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a m Haffey

NOTE FOR INFORMATION

- cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) -B
- PS/Paymaster General (B&L) - B
- PS/Minister of State (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Mr Feil - B
- Mr Pilkington - B
- Mr Ledlie - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Alston - B
- Mr A Wilson - B
- Mr D J R Hill - B
- Mr Cooke - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr McNeill
- Mr Dodds - B

UNIONIST VIEWS ON THE TALKS PROCESS

During the course of last week PAB made a point of talking to a number of unionists about the talks process. These were people who are not part of the delegations but are either elected representatives or office bearers within one of the two unionist parties. They include people from most areas of the Province where there is a significant unionist presence. The objective of the exercise was to try to get some feel for how they viewed the process, how they viewed the performance of their leaders, what exactly the burning issues were, so far as they were concerned whether the leaders should stay in the process and how they would like to see it developing. The statement issued by the four leaders on Wednesday may have a bearing on some of the views expressed and most of the views below were canvassed from people who could not have been informed of the background to that statement. However it is useful to record them anyway.

2. There was a surprising degree of consensus among all those to whom we spoke about the talks process. However, the one significant divergence of emphasis was between those who came from areas east of the Bann and those who lived to the west of it. The latter ie those

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in Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh considered that the talks were not the top priority, certainly in the local communities, but that dealing with the terrorist campaign was. Time and again it was said that the Government must be seen to be resolute in the fight against terrorism and should take the offensive (as in Coagh). Unionists in Armagh and Fermanagh in particular expressed the view that PIRA could take out anyone in the protestant community at will, could intimidate business people and shopkeepers and dominate large areas because there were not enough troops and police on the ground. It was said that people were unsure as to the will of Government to defeat a small group of terrorists; therefore they were unsure of the will to bring about an acceptable political solution.

3. On specific issues the following points are relevant:-

Venue

The general perception was that unionists had performed very badly in the first few weeks of the talks. People simply could not understand nor sympathise with the nuances of the venue problem. The unionist leaders it was said had not prepared their people for the process and for the fact that it would mean change and probably compromise.

14 May Ultimatum

This changed the general perception of the unionist leaders somewhat. The hand of Dublin was seen to be involved in the preparation of this document, the unionists leaders got their meeting with the Prime Minister and to some extent the blame for the ensuing uncertainty was left at the door of the Government.

Lord Carrington

The Carrington issue was when most most of those to whom we talked saw the pendulum swinging in favour of the unionist leaders. While ordinary

C O N F I D E N T I A L

-2-

C O N F I D E N T I A L

unionists did not immediately see the significance of Lord Carrington in terms of his unacceptability to their leaders, those more politically attuned particularly in the UUP immediately thought that the proposal by the Government was a trick or a trap. Despite the overnight uncertainty and press charges of the unionist leaders being economical with the truth, this episode seemed to strengthen the position of some in the delegation. Ken Maginnis became more identified as the acceptable and convincing face of unionism. When he lambasted the NIO, people believed him.

Other Parties

The SDLP were widely criticised throughout the unionist community for staying out of the process for so long and thereby lengthening it. They are also seen as having the support and encouragement of the Dublin Government while the unionist parties have to stand alone. Alliances are seldom mentioned. The NIO universally comes in for criticism for being insensitive to, and biased against, unionists. Some would argue that the neutral position taken by the Government is untenable and will be particularly difficult during the Strand II negotiations.

The Unionist leaders

Mr Molyneaux is generally recognised as someone who doesn't want to be in the process. He was described by one member of the Ulster Unionist Council as a clever little man who will nit-pick all day and who wants as little change as possible. Most of his negotiating team are thought to want to make progress but first have to get past the leader and Mr Cunningham; hence the hedging and qualifications which have been built into the process in the first number of weeks. The strength of Mr Molyneaux's position though in all areas and throughout the party still seems to be as firm as it ever was. Apparently at the UUC meeting last Tuesday night (4 June) very few questions were asked from the floor and those present appeared to accept quite readily the version of events

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of the talks process given at that meeting. Mr Molyneaux cannot afford to move too far ahead of his troops, particularly in the Orange and Black Institutions, and this is where his 'high wire act' analogy comes into play. The closer he gets to Strand II the higher the wire will become and the more uneasy he will be. There are few unionists at this stage who seem to be prepared to contemplate anything beyond a simple neighbourly relationship with the Government of the Republic ensuing from the process.

Dr Paisley

Dr Paisley on the other hand is said to be coming in for a fair amount of pressure from the paramilitaries and his right wing. One DUP councillor recounted how he (not Paisley) had been verbally and physically abused in the shipyard by a group of men who accused him and his party of being traitors. Some in the DUP are of the view that they should never have entered the process (because of Dublin's involvement) and should therefore leave it. Other believe that it is the only way they can survive. Most regret the fact that they ever had a pact with the other unionist party as they see it as having damaged their party in a significant way - electorally and in public presentation terms. Some DUP representatives make the point that as a party they are totally committed to the process, as evidenced by the fact that their full delegation is at Parliament Buildings doing work practically every day of the week. While Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux might work well together there is undoubtedly ill-feeling between the second and third ranks of UUP/DUP. This was perhaps seen most vividly in the production of separate lists for possible Chairman of Strand II. It may be simply a matter of style and public presentation, but Mr Paisley is trusted unquestioningly by most of his party followers, even though some of them are very hardline indeed.

Conclusion

5. All the views canvassed were in the period between the Glenanne UDR killings, the Coagh PIRA deaths on the one hand and the eventual agreement by the four leaders that they will enter plenary talks on

C O N F I D E N T I A L

C O N F I D E N T I A L

17 June on the other. The recent incidents in Tyrone and Fermanagh may have been a factor in people west of the Bann putting security to the top of their priorities. However it must be said that very often the views expressed were to the effect that the talks were detached, there seemed to be little interest in them and people did not believe that they would get anywhere anyway. People did not understand the issues and the fine print of the documents and some considered that the process was doing more and more damage to the unionist cause. On balance it would appear that the majority of people in the unionist community want their leaders to stay in the process, if only because they recognise that the position of the SDLP and the Irish Government would be strengthened if the talks collapsed. Ordinary unionists say they are looking for two main outcomes from the talks, one is the re-establishment of a strong link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom and the other a visible reduction in the influence which the Government of the Republic of Ireland has in Northern Ireland affairs.

[Signed

R Neill for]

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