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| Reference Code: | 2005/151/710 |
| Title: | Memorandum by Dermot Nally, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach, of matters discussed at meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Garret FitzGerald, and John Hume and Austin Currie of the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party], including the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention. |
| Creation Date(s): | 17 October 1975 |
| Level of description: | Item |
| Extent and medium: | 3 pages |
| Creator(s): | Department of the Taoiseach |
| Access Conditions: | Open |
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NOTE:-

1. I attended a meeting this morning between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Messrs Hume and Currie. Mr. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs was also present.
2. Messrs Hume and Currie had come to Dublin at the invitation of the leader of the Opposition, who wished to discuss matters with them following recent speeches and statements by Mr. O'Kennedy. It is the practice of the SDLP whenever they see members of the Government here, to seek interviews with the corresponding members of the Opposition. Similarly, when they see any opposition, they wish also to see members of the Government. For this reason, they had sought the present meeting.
3. On the immediate issue, they said that their impression was that the Press had greatly exaggerated the differences in the opposition on the questions raised in the O'Kennedy speeches. There was no deviation from the line which had been held by the leader of the Opposition and any apparent straying from this line had been accidental. Mr. O'Kennedy was, they said, now fully aware of the nature of this line, and of the SDLP's views on it.
4. Some general discussion took place on the prospects for the Convention. The SDLP members said that the report would be prepared by the Loyalists - not by the Convention Secretariat; and that, at present, it seemed that there would be no opportunity for incorporating their views in the report, as it was submitted to Westminster. For this reason, they were producing a separate document - a glossy one - setting out their own aims and would ensure that this document got maximum publicity.
5. Mr. Craig would vote with the Loyalists on the report. The SDLP, Faulkner Unionists and Alliance would vote together against it. This would mean that the British would be presented with a situation where one side voted for the document and the other side, a reasonably big minority, voted against it. There would be no question of particular aspects of proposals being accepted unanimously. For example, the report would not just show total acceptance of the proposition that there should be devolved Government in Northern Ireland. This would mean that the British could not pick out certain elements in the report and say that there had been agreement on them - and then refer the agreed parts, back to the Convention to work out in more detail. They would simply have the option of accepting or rejecting the report. On this strategy, they could only reject it.
6. The SDLP members said that this rejection must be as

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hard and as definitive as possible. It could be on the basis that the report rejected the parameters within which the Convention had been established. If the rejection were not in strong and unambiguous terms, "all is lost". The Loyalists would simply go back to their old positions and the whole argument would start all over again, ~~at best~~.

7. The Loyalists were seeking an adjournment of the Convention - for no very clear reasons. It was indicated to the SDLP members that, on our information, the most likely outcome seemed to be that it would be continued, either actively, or in suspension, for six months after 7th November, and that, within this time, it would be asked to have another look at the problem it was being asked to solve.

8. In reply to questions by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the SDLP members said that it would suit the purpose if the rejection of the report did not come too quickly from the British. It could, perhaps, wait a month or two. In reply to further questioning by the Minister as to whether the Craig proposals would be acceptable to them in the end, the SDLP members said that they would have to look with great care at -

(1) the proposal for an emergency coalition, which was temporary in nature. There would have to be a temporary constitution, which would guarantee the continuance of this coalition for a reasonable period. Ten years was mentioned in this connection. The date could be mentioned in the Constitution and there would be provision, within the period, for working out of a more permanent basis. The SDLP could not agree to a situation where, at the end of the period of the temporary coalition, they would revert to square one and once again find themselves faced with the problem of majority Government, as it had been for the past fifty years;

(2) the proposal that the Head of Government had powers to hire and fire Ministers. There would have to be some form of ~~copper~~ fastening on this. It could be the easiest thing in the world for a Prime Minister or someone in the party to manufacture an issue on which firing became essential. The situation in the North was different from that in a normal state where if a Prime Minister asked a ^{Minister} Government to resign, he might risk bringing down his Government. In the North, if this happened, the likelihood was that the position of the Prime Minister would not be weakened but consolidated. The Loyalists would be only too glad to join in a Government from which minority members had been expelled;

(3) the question of responsibility for security.

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It was obvious that if the new Government was to be responsible for security, the British would not give them responsibility for the Army. There would, therefore, have to be some alternative force. The nature and duties of this force would be a matter of great concern. There was the obvious danger that it could be a reincarnation of the old B specials. Mr. Hume was quite firm on the principle that if they were in Government they would have to accept responsibility for security - and all that this entailed, and

- (4) the proposals for a Bill of Rights to apply to the United Kingdom generally. As the Loyalists saw this, it would be a written constitution which would deprive Westminster of the power of abolishing any devolved Government in Northern Ireland. In other words, they were learning from the existence of a written constitution here.

← Mr. Hume said that he had been speaking recently with three leading UDA members - Messrs McKee, McClure, and McKeague. There was strong anti British feeling in their comments. They appeared to have lost all regard for the British crown. Their line now seemed to favour independence - they were quite strong on this. Mr. Hume said that the group were politically naive. On his information, they intended to speak soon with the Provisionals. at Mr. Hume also mentioned his feeling that the back of Craig's mind also is the question of independence for the North.

9. Mr. Currie said that he had been instructed by his party to convey their concern to the Government here at the recent statements by the Minister for Defence that the Army would in no circumstances intervene in Northern Ireland. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that these statements had not been made in any formal speech but in reply to questions.
10. There was also general discussion on the subject of maintaining a bipartisan policy here - and on the feelings of the leader of the opposition on the subject.

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17th October, 1975.