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1. Over the past ten days I have been twice in Northern Ireland (on 25/26 January and on 1/2 February) and have had informal conversations with the following SDLP people: Messrs. Hume, Currie, Paddy Duffy (Dungannon), Eddie McGrady (Downpatrick), Paddy O'Hanlon (Newry), Dr. Joe Hendron (Belfast), Brid Rogers (Lurgan) and Dan McAreavy (General Secretary). I have also met Mr. David Forde (Northern Ireland Office, Belfast), Canon P. Murphy (P.P. Falls Road), Fr. Alec Reid (Clonard Monastery, Belfast), Fr. Dessie Wilson (Ballymurphy, Belfast) and Tom Conaty (Belfast). The following report is based on those conversations.

SDLP Position

2. The Taoiseach's This Week interview on 8 January and the Irish Press interview with Archbishop Ó Fiaich re-opened discussion inside the SDLP on the issue of British withdrawal. It will be recalled that at the party's 1976 annual conference, a motion calling for a declaration from Britain that it intends to withdraw politically and militarily from Ireland was defeated by 156 to 111 votes but that a majority of the platform party (i.e. the then members of the Northern Ireland Convention plus the members of the SDLP Executive) voted in favour of British withdrawal. At the annual conference in November 1977, the issue was avoided by a series of procedural devices but it was generally accepted at the time that if a vote had been taken a majority of delegates would have voted in favour of British withdrawal. Hume and Currie, however, wished to avoid such a vote, not least because the British were about to open talks with the Northern Ireland political parties on an interim system of devolved government. They therefore placed before conference and had adopted a policy document entitled "Facing Reality" which demanded, inter alia, that:

"The British Government should state clearly and unequivocally its long-term intentions. While remaining in Northern Ireland, it should promote reconciliation and an end to divisions between all Irish people, leading to the establishment of structures of government which allow both traditions in Ireland to flourish freely and to live together in unity and agreement.... The end result of such a policy, pursued rigorously and positively over the years would undoubtedly be an agreed Ireland; the essential unity of whose people would have evolved in agreement over the years; whose institutions of government would reflect both its unity and diversity.... In the immediate future and as part of that long-term strategy, the British Government should, in conjunction with the Irish Government, initiate talks with a view to arriving at an agreed form of government for the North within the long-term strategy...."

In November/December 1977, the SDLP reluctantly and half-heartedly entered into the talks on interim devolution but by Christmas they had informed Mr. Mason's office that, in view of continued unionist intransigence, they did not consider the talks worthwhile.

3. Following the Taoiseach's interview, those within the party, particularly Seamus Mallon (Armagh), Paddy Duffy and Eddie McGrady, who have traditionally favoured a declaration of British intention to withdraw, requested a review of party policy and within a matter of days had succeeded in having a policy review committee established. The committee is representative both of the party's executive and of the ex-Convention members and is to report to the executive which, under the constitution of the SDLP, is responsible for developing policy between annual conferences. Hume initially resisted the idea of a policy review but found the pressure overwhelming as branch after branch expressed the view that the SDLP could not be seen to be less nationalist than the Taoiseach and the Archbishop of Armagh. Both Hume and Currie told me that the timing of the Taoiseach's comments created problems for the SDLP. They had expected the talks on interim devolution to be formally brought to an end about now and they would then have almost certainly moved to a position similar to that outlined by the Taoiseach in his interview. As things have turned out, however, they feel they have been badly exposed and no matter what position they now adopt they will be seen, both by their own supporters and by unionists, as simply responding to the combined leadership of Dublin and Armagh.

4. The policy review committee has now been meeting regularly for a fortnight and expects to finalise and issue a new policy statement by the middle of February. In Hume's absence abroad, the discussion is dominated by Seamus Mallon who has produced a hard-line draft statement which would, if adopted, call on the British to declare immediately their interest in Irish unity and would also commit the SDLP to take part in constitutional discussions only after such a declaration had been made and only if the discussions were centred on all-Ireland rather than internal Northern Ireland arrangements. While the final statement will hardly be so hard-line, there is a strong feeling in the party against any further discussions on power-sharing within Northern Ireland until the British have "clarified" their long-term position. Paddy Duffy and Eddie McGrady agree with Airey Neave that power-sharing is no longer "practical politics" though their paths go in widely different directions thereafter! Gerry Fitt is not taking a very active role in the policy review - he was never a great participant in committee meetings - but has let it be known that if the SDLP goes "totally green", it will be without him. A small but influential group within the SDLP (including Seán Farren from Coleraine and Billy Conaghan from Magherafelt who are widely respected for their behind the scenes efforts in building up the party) has discreetly made it known that it would not find it possible to remain in the party if a hard-line, all-Ireland position were adopted and the fear of the SDLP splitting is at the moment a strong, sobering influence. It is therefore likely that the new policy statement will not rule out discussions on internal Northern Ireland power-sharing arrangements but there will almost certainly be a distinct shift towards the other principle of party policy viz. "to promote the cause of Irish unity" and the British Government will probably be asked to express its support for this cause.

5. In organisational terms, the SDLP continues to thrive. Branch meetings are well attended and the conclusions drawn from an analysis of last year's District Council elections (see attached extract from confidential internal SDLP document) are being applied. The strength of the organisation was very evident in a district council by-election in Limavady this week where the SDLP won the vacant seat against all the odds. They got their voters out. The unionists did not. The party's serious financial difficulties have also been turned to advantage. The 1977 conference gave the party treasurer Eddie McGrady, power to levy contributions for a central fund on each of the 26 district executives of the party which have been established in the District Council areas. The effort which each district executive has to make to meet the levy is ensuring a high rate of activity at a time when there might otherwise have been very little for the branches to do. Paddy Devlin's departure in west Belfast has also given party headquarters the opportunity to move in and set up real branches in an area where the SDLP has never been properly organised. Progress will, however, be slow for a variety of reasons including Gerry Fitt's reluctance to fit into an organised party structure and also the understandable reluctance of people in Belfast to identify themselves publicly with any political activity for fear of endangering their own or their family's safety.

NIO Position

6. Mr. David Forde is the senior Northern Ireland Office civil servant resident in Belfast and, inter alia, he maintains regular contact with all the Northern Ireland political parties. He said that the Northern Ireland Secretary of State still regards the talks on interim devolution as "ongoing" and hopes that in due course both the SDLP and the Official Unionist Party will come back to the discussion table. The NIO does not propose to seek any more meetings with the parties but has made it known to all concerned that the door is open and the documents containing the British proposals will remain on the table. Forde does not expect any early moves but says that they are anxious not to issue a death certificate for the talks since this would lead to very strong pressure, which would be difficult to resist, for the allocation of additional functions to the 26 district councils or for the creation of a new upper tier of local government. Mr. Mason is particularly anxious, in the current Westminster climate, to avoid giving more fuel to the Airey Neave/Unionist bandwagon which is calling for improvements in local government structures in the hope that this will eventually lead to majority unionist rule. The NIO saw some administrative advantages in local government reform but realised that it would be politically disastrous and would effectively force the SDLP out of politics and onto the streets where they would be swamped by the IRA.

7. In regard to Anglo-Irish relations generally, Forde said that the Secretary of State was anxious to have an early meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs since this would help clear the public air, especially in Northern Ireland and Britain where many people assumed that Ireland and Britain were on the point of war. Mr. Mason could not, however, have a meeting without been seen to discuss security co-operation and he would therefore hope that the Minister for Justice could also be present. There was no major problem in the security field but the public presentation of co-operation was important, especially in Westminster where some Conservatives were being very difficult. As regards venue and timing, the British await our proposal but they thought it might be helpful all round to have the meeting in Belfast.

8. Mr. Forde was optimistic as ever about the current Northern Ireland security situation even though there have been about 60 Provo. bombings in the last ten days. The British believed that the recent re-structuring of the Provos. into local units had been forced on them by weakness rather than strength and having split up the unified command structure, the security forces would now be able to tackle the problem on a unit by unit basis and eventually eliminate all of them. I reminded Mr. Forde that I had personally been hearing these optimistic assessments of the security situation for at least five years and that so far none of them had proved accurate.

Irish Independence Party

9. The SDLP claim that they are not unduly worried about losing support to the McAteer/McManus party and there is no evidence that the IIP is winning popular support or building up an organisation. Their identification with the old Nationalist Party is not helping and the few meetings that have been called to set up branches of the new party in Cos. Fermanagh, Tyrone and south Derry have been poorly attended. In some places, the few remaining Nationalists have provided the nucleus while in other areas an older generation of former Provisional supporters have been giving support. Neither of the two co-chairmen, Fergus McAteer and Frank McManus, enjoy great popularity and their failure to attract/charisma and appeal to help them in their initial efforts is proving costly. They have also failed to win any friends in the media and their only press conference, in Belfast last November, made them more enemies than friends. In the crucial minority areas of Belfast, there is so far no sign that the IIP have made any effort to organise branches and their delay in that area has been of obvious advantage to the SDLP in the aftermath of Paddy Devlin's departure.

Coalisland Conference

10. On the initiative of Mrs. Bernadette McAliskey and a local prisoners support committee, a pan-nationalist conference was held in Coalisland on 22 January to highlight "torture and repression" and begin a back-to-the-streets movement on the 1967/69 scale. All nationalist groups in Northern Ireland and a wide range of left-wing groups from Britain and Ireland were invited as were a few loyalist groups active in the civil rights field. A large attendance was expected, and it was the first effort at joint action by the Relatives Action Committees (set up all over Northern Ireland by relatives of "political" prisoners; usually controlled by the Provos.). Austin Currie and Paddy Duffy turned up in personal capacities and it seems that Duffy may also have contributed financially - he does, of course, live near Coalisland and, as a solicitor, is in constant contact with IRA prisoners and their relatives. He is also the SDLP candidate for the mid-Ulster Westminster seat and if he is to have any chance of success, he must ensure that there is no other nationalist candidate! The IIP was also strongly represented at the conference and people, like Fr. Faul, who have been active in highlighting ill-treatment by the security forces were prominent on the platform. In the event, the Provos. took the event over so completely (Paddy Duffy said that they even took charge of the car parking arrangements - for a fee, of course) that a follow-up is unlikely and any prospects of the emergence of a new pan-nationalist movement seem to have vanished at birth.

Westminster Elections

11. There is inevitably a good deal of talk among Northern Ireland politicians about Westminster elections and those to whom I talked were confident of an Autumn date. In theory, the SDLP are committed to running candidates in all 12 constituencies but Austin Currie confirmed the impression that they will not oppose Frank Maguire in Fermanagh-South Tyrone, as long as he does not join the IIP. In effect, Maguire has a safe seat so long as he remains an independent. The mid-Ulster seat is winnable if the nationalist vote is not split and the SDLP are hoping that Paddy Duffy will not be opposed by the IIP or the Republican Clubs whose candidate did so well there in 1974. Duffy has certainly the best chance of anyone in the SDLP of being given a clear run by the other nationalist groups but it is not at all certain that he would be an effective SDLP M.P. at Westminster. At heart, he is an advocate of independence for Northern Ireland and in social/economic questions, he is well to the right of most Conservatives. His relations with Gerry Fitt have always been poor and it is difficult to see them working as a team in London. Fitt's seat is as secure as any seat can be and the SDLP would seem to have little hope of winning anywhere else, unless the unionist vote were badly split by conflicting nominations. It is understood that Paisley has taken the initiative in privately asking West's OUP and Baird's UUUM to join him in working out a fair distribution of the ten unionist seats within the next few weeks. (The present position is that there are 7 OUPs, 1 UUUM, 1 DUP and Bill Craig who is on his way to becoming OUP again). The SDLP believe that the unionists will sort out the position to ensure only one unionist candidate in each constituency, with the possible exception of South Down where both Paisley and Baird are said to be anxious to dislodge Powell even at the price of giving the seat to the SDLP who have no shortage of aspirants, including Paddy O'Hanlon, Paddy O'Donoghue from Newcastle and Eddie McGrady who says he would go for the seat only to ensure that it did not go to Paddy O'Hanlon.

Local Government

12. In view of the possible discussions on local government in the near future, I have arranged with the SDLP to up-date our dossier on the performance of the 26 district councils and it is hoped to have this task completed within a few weeks. Some of the 18 councils which have unionist majorities are carrying on the discrimination tradition which characterised the old Northern Ireland local authorities. They now have very limited powers and the areas of discrimination are generally in (i) membership of council committees; (ii) nominations by the councils to public bodies dealing with health, education and housing; (iii) recreational matters e.g. grants to the GAA and Sunday opening of facilities. The unionists are pressing for the return of powers relating to planning, roads and houses and the main pressure at the moment relates to planning. The SDLP is totally opposed to any additional powers and constantly seeks assurances that no change is planned. The most recent assurance was given to a delegation (Messrs. Currie, McGrady and Hendron) which saw Mr. Ray Carter, Minister of State at the NIO, on 1 February following Airey Neave's speech earlier that day. The SDLP are not, however, confident about the long-term position and they detect a spirit of optimism on the part of unionist councillors who appear to believe that, no matter who wins the next British elections, they will once more get their hands on real local government powers. An encouraging trend which the SDLP have noted

at district council meetings, especially since the failure of Paisley's strike in May 1977, is the growing gap between the OUP and Paisley's DUP councillors.

Fair Employment Agency

13. This agency was set up in 1976 to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious beliefs and to work for the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of religious beliefs on political opinion. Tom Conaty is a member of the Agency's Board and I have been talking to him and to one other Board member who would not wish to be named. The Agency is working in two ways, firstly, by examining individual complaints and, secondly, by commissioning and publishing research papers. The recently published paper on "An Industrial and Occupational Profile of the Two Sections of the Population" is the first of these papers and the Agency ran into a good deal of trouble with the NIO about publishing this paper. The NIO told them it would be "politically unhelpful" to publish a survey based on 1971 figures and when the survey was published, the NIO would not agree to publicise its findings or even provide a mailing list for free distribution. The Agency is now working on papers dealing with educational attainments and patterns of employment in the Northern Ireland civil service but, in regard to the latter, is meeting with a wall of silence from the Permanent Secretaries of the Northern Ireland Departments. The Agency's right to commission the paper is being questioned and a long, weary battle is expected. In regard to complaints by individuals, two officers of the Agency are working full-time following up the complaints and making recommendations for the remedying of genuine grievances. One of their first cases involved an employee in a large engineering firm in Belfast where the company has refused to accept the Agency's findings and is challenging it in the Northern Ireland High Court. The case is expected to be heard in March or April this year. In general, it would seem that the Agency is functioning well and that this is due in large measure to its Chairman and full-time Chief Executive, Bob Cooper - formerly of the Alliance Party.

Other Points

14. There are very few complaints of ill-treatment of suspects by members of the security forces and all our contacts are agreed that there has been a remarkable improvement in most areas over the last few months. The Provos. have been trying to focus public attention on the 240 men "on the blanket" in Block H in Long Kesh but there seems to be little sympathy for them, even in the traditional areas of support such as west Belfast. In fact, the priests I met in Belfast said there was more interest in the south than in the north on this issue and that most people in the north saw it as yet another effort by the Provos. to rally support for the cause. My west Belfast contacts continue to be depressed, however, by the general grip which the Provos. have on their area and talk about the continuing recruitment of teenagers into the movement. Fathers Wilson and Reid - who have had close and regular contacts with Belfast Provos. over the years - say that there is now no question of a ceasefire and that none of the local leaders are talking of even a temporary rest.

Seán Donlon

Seán Donlon
3 February, 1978

cc. PSM, PSS,
Ambassador Keating
Min. Nally (W/Tamrath).