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NORTHERN IRELAND
POLITICAL APPRECIATION

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department

A. OBJECTIVES

Her Majesty's Government has had two principal objectives:-

- (a) to ensure that the historic tensions and divisions in the community are resolved, and
- (b) to ensure that political, economic and social conditions and institutions are of a standard acceptable by comparison with those in Great Britain.

They are interdependent and advance towards one is conditional on advance towards the other: massive unemployment and poor housing in Londonderry and elsewhere have preserved and exacerbated old quarrels between politico-religious communities.

2. The factors affecting the attainment of these objectives include:-

- (a) the political settlement enshrined in the 1920 Constitution. This was born in crisis but the majority would now fear and oppose any change; in the short or medium term minimum interference with the constitutional settlement must have a high (but not absolute) priority, and limits the external pressure which can be applied.
- (b) the limitation on the maximum rate of change acceptable to both communities in a society such as Ulster's; religious and political attitudes are (or were until very recently) fortified by the society's institutions including the political parties, the churches, employment, denominational education and separate housing

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(neither is an imposed phenomenon, but reflects social choices). This affects the timing of reform. Rapid progress towards the objective of reforming institutions is capable of generating a hostile reaction and exacerbating communal hostility, so that ground is lost with the other objective.

- (c) Economic conditions. There are several positive indications that these hinder advance to the objectives. Poverty breeds unrest. In employment, each side continues to protect its own interest (by segregated labour organisation and management's recruitment policies) notably in areas and industries of high unemployment; housing has been the same (when operated through control of local authorities); there is a widely held belief, though it is hard to justify, that government policy discriminates against development in the area west of the Bann (where Roman Catholics are more numerous). Economic sanctions may be a short-term political weapon, but in the long run peace in Ulster depends on prosperity - and no doubt on help from Britain.
- (d) Political leaders. In terms of attaining the objectives reasonably soon, Captain O'Neill is by far the most hopeful leader; his policies and his widely based popular support in Ulster are a uniquely favourable political combination. No non-Unionist can hope to form a Government, and no other Unionist seems likely to carry the moderate Roman Catholic minority. Mr. Faulkner could offer an alternative path to the objectives, through economic advance which would eventually render old attitudes obsolete and make reform in advance of public opinion unnecessary; but the minority are not prepared to wait another generation. The consequences for Her Majesty's Government's policy are that Captain O'Neill should be helped to remain leader, and to go further along the path of reform. What is said and done in London affects his position.

B. SITUATIONS

3. Apart from the two most probable outcomes of the General Election, which are discussed below, there are a number of possible situations which can be envisaged. For example, the effect of vote-splitting between pro- and anti-O'Neill Unionists could conceivably deprive the official Unionist party of its overall majority at Stormont, and force a coalition or voting arrangement among moderates of the main parties. These possibilities are too speculative and uncertain for useful analysis - but they are present in the situation. Two main immediate situations can be foreseen: (a) that Captain O'Neill is returned with only just enough support in his own party to sustain him in office; or (b) that he is returned with substantial and lasting support within his own party.

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- (a) Even if Captain O'Neill had a slim majority he would have a mandate for the Unionist manifesto (including the five-point programme of reform; that is the abolition of the company vote at local elections, the Parliamentary Commissioner, the Londonderry Commission, the institution of housing allocation standards and the review of the regulations under the Special Powers Acts). We do not know whether he would regard himself as having a mandate for 'one man, one vote' at present but it has not been part of his platform in the Election. He would almost certainly not have the strength to carry it in his party with only a slim majority. The Cameron Commission would continue to sit, but Captain O'Neill could not at present give a firm assurance on implementing its recommendation when it reports later in the year. The probability of further unrest from the civil rights movement and counter unrest by Paisleyites would be high; some radicals would see no hope of early reform save by forcing Westminster to intervene by provoking unrest and replacing Captain O'Neill by a reactionary leader. Too slim a majority might make him give up at an earlier stage.
- (b) With a substantial and lasting majority Captain O'Neill might think that he had a mandate for 'one man, one vote'. He would certainly be much better placed to say at once that he would consider this again in the light of the Cameron Report. The civil rights movement would be more likely to accept this situation, and if they did there would be less occasion for Paisley demonstrations in advance of announcements of further reform (especially since in this situation, Paisley will have been electorally discredited). A substantial majority would greatly increase the opportunity to secure the long term objective of communal reconciliation.

4. In both situations the indicated policy for Her Majesty's Government depends on whether an early reform of the local government franchise is to be regarded as the only acceptable demonstration of progress and, if so, it is accepted that Captain O'Neill still may not make a definite commitment on the franchise before the Cameron report later in the year, bearing in mind that in the last exchange with Her Majesty's Government he was given till June to announce an intention to reform the franchise. If not, or if he cannot institute franchise reform at that time, legislation at Westminster is the only means of achieving it. This achieves some advance on the second objective stated in paragraph 1 above, at the risk of the almost certain loss of ground in terms of social reconciliation. In so far as it might result in communal violence, Her Majesty's Government would be under an obligation over the restoration of order. If it is accepted, then Her Majesty's Government would want Captain O'Neill to give the firmest indication (so as to satisfy in some measure opinion at Westminster) consistent with his position in his party, of reconsideration of the franchise in the light of Cameron.

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5. To avoid damaging Captain O'Neill's position, it would seem best for an invitation to be publicly offered (or perhaps better publicly sought by him) before he meets the new Parliament, to a meeting with Ministers in London after he has met Parliament. This accepts that The Queen's Speech will contain no mention of the franchise, but looks to an early statement on Cameron. An earlier meeting would look like an attempt by Her Majesty's Government to influence The Queen's Speech in advance (and would be thought to have failed); a later invitation would look like a reaction to an 'inadequate' Queen's Speech (and would again be thought to have failed.)

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6. If Her Majesty's Government are forced to intervene by suspending the Constitution, our objectives would remain as set out in paragraph 1, but the healing of communal tensions would have received a grave setback. To secure those objectives in this situation, we should aim during our intervention to win and retain the support of the mass of the people for a return to constitutional rule. The sharpest direct reaction to intervention (apart from any IRA extremists who seek to capitalise on the situation) can most probably be expected from Paisleyite extremists; and to narrow their support and weaken their appeal the first essential (as indeed the Emergency Bill is designed to do) is to reaffirm that the Border is not in issue and that Unionists have nothing to fear on that score. The second aim would be to reassure the Protestant majority that the advancement of the Roman Catholic minority to equal status in local government, employment and housing would not threaten or destroy the standard of life or impair the liberties of the majority. The hope must be that the moderate majority of Unionists can be brought to accept reforms from Westminster, and prevented from moving to the right and attaching themselves to Paisleyite extremists. If this can be done the essential conditions, along with a restoration of order, for a return to constitutional rule will have been achieved. There are two major alternative routes for a return to normality:

(a) A return to the 1920 Constitution presupposes restoration of peace and order, and a stable situation. Reforms might have been carried through by Westminster in this period. The first step to a restoration might be for the Governor to hold a conference or informal discussions with political leaders of all parties; this could lead, if all or most agreed, to the nomination by the Governor of a fresh Executive Committee, replacing the existing non-political membership with a 'coalition' Committee; this would effectively govern while arrangements were made for a General Election and the recall of Stormont.

(b) If the emergency continued, or if no consensus emerged under (a) for a return to the 1920 Constitution, it would be possible to require the Constitutional Commission to design new constitutional arrangements; in the interim an Ulster Advisory Council of such public and political figures as would co-operate could advise the Governor on policy, while a Select Committee of Northern Ireland (and other) members at Westminster would continue to watch over the emergency Government's administration.

7. The possibility of bringing about Ulster's complete independence as a solution to the immediate problem of returning to constitutional rule might have some appeal, but it would require profound consideration and could be considered only in a context far different from the present. It would be impossible until peaceful conditions had been firmly established for some time (objective (a) in paragraph 1). The severance of

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financial and economic relationships between Ulster and Great Britain would give independence little value and their retention little meaning. Moreover, there could be substantial British interests at stake in the fields of defence, agricultural produce, the massive industrial investment that has gone into Ulster, and mineral and other rights in the Irish Sea. Finally, the repercussions for Scotland and Wales even of discussion of this possibility - particularly with a Commission on the Constitution sitting - would be profound.

L. J. C.

Home Office, S.W.1.

24th February, 1969