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NORTHERN IRELAND

VISIT BY MR. WILLIAM CRAIG

1. Mr. Craig called, by arrangement, on the Taoiseach yesterday to pay a courtesy visit. Messrs. McColgan (Department of Foreign Affairs) and Nally (Department of the Taoiseach) were in attendance. The meeting lasted approximately one hour.
2. After the usual preliminaries, Mr. Craig said that he had come to stress the importance of some new political initiative in Northern Ireland. He said that he had gained the impression that Mr. Fitt had, perhaps, now come to accept that a period for cooling-off, of, say, a year was now acceptable. He thought that this would be a most dangerous situation since if the present political vacuum continued for any length of time the existing political parties could well disappear and their place be taken by paramilitaries and "community" organisations. In fact, this was happening to a very considerable extent. It was disturbing to see the extent to which they had already set up organisations and infiltrated businesses in Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach stressed at this point the representations which he had made at his recent meeting with Mr. Wilson but said that, while the British had indicated that they would not negotiate with persons other than elected representatives, they had refused to give an undertaking not to talk to the paramilitaries.
3. Mr. Craig said that the Taoiseach's statement that he would support institutions agreed by the people of Northern Ireland had been particularly appreciated there. He said that he had the impression now that if a referendum were held there would a considerable measure of support for a Coalition or power sharing administration. He referred to the results of the National Opinion Poll which showed that well over 60% of each community in Northern Ireland were in favour of such a Coalition and said that, in his opinion, if such a referendum had been held that these percentages would be maintained. The Taoiseach referred to the doubts on this score held by the Northern Ireland office.
4. Mr. Craig went on to say that in his belief the position of the minority community was appreciated in Northern Ireland. He said that this applied particularly to the idea that they could not be fobbed off with anything other than positions of real power in any new administration. It was pointless to talk of devices like privy Councils or Chairmanships of Committees or delaying powers for minority institutions. In fact, in Government this type of device could well be dangerous since it would give to certain parties a power of delay or suspension over actions for which they would feel no responsibility, as part of a Government or administration. He said that, in his view, if there were an election now based on the idea of a coalition

POLITICAL
INITIATIVE

or a power sharing administration the parties supporting it "would sweep the country." He could see Mr. Paisley's support dwindling - perhaps to three or four hardliners. At a recent meeting in Bangor, which was the heart of the official unionist country, there had been sixty-five persons in attendance. After the meeting, which he had spoken, fifteen of those present had applied for membership of Vanguard. At another meeting in East Belfast five ladies from Andersonstown had attended. This was a most unusual gesture. His opinion was that if some face saving gesture or offer could be made now, perhaps by the SDLP, that many of the official unionist party would go for it. The realisation was sinking in that they were now without institutions of government in Northern Ireland and this was a sore point with them. The Taoiseach enquired as to Mr. Craig's view on views on what this initiative might be. Had it to do with police or was there some other aspect?

5. Mr. Craig said that a gesture on police or security would be much appreciated. His own feeling was, however, that something to do with acceptance of institutions or of the existence of Northern Ireland would be appreciated. It was pointed out to him that the SDLP would be coming to Dublin shortly but that it would, of course, be for them to decide on where the balance of advantage lay, so far as they were concerned. It was indicated that, after so many years of struggle, the parties may not now be in a position where the idea of an initiative would appeal.
6. Mr. Craig then went on to say that it would be difficult for Mr. West, personally, to move from his present position because of his statements. John Laird who was not quite so committed was, he felt, thoroughly sick of politics. Mr. Faulkner's position was weak and would probably decline. The position of the Alliance could well be strengthened. As well as the SDLP it would have to be taken into account, together with the Northern Ireland's Labour Party. Mr. Craig stressed again the dangers of letting a political vacuum develop. He said that Mr. Powell who seemed to have considerable access to Mr. Wilson had developed the idea that they should forget about devolution for the moment and think on the lines of increasing the powers of local authorities in Northern Ireland. This was not a line which he himself would advocate. It would do nothing to get away from the dangers of a political vacuum - which would become really acute as the recession hit Northern Ireland with its full force during the year. Mr. Craig anticipated that unemployment could well rise from its present level of 11% to perhaps 20% by the end of the year. The dangers here were obvious.

UNEMPLOYMENT

SECURITY

7. There was some discussion about security co-operation between the Gardaí and the RUC which it was pointed out had been accepted as excellent, by the British, during the Taoiseach's recent London visit. Mr. Craig said

that he appreciated this. He connected the British reluctance to stop talking with the paramilitaries to the rather delicate position existing at the time as a result of the ending of the classification of "special category" prisoners. There was some discussion on the question of what persons could do who had been released from prisons into a society where there was no work for them. The incidence of bank robberies and high living among these people was commented on.

EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT

8. Mr. Craig then went on to refer to the forthcoming meeting of Heads of Government in Brussels. He said that under British proposals as they seemed to be emerging there was a danger that Northern Ireland would finish up with only two seats in the European Parliament. He said that if this happened it could well be that Unionists would finish up with both seats. He thought that this would be a most dangerous position. If, on the other hand there were three seats, it was likely that the SDLP or some other minority representatives would gain at least one of them. This was obviously more desirable than that the minority should have no representation in Europe. He himself was not sure of the merits of direct elections to the European Parliament. He thought that some system like the German list system might well be preferable. (It is not clear whether Mr. Craig appreciated that a German list system could be operated in conjunction with direct elections.)
9. There was some further discussion on prospects for the next British Prime Minister. Following this, the meeting concluded.

ph

26th March, 1976.

[Copies to Messrs. Donlon and McColgan, Department of Foreign Affairs.]