

FROM:

D BROOKER
CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL DIVISION
17 June 1992

cc: PS/S of S (L)
PS/Mr Hanley (L&B)
Mr Thomas
Mr Bell
Mr Maccabe
Mr D J R Hill
Mr Marsh
Mr Durbin
Mr McVeigh, PAB

PS/S of S (B)

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT : THE WORKERS' PARTY

Ministers Cases SOS/00279/92 and SOS/00251/92

Councillor Tom French, the Chairperson of the Workers' Party in Northern Ireland, wrote to the Secretary of State recently to welcome him to Northern Ireland, express his pleasure that the talks had resumed, state the credentials of his party and to request a meeting to discuss the current political situation. While that letter was under consideration, Councillor French wrote again to send the Secretary of State his party's ideas on devolved government and repeated his request for a meeting.

History

2. The Workers' Party is miniscule in electoral terms; its best result was its 2.6% of the poll in the 1987 General Election (19,294 votes). In the autumn of last year it held 4 of the 566 District Council seats. Despite its size, Ministers have maintained contacts with the party over recent years. This is because the party has been a voice for moderation in nationalist areas, particularly West Belfast, and has developed a track record of denouncing terrorist violence. Its anti-violence stance has much to do with its attempts, since the 1970s, to shed its heritage as being the political wing of the Official IRA. Its progenitor, the Republican Clubs, was proscribed in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was

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de-proscribed, by the British Government, to try to bring the more militant elements into the political process; this also helps to explain Ministers' decision to continue contact over the years even though the party has only a minor following. Ministerial recognition was partly intended to reinforce the message throughout Northern Ireland that there is a place in constitutional politics for those who renounce violence. In the recent past the Party has met Mr Brooke, for a discussion about the talks, in April 1991 (before the talks actually began). The previous Head of PAB also met them during the 1991 talks to give them informal briefings, within the limitations of the confidentiality rule, on what was taking place. Prior to the latest correspondence, we last heard from the Party in October 1991 when they sought a meeting with Ministers to discuss the deteriorating security situation. This evolved into a proposal for a meeting with Dr Mawhinney, which would focus mainly on politics but also touch on security but, in the event, the meeting never took place. It was overtaken by internal upheavals within the party earlier this year.

3. The Secretary of State may be aware that, at the end of February this year, the Party experienced a major split. Proinsias de Rossa, with the support of many of the leading lights in the Party both North and South, split off to form Democratic Left. The schism came about because many in the Party wanted to break away from traditional revolutionary socialism and to make a clean break, once and for all, from the OIRA heritage. The new Party took with it six TDs, one MEP and a large number of Councillors on both sides of the border. The result of this split was that, in the recent general election, the Workers Party had lost many of its figureheads and supporters and polled only 4,359 votes - 0.5% of the electorate.

Future Handling

4. There is a fairly respectable argument that, even though the Party's strength has diminished to the point where it has virtually been extinguished, the Government should nevertheless keep open its

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contacts with it in some shape or form. It is reasonable to assume, at least from the correspondence with the Secretary of State, that the Party will continue to advance moderate policies. The Party's ideas on constitutional development, attached to Councillor French's letter of 21 May, are sensible and coherent. They advocate devolved government centring on an elected Assembly; a system of Departmental Committees, which would initially have only scrutinising powers but, with the approval of a weighted majority in the Assembly, could become decision-taking bodies; and an Executive formed by the Committee Chairmen. According to press reports, attached, the submission has been sent to the other parties both North and South. As in the past, continuing recognition by HMG would underscore the point, for a wider Northern Ireland audience, that those who follow the constitutional path will be embraced into the mainstream of political life.

5. On the other hand, if the Government agreed to see the Workers' Party it could easily find itself caught in the middle of lingering recriminations between the WP and the Democratic Left. According to press reports this week, the Workers' Party have issued a booklet ("Patterns of Betrayal, the Flight from Socialism") attacking the Democratic Left as "liquidators and conspirators". If the Government were to meet the Workers' Party it would be hard to resist meeting the Democratic Left, most of whose leaders were the key figures in the Workers' Party when Ministers last met the WP. There is no reason in principle why, at some future stage Ministers might not meet Democratic Left but we would need to wait and see what their policies are first and how their relations with the WP settle down. In short, it is not inconceivable that the Workers' Party have asked for a meeting with the Secretary of State in an attempt to help establish their credentials ahead of the Democratic Left.

6. The split in the WP earlier this year also reopened speculation about the Party's continuing links with the OIRA. This speculation led Councillor French to issue a statement in early March in which

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he said that "It is of grave concern to us that an impression has been created that those of us who remain in the WP can be in some way or another described as a 'Stalinist/Official IRA rump'. We categorically deny that this is so. The WP is committed to the development of democratic politics and practices and our opposition to paramilitarism and terrorism is absolute no matter what name that goes under. There is no room in the WP for those who advocate or countenance paramilitarism or illegality". Whatever the truth of these remarks, the WP are certainly perceived, in parts of the community, as retaining their connections with the OIRA. It would not be a good time for Ministers to meet the Party when these issues have recently been back in the public consciousness.

Advice

7. In the circumstances, our firm advice would be that the Secretary of State should reject a meeting at this stage. This is justified not only because of the danger of getting caught up in an inter-party row between the WP and the Democratic Left and persistent speculation about the WP's connections with the OIRA but because a meeting could complicate the already difficult progress of the political talks.

8. At the same time, we would not entirely rule out the possibility of a meeting at some time in the future, when the political climate might be less sensitive and the relationship between the new Workers' Party and Democratic Left has settled down. Given the tiny support for the Party, any meetings would probably be better pitched at official, rather than Ministerial level.

9. I therefore recommend that the Private Secretary sends a short but reasonably friendly reply, in the attached terms.

(Signed) David Brooker

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DRAFT

Councillor Tom French
Chairperson
The Workers' Party
Northern Regional Executive
6 Springfield Road
Belfast 12

hcc: As per Mr Brooker's minute
of 17 June

FOR SIGNATURE BY PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

You wrote to the Secretary of State recently to welcome him to Northern Ireland and to send him the Workers' Party's ideas on a system of devolved government in Northern Ireland. You also asked for a meeting with him to discuss the Party's ideas. I am sorry that you have not received a reply to your letters before now.

The Secretary of State was very glad to receive your kind message of welcome. As you may know, he was more than happy to be appointed Secretary of State; it is a position which he has long wanted to hold.

The Secretary of State was also very interested to read your Party's proposals for devolved government. It was apparent to him that the Party had clearly given serious consideration to its proposals. He understands, from reports in the press, that copies of your submission were also sent to the other political parties in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Although he was grateful to receive your Party's submission he does not, however, believe that a meeting would be useful at this time.

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