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A NOTE ON A MEETING BETWEEN AN SDLP DELEGATION AND MR. ROY MASON, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND AT STORMONT CASTLE ON MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 1977. THE MEETING LASTED FROM 5.30 P.M. UNTIL 7.15 P.M.

SDLP was represented by Messrs. G. Fitt, J. Hume, A. Currie, P. Devlin, S. Mallon and D. McAreavy.

Mr. Mason was accompanied by Mr. Don Concannon and various officials from the Northern Ireland Office.

The note is not an exhaustive report of the meeting but includes the main points made especially by Mr. Mason.

R. MASON: I extend a very hearty welcome to the SDLP representatives. I look forward to having a full, frank and heart to heart discussion. You are a most important element in Northern Ireland. You are the voice of the minority in Northern Ireland. I depend greatly on SDLP in the drive towards the establishment of devolved government here. I want the SDLP to continue and to see you heading towards partnership government. I don't believe in Direct Rule for its own sake. I want partnership government but Direct Rule must continue until the majority of both sides agree on devolved government. I acknowledge there has been criticism about the absence of political initiatives but I am, in fact, very keen to get movement and I have been active. For example the Tories appeared to woo the Unionists at their Conference and I sent for Airey Neave to clarify the position. I sought and received assurance from him, from the floor of the House, what the Tory policy was. I am satisfied with that assurance. I informed Dublin. Certain phrasing has now been strengthened at the instigation of the Taoiseach. Thus partnership is firmly back on the rails. On November 2 I sent a letter to Gerry Fitt reaffirming the position. The Molyneux plan came forward and this plan clearly moved away from the UUUC Convention Report. The plotting to move the Unionists at least produced the Molyneux plan. This plotting will continue in conjunction with the fact that the Tories have been brought back firmly on the rails.

G. FITT: When you succeeded Merlyn Rees it was appreciated that a log jam existed but the way things are going you are not going to get devolved government. The minority has no forum except one M.P. The Unionists are hoping for a splintering of the SDLP. We don't want to be the representatives based on a religious tag. If SDLP splits up our supporters will go into the arms of the IRA. The people outside are frustrated. They don't see what we have done. All the people have seen is the intransigence of the Unionists backed by the Government. Unless our supporters see some concrete move towards genuine power-sharing it will add to the current depression and despair. We wouldn't have accepted the Molyneux plan even if it had been accepted by the Unionists. But Molyneux was not able to sell his plan to the Unionists.

J. HUME: We asked for this meeting because following our Party meeting in September we asked certain questions which were fundamental. We feel it is the British Government's policy to ignore these questions. The steps you took, even though they did not go nearly far enough, floundered. After the reception given to the Molyneux plan by the Unionists they have gone even further into the trenches. We again assert that responsibility rests with the British Government. The Unionists cannot have it both ways which they have had up to now - e.g. the 1974 strike when the Loyalists were not faced. This leads the Unionists to believe that they can have their way. Is the British Government willing or able to implement its own Acts? If it is not, you have no role here. If we allow the position to continue we will disappear. If we had been in existence 20 years earlier the present position would not have arisen. If we go down the drain constitutional politics go down the drain. We are committed to a fundamental re-appraisal. We cannot go further than we have already gone. I ask again: Are you willing or able to implement your own Acts? If you cannot do so we want to know.

R. MASON: It is not right that I should answer questionnaires. Gerry has said the Unionists were holding on in the hope of a general election in three months time. They will have to wait at least a year for that. Any suggestion of the disintegration of the SDLP concerns us greatly. What is left if you disintegrate? The integrity of the Party is absolutely essential. In this era of me trying to move the Unionists, the Molyneux plan emerged. It foundered on the rocks of the hardliners. I would have liked the SDLP to have commented on the Molyneux idea. If you had seized that opportunity we might have given you the right encouragement. I can't threaten the Unionists but I don't want you to rebel in the light of ideas.

A. CURRIE: In the opinion of a lot of our people there have been too many ideas and not enough action. If the SDLP were to fade there would be a very sharp move on the part of our supporters. You have emphasised that you want to make Direct Rule acceptable. In this respect I pay tribute to the work being done by Ray Carter and Lord Melchett. But there has been a trend towards the return of functions to Northern Ireland. Is Airey Neave and the Tories off the rails again here? Former Northern Ireland Secretary of State Francis Pym talks about a Speaker's Conference, which, of course, is in conflict with the idea of strong devolved government. We suspect Powell had much to do with the Molyneux speech. It should not be forgotten that all the trouble started in local government. The stark position is that our supporters see partnership fading and the British Government standing by impotent. The fact is that the people responsible are the people with the power i.e. the British Government.

R. MASON: I fully appreciate the anxiety within SDLP. Airey Neave has promised to give me his proposals regarding a Council of State, which has not a snowball's chance in hell. I don't know to what extent Powell was involved with Molyneux. Powell is an integrationist.

J. HUME: The real Unionist position i.e. the Stormont Unionists is that they want powers restored. This appears reasonable to the Westminster parliamentarian.

R. MASON: There is increasing Westminster pressure on the Unionists.

J. HUME: Your pressure did not come over as such. We won't disappear but we will have to adopt policy which we don't prefer. We continue to be beaten down by the Loyalists and the British Government.

S. MALLON: Do you accept the political logic of our case as put by John Hume?

R. MASON: I am looking for a willingness to talk by both sides. Why didn't SDLP make some response to Molyneaux?

J. HUME: We are always willing to talk provided there is a possibility of success.

S. MALLON: We have discussed everything except what we came for i.e. our case as put by John Hume. Look at the weight of political opinion on our side, not only in Northern Ireland but also in Britain, the Republic and Europe. We are coming very near the end of the line if the weight of this opinion is to be ignored by the British Government. Is it a matter of a lack of will? If this is so, it is because of Loyalist intransigence.

On the security front a very dangerous situation is evolving. There is the Unionist dominated RUC, UDR and RUC Reserve. Ulsterisation of the security forces is under way as evidenced by the introduction of new weapons for the RUC and the increasing autonomy for the UDR. An indigenous force is developing in the Direct Rule situation. Such a development will play into the hands of the Provisional IRA. Resentment by our people is very understandable, especially in the absence of any political movement. An Ulsterisation policy can only exacerbate the situation. Enormous problems are being created e.g. the promotion of people in the RUC involved in the Strasbourg findings are stultifying any movement towards acceptability. Recruitment to the RUC Reserve involves people ^{linked} with past or present paramilitary activity, while members of the UDR have been charged with every crime from murder to petty theft. We were told that these patrols would always be accompanied. The situation in the UDR is politically explosive. Their arms have been used for murder. How much more serious can one get.

R. MASON: I cannot threaten the Official Unionists.

J. HUME: Is it a threat to implement a British Act?

R. MASON: They have nowhere to go. You might say that the Unionists have a veto but so, too, has the SDLP. I am concerned about the phrase "Ulsterisation". The UDR is under the control of the British Army. They are not allowed to take part in riot control. Compensation has been paid to the victims of torture. All the methods then used are now out.

S. MALLON: But the culprits have not been punished.

R. MASON: The cases are now with the European Court. But SDLP could do something about "Ulsterisation". SDLP must help by being prepared to talk. An indication of support for the Security Forces would help.

J. HUME: The UUUC is being totally hypocritical by working hand in glove with the paramilitaries. Further, the impression is abroad that you are handing over to local forces.

MASON: Two hundred full-time members of the UDR are on static duty. There is no question of a withdrawal. The 14,000-strong force here will be retained so long as it is required.

J. HUME: It would seem that the Army is becoming invisible. The majority in current checkpoint and search operations are the RUC and the UDR.

P. DEVLIN: I do not propose to comment on your assurance that there will be no British withdrawal. I have my own views and I will leave it at that.

We are a social, democratic party and this fact must be emphasised at all times. About the RUC I feel it is a better and more effective force than ever before but its effectiveness would be reduced by an appeal to Catholics only. The UDR is not worth analysing.

The main reason for keeping the Party alive is because it represents a factor for stability. A Party with a philosophy such as ours is necessary. In the long term we will become more and more necessary.

There are five points on the economic front which I wish to raise:-

(1) QUIGLEY REPORT: Money is needed to provide job opportunities. There is also the re-forming of the Economic Council.

(2) BULLOCK REPORT: Does it apply here? It will not if the ceiling is to be 2,000. Two hundred would be nearer the mark.

(3) Legislation on co-operative concept is needed if we are to get thrust from the working class.

(4) There are also factors relating to low wage factories.

(5) We tend to be excluded from legislation in Britain which would be beneficial here.

R. MASON: Regarding Quigley a new type of economic forum is planned. I am making sure that Northern Ireland is not being neglected. Co-operation must also be looked at. Bullock is germane to Northern Ireland.

POINTS RAISED AT THE END OF MEETING:

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: G. Fitt raised the questions of elections to the European Parliament. J. Hume said that the election of the three members for Northern Ireland must be under the PR system with Northern Ireland as one constituency. R. Mason said that he would be doing his best in cabinet to have this system adopted. He asked that this assurance should be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

TREATMENT OF PRISONERS: A. Currie asked that the treatment of Irish prisoners in English jails be looked at. R. Mason gave an assurance to do so.

ADDITIONAL REPRESENTATION AT WESTMINSTER: R. Mason indicated that it would be years before there would be extra M.P'S from Northern Ireland at Westminster.

FUTURE MEETINGS: R. Mason said he would be prepared to meet the Party at any time in the future.

The meeting adjourned.

D. MCAREAVY,
1.2.77.