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| Reference Code: | 2005/7/621 |
| Title: | Report on a meeting between members of the Oireachtas All-Party Committee on Irish Relations and a delegation from the Social Democratic and Labour Party in Dublin on 18 January 1974, regarding the political situation in Northern Ireland, and measures which the Irish government could take to help sustain the Sunningdale Agreement. |
| Creation Date(s): | 18 January, 1974 |
| Level of description: | Item |
| Extent and medium: | 5 pages |
| Creator(s): | Department of the Taoiseach |
| Access Conditions: | Open |
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Report of Meeting

1. The All-Party Committee on Irish Relations met a delegation from the Social Democratic and Labour Party on Friday 18th January, 1974 in Leinster House. The S.D.L.P. delegation comprised Mr Seamus Mallon, Assembly Party Chairman, Mr. Paddy O'Hanlon, Chief Whip, Mr. Hugh Logue, Mr. Michael Canavan, Mr. Ben Caraher, Vice-Chairman of the Party, Mr. Kevin Murphy, Mr. John Kerr, Mr. W. J. Conaghan and Mr. John Duffy the Party's General Secretary. All the members of the Committee were present.
2. The Committee's Chairman Deputy Paddy Harte welcomed the visitors and said that the meeting was meant to be a very informal one. It may be that, at a later stage, the Committee would request written submissions from the various groups they met but the purpose of this meeting was to have an informal exchange of views on the matters with which the Committee was concerned.
3. Mr. Mallon said that his Party were glad of the opportunity to present its views. He ^{made an} introductory statement to the Committee a copy of which is attached to this report. (Appendix A).
4. The visitors were asked for their assessment of the present political situation in the North. They indicated that the possibility of a British general election was causing them considerable anxiety at present. The new power-sharing Executive had to be given time to settle down and show itself to be effective and impartial. A general election would not help this process at all. Both communities were very confused at the moment - the calling off of the rent and rates strike and the continuance of internment had disturbed some of the minority

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population and ~~the~~ whole idea of power-sharing and a Council of Ireland as well as Mr. Bole's proposals had confused the majority population in the North. Both communities had to be given time to adjust to the new arrangements that were now emerging and a general election would seriously damage all that had been achieved in the formation of an Executive and the Sunningdale Agreement. Progress could only be made on the basis of mutual respect for ~~the~~ traditions and aspirations ~~of the Northern people~~ and the visitors felt that the Unionists would have to be given some leeway at the present time so as to assist them in their efforts to bring their people with them. The S.D.L.P. still held an aspiration to see both parts of Ireland re-integrated by consent and the fact that they were participating in the Executive did not mean that they had to compromise on this aspiration. They saw the Sunningdale Agreement as representing real progress in the process of reconciliation and they stressed the importance of proceeding urgently with the establishment of a Council of Ireland. The establishment of the Council was the best way to bring about reconciliation within Northern Ireland and within Ireland as a whole.

5. The visitors were entertained to lunch in Leinster House and the discussions resumed afterwards. As to whether there was any evidence of a movement towards the S.D.L.P. by the majority population in the North the visitors said that it was too early ^{to form} any definite view on this. But if there was continued progress on the implementation of Sunningdale they would see the Party gaining ground with the majority population. The Party were now part of the new institutions in the North and it could be said that there was almost "threshold support" for the Party. It had to be remembered that ~~the~~ majority population were very confused at the present time.

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Mr. Bole realised what was happening i.e. that Britain was on the way out of Irish affairs but this had yet to be accepted by the grass roots. The Party were hopeful that when the economic and social programme which had been agreed prior to the formation of the Executive began to work, both communities in the North would see that the best hope for the future was in giving their support to the power-sharing Executive. While action against terrorists was vital it did not ^{quickly} help people to achieve an acceptable standard of living. The economic and social programme of the new Executive would do this.

6. There was a short discussion on violence. The view was expressed by the visitors that the aim should not be to isolate the terrorists but rather to bring them into the political process. The view was expressed that television programmes could give considerably less emphasis to violence as a means of political end.

7. In reply to a question as to how the Republic might help to sustain the Sunningdale Agreement, the visitors said that this could best be done by insuring quick progress on the formation of a Council of Ireland. The Council would provide a forum for reasonable discussion between both parts of Ireland and would mean that there would be an end to the shouting matches across the Border. The S.D.L.P. considered the early formation of the Council to be so important that if it did not come about soon they might have to withdraw from the Northern Executive. They felt that the Unionists were trying to gain ground before the Council of Ireland came into being. They were very perturbed at the meeting that had taken place between the police chiefs North and South. Such meetings should take place under the umbrella of a Council of Ireland and, in their view the particular meeting only helped to diminish the status of the Council.

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They were anxious that any such meetings planned ^{to take place} before the formation of the Council would be stopped.

8. The visitors were asked if they saw a Council of Ireland having strong functions at the outset or should it start off with weak functions and leave their execution to the administrations North and South. There was a certain balance which had to be arrived at in considering this matter - was it preferable to wait for the Council to begin operating before assigning it strong functions. The visitors replied that their main concern was to see a Council established quickly. They would of course like it to have strong functions if this were possible.

9. The visitors were slow to express the view as to how the Republic's Constitution might be changed so as to assist in the evolution of a 32 County Ireland. It was pointed out that parts of our Constitution were having an effect on attitudes in the North. The visitors said that the aim should be the establishment of a ^{plur}alist society in the island as a whole. If there was any question of trying to draw up a Constitution for the 32 counties, the people of Northern Ireland would demand a say in its formulation. It was pointed out to the visitors that the S.D.L.P. had passed a resolution at their last annual Conference which seemed to suggest that the Republic should make changes in certain of its laws and that it was not ^{an} reasonable therefore to ask what specific matters were in mind. They replied that the resolution should be seen in the context of the 32 counties ^{but} beyond saying that ~~what~~ was in mind was a ^{plur}alist society North and South they were reluctant to elucidate on the resolution. It was pointed out to the visitors that it was open to them to expand on their Party's resolution at a later stage if they so wished. They expressed the view that

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proposed changes in the Constitution might best be considered by the Council of Ireland and that in relation to the harmonisation of laws generally, the Council could perform a useful function e.g. in relation to the harmonisation of property and lease hold laws.

10. The All-Party Committee was asked to outline its work to date and the Chairman, Deputy Harte gave the visitors a broad outline of the work of the Committee.

11. It was pointed out that the media were aware of the meeting and in view of this it was considered desirable to issue a short release. A copy of the agreed release is attached to this report (Appendix B).