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PAB/4945/DP

FROM: J E McCONNELL, PAB
14 APRIL 1989



NOTE FOR THE RECORD



cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/Minister of State (L&B) - B
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B / 14/4
① PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr Burns - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Miles - B
Mr Kirk - B
Mr Daniell - B

② Mr. Spence

③ ~~PS/Secretary of State~~

DISCUSSION WITH JIM NICHOLSON AND JIM SPEERS - UUP

I had a three and a half hour meeting yesterday with these two people during which we discussed the coming elections.

2. Jim Nicholson is very confident about the outcome of this election though I detected a little bit of concern that the Conservative Association would cut into his vote thus allowing his critics to say that he was not as good a candidate as his predecessor - John Taylor - and the Government to claim that support for unionism was diminishing. He said in passing that he believed that the Orange Order was about to, if they hadn't done so already, blackball any of their members who became candidates for the Conservative Association. It was not clear from what he said if he had been agitating for such action but Jim Speers clearly believed that it would be damaging rather than helpful.

3. When discussing the local government elections each of them said that they were sure their position would be consolidated vis a vis the DUP though possibly with a lower vote because of apathy in the electorate. I suggested to them that if it was a low turnout it should be seen as a clear demonstration that the electorate did not approve of unionist activities including the boycott and that such

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things would then be construed as counterproductive. They of course both pooh poohed this idea but clearly that is part of their concern in that neither of them are convinced that the protest action to date has served or will serve any useful purpose. They continued with veiled references to positive things which may happen in the wake of the elections but when pushed neither were prepared to give any details of what they meant.

4. I then put the point to them that had they been standing on a different manifesto in relation to the Anglo-Irish Agreement that the same team would have been elected and in response I got a rather gratifying silence as they looked at each other clearly confounded by this profound gem of wisdom.

5. Both of them told me that, in common with other political parties, they were having difficulty in getting suitable and in some cases any candidates for the local government elections. The Craigavon case where councillors have been surcharged has been one element in this so many people are thinking twice about seeking positions which no longer carry any influence or patronage to counterbalance the unpleasantness of the current district council scene.

6. We then had a discussion about, what they termed "the Mawhinney round", with each of them saying that there was no point in talking to unionists other than Jim Molyneaux because he was the only one who could deliver and in fact he was the only man who could also deliver Dr Paisley. I suggested to them that this implied that people such as themselves had no influence within the party and therefore no influence with the leader. They railed at this and immediately backed away from their first statement. Neither of them were prepared to give any commitment on a discussion with Dr Mawhinney except to say that in the run up to the elections it would be something which they would find impossible to consider.

7. They then went on to repeat something which is a common theme amongst our unionist contacts that there will be an election or a

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referendum in the autumn - an election to a new assembly or a referendum on the future governance of NI or even both. They base this story on a rumour which is circulating among unionists that Pat Bradley, Chief Electoral Officer, has been asked if it would be logistically possible for such an exercise to take place. We have heard this story from Jim Wilson Party Secretary, Jack Allen Chairman of the Party, Ken Maginnis, David McNarry and some others. I told them I was totally unaware of any such exercise and would be amazed if what they had described had taken place.

8. I then had a long speech from each of them which in substance was a repetition of the usual unionist position that Government had to do something to allow them to get into discussions with both of them labouring long and hard on the lost opportunities of Duisburg. I pointed out to them that time was not on their side and that Government would continue to govern and they, as political parties, would continue to diminish in importance for so long as they were prepared to sit back and allow this to happen. They took this point and Jim Nicholson suggested that we should be encouraging all of those to whom we are talking to work to find a way of setting an agenda and then the message of allowing people to get round a table to discuss this agenda. He went on to say that, as a first step, low key discussions should take place to cover this particular point. I confirmed to him that the Government is keen that discussions take place at all levels and subsequent discussions could then take place without preconditions in line with the Secretary of State's position.

Comment

9. It was very clear from my discussion that "the Mawhinney round" is being discussed in unionist circles and as further evidence of that I am aware that Raymond Ferguson has been speaking to Jack Allen and David McNarry has been talking to his colleagues saying that this is a positive exercise which should be supported.

10. The point about the same team being elected regardless of manifestoes continues to be something which really does stop most of

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them in their tracks and I suggest this is a line which we should continue to use when appropriate.

11. The point about suitable candidates for the local government elections is something which is being repeated to us with regularity from all sides. Example Iris Robinson (Peter's wife) is now running in Castlereagh having decided 4 weeks ago not to run because of illness, Rhonda Paisley is running in Belfast when she had earlier indicated she would not and Jack Allen is being pushed to run in Londonderry against his will - this story is being repeated in other areas.

12. The suggestion by Nicholson that low level discussions should take place is not too dissimilar from the proposal in the unionist Task Force Report.

[Signed: D Pearce for J McConnell]

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