

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Oifig an Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha

21 September 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Northern Ireland

1. Following the final breakdown of the Unionist/SDLP talks, the issue of a new policy statement by the SDLP and the appointment of a new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Minister for Foreign Affairs submits this Memorandum as an aid to discussion and in preparation for meetings within the next few days with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State and with an SDLP delegation.

2. The policy of the Government hitherto has been:

- (a) to seek to ensure that Britain exercises its responsibilities in Northern Ireland, protecting the minority against any loyalist assault, and not conceding a declaration of intent or withdrawal, and
- (b) to encourage developments towards agreement on a devolved power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.

3. Following the breakdown of the inter-party talks, the SDLP has issued a policy statement, the full text of which is contained in Appendix I. The main points in the statement are:

- agreement between the Northern Ireland parties is not possible given the present political stance of the majority parties and no advance is possible in the absence of a clear initiative from the British;

- a demand that the British Government should implement their stated policy (i.e. "impose power-sharing") or "abdicate".

4. Discussion within the SDLP in formulating their policy statement has been on the theme "the British must govern or go" and for all practical purposes the only point at issue recently seems to have been whether it was better to call for a declaration of intent now or initiate a public debate which would lead within a few months to the SDLP's concluding that the only way forward was for the British to be forced into making such a declaration. With the exception of Fitt, there seems to be no one within the SDLP committed to having the British remain in Northern Ireland. The pressure for a change of policy from within the SDLP itself has been there for some time and Messrs. Paddy Duffy, Seamus Mallon, Frank Feely and Eddie McGrady had long called for a policy based on a demand for British disengagement from Northern Ireland. Any policy change was resisted by Hume and Currie as long as there was some prospect of reaching agreement on a power-sharing devolved government by talks with the Unionists. Now that these talks have ended, Hume and Currie no longer see any prospect of agreement emerging from within Northern Ireland and they have therefore put their weight behind the move to get Britain "to impose power-sharing or get out". Most of the SDLP leaders concede that the British cannot enforce power-sharing and they are not at the moment prepared to accept indefinite direct rule, on the grounds that the ensuing local political vacuum creates a climate where the Provisional IRA continues to thrive, increases its grip in minority areas and engages in a campaign of violence which has so far this year resulted in 231 deaths and a continuing regular destruction of property. As to what might happen if the British did decide to "abdicate" and leave Northern

Ireland, the SDLP believe, with varying degrees of confidence, that loyalists would then come to their senses and negotiate the best possible deal with the representatives of the nationalist tradition either within Northern Ireland or on the island of Ireland as a whole.

5. The most important recent development on the loyalist side has been the considerable hardening of attitudes within the Official Unionist Party. The vote by its Executive Committee on 4 September 1976 to suspend the current talks with the SDLP was a unanimous one and indicates clearly that the Unionists now no longer believe that there is any further point in talking. As against that, the hardline approach of Paisley and Baird in opposing direct rule and the accompanying attempt by the Ulster Special Constabulary to organise vigilante patrols has been a failure. It is likely that the next few weeks will be devoted to a re-assessment of the position within the UUUC and all the indications are that the present cracks will be quickly papered over and a solid and reunited approach to bring pressure on the British to restore majority rule will be adopted. There are some indications that UUUC politicians would be prepared to push this pressure to the extent of bringing Northern Ireland once again to a complete standstill as was done at the time of the UWC strike. The likelihood of this happening when the full implications of the recent shift in policy by the SDLP are fully understood has clearly increased.

6. Also of relevance when considering the loyalist position is the increasing wooing of the Official Unionists by the Conservative Party and in the situation of marginal majority at Westminster, the possibility of a renewing of the coalition between the Conservatives

and the Unionists in return for the restoration of majority government in Northern Ireland cannot be excluded.

7. On the loyalist para-military side, there is still considerable disarray, confusion and mistrust between the various groups and while their activity continues at a fairly high level, their popular support is probably at its lowest ebb ever and the activists are representative of maverick or breakaway groups rather than part of a concerted or carefully planned campaign. Nevertheless, the capacity of the para-militaries remains impressive. They are still at loggerheads with their political representatives but in a groundswell situation they could quickly unite again behind a new movement to pressure the British to restore majority rule.

8. In this new situation, the options open to the Government would appear to be:

- i. stick to the existing policy of seeking to ensure that Britain exercises its responsibilities in an even-handed manner and does not concede a declaration of intent or withdrawal. The difficulties of this option are obvious, especially at a time when the SDLP may be moving towards the declaration of intent and when Fianna Fáil have already adopted it. There are, however, no indications that British policy is likely to change and their interest in ensuring a coincidence of policy between London and Dublin may give us some extra leverage in our dealings with them. The possibility of persuading the SDLP not to move towards a declaration of intent cannot, of course, be completely excluded. They are aware of the security and economic risks of withdrawal and they cannot be confident of a fair deal from the loyalists in whatever situation might follow withdrawal. There is, moreover, no evidence to suggest dissatisfaction with direct rule on the part of a vast majority of the Northern Ireland minority - indeed the

desire seems to be for a continuation of the relative stability which direct rule has provided now for over four years.

As a first approach, it would therefore seem desirable to stick very firmly to existing policy and encourage the SDLP to stop short of going for the declaration of intent. The extra leverage we may now have with the British could be used to encourage them to

- (a) take a more positive role in bringing about a climate conducive to power-sharing. While this might not have any immediate results, it would at least reduce pressure on the SDLP and encourage at least some of the Unionists who are still open to persuasion from London;
 - (b) devise some way of keeping the political process alive in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Secretary of State might, for instance, be advised by a power-sharing commission drawn from the ranks of prominent Northern Ireland politicians - though it may well be that some or all of them would not be prepared to fall in with this arrangement. At minimum, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State should be encouraged to open and maintain lines of contact with these politicians and make it clear publicly that he was dealing with them as public representatives.
- ii. in the event of existing policy being completely undermined, either by the SDLP's switching their line or the British Government's continuing a policy of complete drift and inertia, the least undesirable of the undesirable options would still appear to be to help bring about a negotiated independence with the best possible internal and external guarantees for stability and power-sharing. The studies made of this subject in the recent past do not, however, give cause for optimism that any satisfactory guarantees can be arranged or that the loyalists would be much more likely to share power in independence than they are within

the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, in pursuing current policy, the possibility of the necessity to shift from it at some point would need to be constantly borne in mind.

9. In the meeting with the SDLP, they will certainly ask that the British Government be pressed to answer the questions contained in their new policy statement and they will also press for an indication of Government thinking now that it has become clear that the present policy objective, based as it is on the emergence of agreement in Northern Ireland, is not attainable in the foreseeable future. We might respond by

- arguing the advantages of the British staying in Northern Ireland and, in the absence of agreement on power-sharing, continuing with direct rule;
- indicating that we will ask the British to exert more pressure, both on loyalist politicians and generally, to convince people in Northern Ireland that what is best for the situation there and what the British want to achieve is devolved government based on power-sharing.