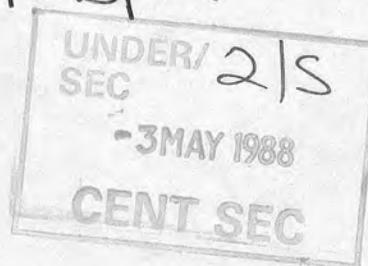


PAB/3927/DP

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



I attach the latest political analysis by PAB of developments in Northern Ireland since the middle of April. This period was most notable for the continuing controversy over the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks and the speech by Peter Robinson in which he alluded to the calling of a "Unionist Convention" if the current talks between unionist leaders and the Secretary of State do not lead to some movement.

The Unionists

2. In a speech delivered to DUP members at Glengormley, on the outskirts of Belfast, Peter Robinson made reference to the possibility of "life without the Union". While stating his personal preference for a Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, Robinson said there was a possibility that another course might have to be considered, "Whilst desiring and hoping that... the Government might take up the unionist proposals for an alternative, and work out a satisfactory basis for membership within the UK, we should prepare and condition ourselves for the other outcome". He alleged that there was an attempt to "estrangle" the Ulster people from their fellow citizens in the United Kingdom and described unionists as "the most wronged community in the world". He referred to the Hume/Adams talks as a bid to obstruct the opportunities for negotiation with unionists.

3. Robinson had been perceived as adopting a more conciliatory stance recently and this speech is being seen as reflecting unionist concerns over a number of political points. There is a growing impatience with HMG at the delay in responding to the proposals tabled earlier in the year by the two party leaders. As for the SDLP, unionists perceive only half hearted interest in some form of devolved government and suspect that many constitutional nationalists would be content to maintain the status quo in terms of

the Agreement. Their suspicions are reinforced by the SDLP's talks with Sinn Fein which they still see as an attempt to jeopardise the prospects for talks with unionists on political progress. Finally, from Robinson's own position there is a hint of criticism of the two leaders for sitting on the side-lines rather than taking command of events.

4. A few days after the Robinson speech Paisley made it clear that "talks with the SDLP can only begin when the British Government gives a positive response to the talks about talks". He reiterated the unionist stand-point that if HMG is prepared "to consider an alternative to the present failed Agreement, then the way is open for a round-table conference with all constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to discuss a replacement". He also called on the SDLP to state whether they are prepared to accept a solution which keeps Northern Ireland with the United Kingdom. He went on to accuse the SDLP of calling for dialogue with unionists while at the same time they "are telling Sinn Fein that they are not committed to devolution". He argued that the real purpose of the current round of SDLP/Sinn Fein talks was to get Sinn Fein to the conference table, but he was emphatic that "Unionists would never sit around a conference table with Sinn Fein/IRA representatives to discuss the future of Northern Ireland".

The SDLP

5. There has been little evidence of political activity on the part of the SDLP; they appear preoccupied with their talks with Sinn Fein, while at the same time making the "right noises" about the possibilities for dialogue. In a recent address to the central council of the party the Chairman, Alban Maginness, expressed optimism about the current political climate in Northern Ireland. He referred to a "reassessment of the Unionist position" beginning to emerge and to the possibility of a "foreseeable end to all military and violent activity". He rather naively referred to the positive elements in Robinson's speech as a call for "a Unionist equivalent of the Forum for a New Ireland". Maginness reaffirmed the party's support for John Hume's talks with Sinn Fein on pursuing

"the task of finding an end to violence and securing the widest and most stable base for a new consensus".

6. Recent reports in the local press have suggested that the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks are set to continue indefinitely, with sources in both parties revealing that there is a positive commitment to the dialogue and a marked reluctance on the part of both Hume and Adams to end the discussions. Despite SDLP claims that the Agreement is evidence of Britain being "neutral" about a continued presence in Ireland, Sinn Fein is understood to be sceptical and maintains that there is no real sign of a British wish to withdraw. As for the current thinking on devolution, Sinn Fein are reported to have made clear to the SDLP that there can be no internal arrangement. Following Eddie McGrady's doubts about the wisdom of the SDLP's discussions with Sinn Fein, Dr Joe Hendron has said his support for the talks would end if it became clear that the IRA did not intend to call a cease-fire. Dr Hendron was the unsuccessful SDLP candidate against Adams in West Belfast and he is very conscious of the risk of the talks diminishing the SDLP's standing in West Belfast by enhancing Adams' credibility. He is also acutely aware of the hypocrisy of Sinn Fein in calling for increased employment opportunities for West Belfast while IRA violence discourages new investment. The McGrady/Hendron position is indicative of a strand of opinion within the Party which considers that the talks with Sinn Fein should be brought to an early conclusion, if, as expected, it becomes apparent that there is no prospect of any change in Sinn Fein's basic position.

7. The latest meeting between the Secretary of State and the SDLP, held on 26 April, was described by John Hume as 'constructive'. Hume was accompanied by Mallon, McGrady, Currie, Hendron and Farren. There was little public comment from them after the talks but it is generally believed that the way has now been cleared for a further meeting between the Secretary of State and the two unionist leaders. Despite the lack of comment by either side, there is speculation that the SDLP indicated that they do not regard devolution, on its own, as a solution to the problem and that a

solution would have to be found in a wider framework. This speculation will heighten unionist suspicions that the SDLP will be seeking a substantial Irish dimension to any talks and even the possibility of including Sinn Fein.

Sinn Fein

8. In a speech to a public meeting in Dublin, Adams appealed to Protestants in Northern Ireland to join in a settlement based on uniting with the rest of the Irish people and ending sectarianism. He said that Sinn Fein "has long accepted that Northern Protestants have fears about their civil and religious liberties and we have consistently insisted that these liberties must be guaranteed and protected.... We offer them equality... We do not seek to exclude them... On the contrary we seek to include them". Adams argued that the Anglo-Irish Agreement simply reinforced the Union and that it enabled London to treat Dublin and the SDLP with contempt and referred to the need for the "broadest possible agreement and endorsement of the internationally established principle of the right of the Irish people to national self-determination coupled with an acceptance that Britain has no legitimate right to be in Ireland".

9. Republican sources are reported as re-emphasising that the talks with the SDLP are not about an IRA ceasefire and that any discussions about a ceasefire would be on the clear understanding that the "armed struggle would continue until a British declaration of intent to withdraw was secured". In response to the SDLP documents Sinn Fein are believed to have tabled policies based on the ending of partition, a British disengagement from Ireland and "the restoration to the Irish people of the right to exercise self sovereignty". As part of a withdrawal process, Sinn Fein will undoubtedly have argued for the disbanding of the RUC and the UDR and the unconditional release of all "political prisoners".

General

10. The recent comments by Charles Haughey during his visit to America, in which he was less than enthusiastic about the

Anglo-Irish Agreement and in which he once again described the cause of the problem as being the "failed political entity" of Northern Ireland, have had a mixed reception here, as has his renewed expression of willingness to talk to unionist leaders about future political structures. There has been little reaction from nationalist ranks presumably because the SDLP are aware that the present Taoiseach is less committed to the Agreement than his predecessor and they are concerned that such remarks show a lack of determination to make it work. Unionist reaction varied, Molyneux welcomed the "new realism" shown by Haughey about the value of the Agreement, Robinson saw the Taoiseach's speech as "the greenest, most bellicose, most belligerent speech", while Paisley, rebuffed any idea that there would be a role for Dublin in any discussions about a replacement for the Agreement.

11. At the same time as Haughey was reflecting his unhappiness about Anglo-Irish relations, Sir Geoffrey Howe was reaffirming HMG's commitment to the Agreement and saying that Britain did not under-estimate the hurt felt by the Irish over developments in recent months - Stalker/Sampson Enquiry, Gibraltar shootings, Birmingham Six Appeal, McAnespie Shooting at Aughnacloy, early release of Private Thain. Seamus Mallon took comfort from the speech and said he detected an opening out of the British position towards Ireland from "the narrow parameters of the Northern Ireland Office". He saw the speech as evidence of new thinking which would emerge in the future actions of HMG. On the unionist side there has been criticism of the Foreign Secretary's speech, with Sammy Wilson saying he had been "supersensitive" to Irish criticisms and had given a "grovelling apology" for British actions since the beginning of the year. Paisley accused Sir Geoffrey of being more interested in placating the Irish Prime Minister than with the rights of the Province's one million unionists and he described it as "typical Foreign Office jargon, and a sell-out of part of Her Majesty's Kingdom".

12. The Workers' Party held their Ard Fheis in Dublin over the weekend 17/18 April. Proinsias De Rossa TD was elected leader in

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succession to Tomas MacGiolla. The party called for the removal of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat from Northern Ireland and the holding of all future Intergovernmental Conferences in London or Dublin in order to facilitate the holding of all party talks on devolution. The SDLP were strongly criticised for engaging in dialogue with Sinn Fein, while Ulster Protestants were encouraged to face the necessity of forging a new identity. In general, the Workers' Party reaffirmed their commitment to the establishment of a devolved government in Northern Ireland with a Bill of Rights to protect civil and religious liberty. After attacking PIRA for their continuing campaign of violence, the new leader was asked about his own party's past and its links with the Official IRA. He replied that no organisation can deny its past, but stressed that the Workers Party had no weapons and no connections with paramilitary organisations.

Comment

13. While there have been no significant political developments in this period, the feeling persists that there is a possibility of progress towards some form of devolved government. The talks between the SDLP and Sinn Fein continue to make unionists suspicious of the motives of a constitutional party which devotes time to talking to the spokesmen for terrorism while appearing less than fully committed to exploring the opportunities for some form of devolved government. Unionists also profess to be annoyed that, after they were severely criticised for their negative approach following the signing of the Agreement, the Government has been slow to respond to their current proposals, which they believe display a more positive approach. The delay in obtaining a response from the Secretary of State to the proposals is seen as contrasting with HMG's readiness to accommodate SDLP concerns. The belief that the Foreign Secretary was apologising to the Irish in his recent speech has also touched a raw nerve with the unionist leadership and the unionist community at large.

14. While the SDLP appear content to continue their strategy of talking with HMG and holding discussions with Sinn Fein, it seems

clear that unionist position remains that the Agreement must be suspended before they will be willing to proceed from "talks about talks" to substantive discussions. Recent statements have also made clear that any talks with Dublin could only take place after unionists have clarified their relationship with HMG and have made political progress within a Northern Ireland context. Whatever the prospects for real political progress there can be little doubt that the path will be a long one and that there will be pit-falls along the way.


 J E McCONNELL
 Political Affairs Division
 29 April 1988

DP/1668

cc PS/Ministers (L&B) - B
 PS/PUS (L&B) - B
 PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
 Mr Stephens - B
 Mr Burns - B
 Mr Chesterton - B
 Mr Innes - B
 Mr Miles - B
 Mr Steele - B
 Miss Pease - B
 Mr Spence
 Mr Wood - B
 Mr Bell - B
 Mr Daniell
 Mr D Kirk - B
 Mr Coston
 Mr Hewitt - B
 Mr A Mackay MP c/o PO
 NIO(L) - B
 Mr George RID FCO - MUFAX
 Dr C Sperling, Research Dept
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 Mr P J Weston, Cabinet Office
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 Mr G C Gillham Assessment
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 Mr Cowper-Coles, British
 Embassy, Washington
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 Mr J Harrison CIVAD HQNI