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Confidential

Recent Northern Contacts

(a) Current developments in the SDLP

1. I had conversations recently with a cross-section of SDLP people, including Seamus Mallon, Hugh Logue and some others and formed the following impressions of current developments in the SDLP:
2. There is obviously a deep degree of uncertainty in the party at the moment, relating in particular to the direction which SDLP policy should now take. This comes partly from the general uncertainty of the present political situation in Northern Ireland and partly, SDLP members say, because they are unclear as to the policy of the Irish Government. I felt there was a noticeable tendency on the part of many of them to emphasise this latter aspect and to be critical of the Government. The burden of criticism tended to vary from person to person, however, and one could not isolate any single clear divergence between the policy of the Government and the SDLP. No doubt the criticisms of the Government must be seen in the perspective of differences of opinion on tactics within the SDLP itself and the obvious frustrations arising from the present political situation in the North.
3. The weekend seminar of the SDLP Executive and Constituency representatives in Downings, Co. Donegal earlier this month had before it a confidential paper entitled "Towards a New Ireland - a policy review". This had been drafted by Seamus Mallon, assisted by Paddy Duffy and Sean Farren, representing the 'deep green' and 'pale green' wings of the party respectively. Broadly speaking the paper had concentrated on these three points:
 - (a) No progress was possible in internal Northern Ireland terms;
 - (b) Joint action by the British and Irish Governments was the key to progress; and
 - (c) The action should concentrate on the process towards, rather than the details of, the final settlement. I understand that some kind of joint commission was envisaged.

4. Accounts of the actual discussions in Downings were somewhat contradictory, and I have not yet had an opportunity of hearing John Hume's version of the events. There was however considerable opposition to a paper which so manifestly rejected the option of progress within Northern Ireland. The meeting culminated in the much more general statement, published in the newspapers on 10th September, which called on the two Governments to go beyond the necessary joint security measures and to 'jointly initiate the political dialogue necessary to deal with the problem itself'. During the discussions Hume held out the prospect of a meeting in the course of the following week between himself, Mallon and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. It was agreed that the delegation would report back to the Executive on the following Saturday. (Hume's audience appears to have got the impression that such a meeting had already been arranged.) He also gave the participants an account of a lunch which he had with Mr. Stowe, Sir Brian Cubbon's successor as head of the Northern Ireland Office, in which Stowe reportedly had said that the present soundings with the political parties were a ritual to be got through and that the NIO would be coming forward with its own proposals towards the end of this year or early next year. This was taken as an encouraging sign by the SDLP people there, and contributed to an atmosphere of optimism at the meeting.

5. Although the prospect of an early meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs had no doubt helped to avoid the adoption of a potentially embarrassing and constrictive document, there appears to have been no follow-up of any kind on Hume's part. The Executive met the following Saturday, in Hume's absence. Attempts by Seamus Mallon to clarify the position by telephone were thwarted by a malfunctioning of the telephone system at the SDLP Belfast office. It is understandable in the circumstances that there is some degree of confusion in the SDLP on the organisational level.

6. The issue underlying the SDLP internal debate is the constant one of whether the party should throw its efforts behind the search for internal accommodation in Northern Ireland or whether,

in the face of the repeated failure of this approach, it should commit itself to the Irish dimension as the key to progress, and if so, the degree of tactical emphasis to be put on this aspect from time to time. In relation to the forthcoming annual Conference, the Constituency Representatives have drafted the following motion:

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 reference to the Mallon document, whose existence is not as yet public knowledge, would, if retained, imply publication of the document and some degree of public endorsement of it by the SDLP. The parenthetical nature of the reference suggests however that it may have been grafted on to the original motion, and clearly it can be removed, if there is agreement to do so, without doing any damage to the sense of the motion. As of now this seems the more likely outcome of the SDLP debate.

7. Criticisms of the Government, which were made by various SDLP members over the past few weeks, centred on complaints

- (a) that the Taoiseach should not have discarded the 'Irish dimension' in the Panorama interview;
- (b) that there was a degree of indifference on the part of the Government and the public in the South generally towards the Northern minority and the SDLP; and
- (c) that no attempt was being made to define unity in attractive terms or to shape society in the South in a way which would make the prospect of unity attractive to Northerners.

Those who felt most strongly about (a) tended to be in the 'green' wing of the party while those who emphasised (c) were those most committed to seeking an internal accommodation in the North. There

also appears to be a widespread belief that the Taoiseach had a private understanding with Mrs. Thatcher on a political approach to Northern Ireland, which again was variously interpreted as a good or a bad omen depending on the viewpoint of the speaker.

8. In my contacts I ensured that those concerned had the text of the most recent statements of the Taoiseach and Minister. On the proposed meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs I said it had been made clear by the Taoiseach and Minister on a number of occasions that their door was always open to the SDLP but that the Minister had been absent on European and U.N. business for that entire week. I was able to pass on to Seamus Mallon a proposed date for a meeting with the Taoiseach, arising out of the Taoiseach's conversation with John Hume in Waterville. On the general issues I said I felt that the Taoiseach's emphasis on the criterion of 'acceptability to both communities' enhanced rather than diminished the role of the SDLP, as the arbiters of what was acceptable to them. The British could not now avoid their responsibility to tackle the political aspects. Although it was indeed probable that their proposed initiative would fail due to unionist attitudes it was all the more important, even from a tactical point of view, that the nationalist tradition should appear in a constructive and conciliatory light and that if there was to be failure, the British would have to recognise where the source of that failure lay, and draw the consequences. I might add that a number of the SDLP people I met volunteered dismissive references to the recent speech by Deputy Sile de Valera. All of them confirmed that it had evoked no support whatever among Northern nationalists. A few people made the point that, ironically, it had been helpful with unionist opinion in serving as a contrast to the Taoiseach's approach.

(b) Alliance Party views

9. I had dinner in Belfast on 24th September with John Cushnahan of the Alliance Party. He was loud in his praises of the Taoiseach's recent statements. He said he had been toying with the idea of a letter to the Dublin papers to support the Taoiseach's

stance, but felt on reflection this might do more harm than good. I said that would be for himself to decide and much would depend on the contents of the letter. However I felt that a letter which confirmed in a general way that the Taoiseach's approach was a realistic and helpful one in terms of the Northern Ireland situation would be encouraging rather than otherwise.

10. On the general situation he felt that polarisation was increasing and instanced many small examples of this. The situation had been potentially explosive in the wake of the Mountbatten and Warrenpoint killings, but the visit of Mrs. Thatcher and the non-visit of the Pope had helped to calm loyalist anger. He said there was a growing exasperation in the Alliance Party at the unionist position. The Official Unionists were in a state of pathetic disarray, held to ransom at all levels by the more energetic DUP, and the problem facing everyone was 'how do you put a spine in a jellyfish?'. He said the attitude in the Alliance Party was coming around more and more to the idea that the British would have to shock the unionists into some kind of action, otherwise the OUP and the situation as a whole would continue to drift. He himself would like the British to set out a programme of powersharing devolution and to hold a referendum on its acceptance as a condition of remaining in the U.K. This had been the feeling at the recent Council meeting of the Alliance Party, where Napier had called for a political initiative. While this is no doubt an emotional view rather than a considered policy it is of some interest in that it reflects a mood of despondency, even on the part of the normally optimistic Alliance Party, about the possibility of any voluntary contribution to progress from Unionist politicians.

(c) Other contacts

11. I tried to see the Rev. Martin Smyth who said (I think truthfully) that he was too busy to see me at short notice. I later ran into Harry West and Raymond Ferguson in the Europa. These conversations were very general and insofar as they touched on the Northern Ireland problem the overwhelming emphasis was on

The need for security cooperation (OUP councillors had seen Mr. Atkins on 24th September and demanded, inter alia, economic sanctions against the Republic, in retaliation against alleged failures of security cooperation). In the course of a visit to Stormont Castle for discussions on economic cooperation I also came across a number of NIO officials and had lunch later with Mr. Tim Gee and Mr. David Gilliland of the NIO. The only point of interest to report was that some of Mr. Gee's remarks seemed to confirm that the NIO plan to launch their proposals within the next few months (probably before the end of the year). I got no indication what these proposals might be and it was my impression that no decision had yet been taken on this. From some cursory references to an advisory-type assembly without executive powers I inferred this was possibly one of the options under consideration.

Sean O Huiginn
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26 September 1979

cc. FSH
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