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MISC 238(69) 1st Meeting

CABINET

MINUTES of a Meeting held in the Prime Minister's Room,  
House of Commons, S.W.1., on

WEDNESDAY, 26th FEBRUARY, 1969

at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT

The Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson, MP  
Prime Minister

The Rt. Hon. Michael Stewart, MP  
Secretary of State for Foreign and  
Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt. Hon. Roy Jenkins, MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt. Hon. Lord Gardiner,  
Lord Chancellor

The Rt. Hon. James Callaghan, MP  
Secretary of State for the Home  
Department

The Rt. Hon. Denis Healey, MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt. Hon. Fred Peart, MP  
Lord President of the Council

The Rt. Hon. Sir Elwyn Jones, QC, MP  
Attorney-General

SECRETARIAT

Sir Burke Trend  
Miss J. J. Nunn  
Mr. D. H. J. Hilary

SUBJECT

SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

**TOP SECRET**SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Meeting had before them a memorandum by the Home Secretary (MISC 238(69) 1) containing an appreciation of the situation in Northern Ireland.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the General Election in Northern Ireland on 24th February had given the Unionist Party 39 seats in the Northern Ireland Parliament as opposed to 37 before. 25-27 of the new Unionist Members supported Captain O'Neill (as opposed to 22 before the Election) and 11-13 opposed him (14 before); and his position in the Unionist Party was thus marginally improved. He appeared to be determined to carry on as Prime Minister and to have no intention of relinquishing his liberal policies. The Unionist Party would meet on Friday, 28th February to elect its leader and it seemed probable that Captain O'Neill would be chosen. The major question for decision now was how far pressure should be applied to Captain O'Neill in the immediate future to make further progress towards liberalisation.

On security, the Royal Ulster Constabulary under their new Inspector General, Mr. Peacocke, were working together with the military for the first time. Mr. Peacocke had given the Governor a full account of the situation and seemed willing to co-operate with the United Kingdom authorities. He would be coming to London in the following week and the Home Secretary thought it right to see him. Mr. Peacocke thought that there should be little trouble in maintaining law and order in the immediate future.

In discussion it was suggested that it would be unwise to press Captain O'Neill to make an immediate announcement of further measures to implement his liberal policies. He should be given the best possible chance to consolidate his position, on the assumption that he would work closely with the United Kingdom Government; and it would be prudent to accept his advice on the tactical situation over the next few weeks. But indefinite delay would be unacceptable; and the United Kingdom Government could not retract their demands for "one man one vote". The problems would not be solved solely by the continuance of Captain O'Neill as Prime Minister; the nerve of the present leadership might weaken or law and order might break down. The aim should be to keep Captain O'Neill as Prime Minister, but to keep him moving towards reform. It was particularly important that The Queen's Speech should not close the door on further reforms. It would be helpful if a Home Office official could visit Northern Ireland before the weekend to see the Governor and to find out from Captain O'Neill what he had in mind to recommend for inclusion in The Queen's Speech. It was open to Captain O'Neill to seek a meeting in London at any time; but it would be inadvisable to press him to do so at once. An immediate visit might weaken his position in Northern Ireland; and the question could be considered further in the light of the Home Office official's report of Captain O'Neill's own wishes. Alternatively, the Home Secretary could consult Captain O'Neill by telephone at once.

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In further discussion it was suggested that, if the situation in Northern Ireland deteriorated to the point where intervention and direct rule had to be seriously considered, independence for Northern Ireland might be a preferable alternative. The threat of declaring Northern Ireland independent might have a profound effect on the population there. There would be enormous difficulties in direct rule, particularly if it was imposed otherwise than at the request of the Northern Ireland Government. It would be helpful if a Working Party of officials could examine the alternatives to direct rule, in particular the various possible forms of independence and their juridical and financial implications.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that there appeared to be four broad alternatives open to Captain O'Neill. First, he could announce that he would proceed with further reforms as quickly as possible; it would be surprising if he felt able to take this course. A more probable course would be for him to seek a delay of about a month before making any announcement on reform; this would be acceptable. If, however, he sought to delay progress for an unacceptably long period or to make an announcement now which would close the door on further reform, Ministers should meet again to consider the position. The Home Secretary should arrange for a Home Office official to visit Northern Ireland before the weekend to ensure that nothing would be said in The Queen's Speech or in the subsequent debate to postpone progress on human rights for an unacceptably long period and to ask Captain O'Neill when he would wish to visit London and, if so, when his intention to come should be made known. It should be made clear to him that there was no intention of pressing him to come before he judged the time appropriate; Ministers would accept Captain O'Neill's own views on this. An interdepartmental working party of officials should be set up to consider the various possible forms of independence as an alternative to direct rule, on the lines indicated in discussion.

The Meeting -

- (1) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
- (2) Invited the Home Secretary to consider how best to pursue with Captain O'Neill the issues indicated in the Prime Minister's summing up.

Cabinet Office, S. W. 1.

27th February, 1969