unionist interest in devolution. Mr Hume was showing increasing lukewarmness, and the party had few positive ideas on the subject. That said, many younger members had an interest in creating devolved arrangements, not least because these would

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offer them political careers. A link between Mr Hume's hesitations and Mr Haughey's recent statements was possible, but it was more likely that the Taoiseach was merely voicing his own long-held attitudes towards devolution; the timing was coincidence.

Anglo-Irish Relations

3. Friction continued across a range of Anglo-Irish issues. Some of these had the capacity to turn sourer yet. The Anglo-Irish relationship needed to be restored, and one way of doing so would be to broaden it on to other issues (such as fair employment, political development, security co-operation, and the administration of justice). This suggestion had already been put to Irish officials; the possibilities would be considered further by PUS' Steering Group. Anglo-Irish problems should not, however, be a way for the SDLP to wriggle out of making progress towards devolution.

Agenda Item 2 - A 'Political Commission'

4. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's recent discussion with NI Permanent Secretaries about political matters had thrown up the idea of a 'Political Commission'. This would be a group of two or three people appointed by the Government, with a small staff, to act as broker in making political progress. It might serve to fill a political vacuum.

5. In discussion, the following points were made:

- (i) at present, we were not in a political vacuum; there were hopes of making progress directly with the parties. Accordingly, the potential usefulness of a Commission was diminished;
- (ii) it was possible to envisage variants upon the 'Commission' idea. A Commission could act as

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Sinn Fein; if so, what that strategy might be; and how it might be used to test the merits of the various measures aimed at Sinn Fein which were from time to time proposed.

8. In discussion, the following points were made:

- (i) Sinn Fein fulfilled two functions, although in practice these were not readily separable. It was a political party, advocating a united Irish Republic. It also offered succour and support to PIRA, a terrorist organisation. It was difficult for a democratic government to object to the first function; the second was highly objectionable, but difficult to attack without also attacking the first;
- (ii) it was important not to mistake symptoms for cause. Sinn Fein's political activities created a variety of tactical problems for the Government. But the underlying problem was that a large number of people were prepared to vote for the party, in the knowledge that it supported violence, as a way of achieving a united Ireland;
- (iii) this reflected a long tradition in Ireland of the successful use of violence to achieve political ends. That said, it would be wrong to dismiss the possibility of change. Other 'terrorist' movements had been gradually and successfully weaned away from violence by the prospect of achieving their objectives by other means;
- (iv) it was tempting to suggest that one objective for HMG might be to split the Provisional movement. But in practice this was an unrealistic, perhaps even undesirable, objective. Attempts to split terrorist movements elsewhere into 'political' and 'terrorist' wings had sometimes served simply to remove the

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'broker' between the parties, but it might also be used to produce a recommended blueprint for devolution. Mr David Astor had recently suggested a 'forum' with an educative/publicity role on political matters, but it was not clear that this idea could contribute to resolving a political impasse whose main features were only too well understood;

- (iii) although the model of a 'broker' Commission was the role discharged by the Convention Chairman and his staff in 1975-76, the 1988 position was very different. The Anglo-Irish Agreement in effect made HMG a party to the central issues, and a Commission would have to broker, not just between the parties, but between the parties and Government;
- (iv) a Commission used to fill a political vacuum would not do so for very long. At some stage, its success or failure would have to be acknowledged and the Commission wound up;
- (v) Paul Arthur appeared to be talking in terms of a 'third party' initiative involving the Nuffield Foundation. Details of this idea were sketchy.

6. The Group concluded that, while a Political Commission was an approach that might, at some time in the future, prove useful, it would not be appropriate to adopt it in present circumstances, when it would only confuse the direction in which the Government was proceeding. For this reason, it might be necessary to discourage Paul Arthur's initiative; PAB should, in the first instance, attempt to find out more about his activities.

Agenda Item 3 - Sinn Fein

7. The Group resumed from its previous meeting discussion of whether or not the Government should have a strategy towards

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constraints which electoral considerations otherwise impose on terrorist activities. Moreover, the Provisionals were not two 'wings' of a movement; they were an integrated organisation with a single objective, but considerable tactical flexibility of means. The precedent of the Workers' Party was not directly applicable. The party's withdrawal from violence in the 1970's had been dependent upon an OIRA cease-fire. It was not realistic to visualise Sinn Fein disengaging itself from PIRA, while the military campaign still continued;

- (v) putting the Provisionals in a complete political 'quarantine' (as opposed to the present partial one) might merely increase their interest in violence;
- (vi) one approach to reducing support for political violence was for the Government to pursue suitable political and economic policies alongside security ones - in other words, present Government policy;
- (vii) building up the SDLP to compete with Sinn Fein was, in theory, another promising approach. But in practice the SDLP was simply not very good at low-level day-to-day politics, and Sinn Fein had proved consistently the most young, busy, and attractive party in, for example, West Belfast;
- (viii) education about the methods and objectives of Sinn Fein/PIRA had little role to play in Northern Ireland; these were already well understood. Overseas, however, such education could still be valuable;
- (ix) proscription would be unlikely to undermine Sinn Fein's underlying support. There were even doubts as to the extent to which it would solve HMG's tactical problems; it might rather create new and perhaps more difficult ones.

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9. The Group saw little advantage in departing from HMG's present broad policy, which aimed to steer a path between proscription and treating Sinn Fein as a normal political party. There were, however, three reviews currently in hand. These concerned Sinn Fein's access to Government; the Government's publicity material on Sinn Fein; and measures which might be taken to replace (or supplement) the candidates' declaration should the latter not secure a legislative slot. These reviews offered an opportunity to refine the existing policy. In addition, it might be helpful to have a short 'position paper' setting out the bones of the strategy itself.

Summary of Action Required

10. The following action was required:

- (i) PAB should seek more information about Paul Arthur's initiative (para 6);
- (ii) CPL should prepare a position paper on Sinn Fein for circulation to PDG members (para 10).

Date of Next Meeting

11. Tuesday 12 April, 11.00 am in the Conference Room, NIO(L).

(signed)

S L RICKARD
CPL
22 March 1988

cc Those present
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir K Bloomfield
Mr Watkins (L&B)
(personal)

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