

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/135/704
Creation Date(s):	8 October 1979
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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Meeting of Taoiseach and Ministers with Messrs. Hume and Mallon

1. Background

The present meeting arises from the desire of SDLP members to coordinate policy with the Government. It comes at a time when there is a certain amount of criticism of the Government in SDLP circles. The broad trend of this criticism is that the 'Irish dimension' does not feature prominently enough in Government policy, that the Government and people in the South generally are distancing themselves from the Northern problem and unwilling to face the sacrifices which real progress towards unity would require.

2. SDLP approach

The current SDLP policy approach is reflected in the following motion down for the forthcoming Conference at the beginning of November

Conference deplores the failure by successive British Governments to recognise the real nature of the Northern Irish problem and calls on the British and Irish Governments to agree to and promote a joint Anglo/Irish process of political, social and economic development - see "TOWARDS A NEW IRELAND - A POLICY REVIEW - within which the representatives of the two traditions in Northern Ireland would work in partnership towards the creation of peace, stability and lasting unity within Ireland. (Constituency Representatives).

The policy review document referred to, which has not yet been published, was drafted by a committee of Mallon, Duffy and Farren. Basing itself on the premise that no advance is possible in internal Northern Ireland terms it asserts that coordinated action by the two Governments is the key to progress, and this action should concentrate on the process towards, rather than details of, the final settlement. I understand that the document is being drafted so as not to exclude powersharing arrangements, but these are envisaged as arising out of, rather than preceding, joint action by the Governments. John Hume, in particular, puts a heavy emphasis on the withdrawal of the British guarantee to unionists as the key to progress. There is widespread scepticism in the SDLP about the value of any advisory assembly.

3. British approach

The British accept the need for a political initiative but have so far given no firm indication as to the form this could take. However, their soundings with political parties and newspaper leaks indicate that they are still thinking on the lines of the 'Mason plan' - an advisory assembly with some committee functions. Details of the 'partnership' mechanisms envisaged for such an assembly have not emerged clearly, although in a recent conversation with Gerry Fitt, Mr. Atkins apparently mentioned some form of 'balancing-up' nominations to committee chairmanships by the Secretary of State. It is thought likely that the British will formally publish their proposals within the next few months.

4. Approach of Irish Government

The approach by the Government, as reflected in recent speeches by the Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs has been to emphasise the need for a political initiative leading to devolved government subject to the essential criterion of partnership and acceptability to both sections of the community. It may well be, as the SDLP maintain, that a devolved administration on these terms will prove impossible to achieve in internal Northern Ireland terms. There could nevertheless be some tactical advantage in concentrating on partnership rather than the Irish dimension at present. Partnership is universally accepted outside Northern Ireland as a fair approach, and failure to implement it adds to the international pressure on the British Government. Any attempt by the British to implement a partnership approach is a form of recognition of the special nature of the Northern Ireland problem. For this very reason it is likely to be opposed by unionists. If the approach fails on this basis it will highlight to the British and in the eyes of the world the real source of the problem. Provided the nationalist tradition can avoid being 'wrong-footed' or cast in a falsely intransigent light the failed initiative will enhance rather than diminish the prospects for the SDLP approach.

5. In the course of listening and reacting to SDLP proposals the Taoiseach may also wish to make the point that his emphasis on acceptability to both communities is intended to highlight rather

than diminish the role of the SDLP as the arbiters of what is acceptable to them. In policy terms, while the SDLP could not now make powersharing the key plank in their programme without blatantly going back on their stated commitment to 'the Irish dimension' and risking accusations of 'careerism' from the nationalist fringes, the Taoiseach may wish to encourage them to keep the door as open as possible to this option and not to be 'wrongfooted' as the people who killed the proposed initiative. In practical terms this probably means deciding their position on the proposed advisory assembly. Clearly the degree to which such an assembly recognises the position of the minority in its committees, voting procedures etc. would be a key consideration.

6. Publicity for meeting

The present meeting is essentially an initiative of Hume and Mallon, as the appointed liaison officers with the Irish Government, and has not as yet been communicated generally to other members of the party. It seems unlikely therefore that they will wish to have publicity for the meeting.

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