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Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Westminster Debate on 9 July 1980 on Government Discussion
Paper: The Government of Northern Ireland

1. The Government asked the House of Commons to take note of the new paper on proposals for further discussion at the time of the annual debate on the renewal of the 1974 Northern Ireland Act. Although separate debates are being arranged later this month on the security situation and the Northern Ireland economy, the discussion on the White Paper inevitably brought in these subjects also. Essentially, the paper puts forward two alternatives to Westminster-style majority rule for an Executive. The first alternative is a system which guarantees any party winning a certain proportion of the popular vote a seat on the Executive. Two ways are suggested: one way would be by direct popular election of candidates for the Executive. Another way would be to have a single (PR) election to the Assembly and then form the Executive by reference to the strength of the parties elected to the Assembly. The second alternative is based on the Departmental Committees of the Assembly whose Chairman and Deputy Chairman would form a Council of the Assembly with advisory, delaying and possibly blocking powers. The Chairman and Deputy Chairman would come equally from those parties supporting the Executive and those opposing it.
2. In introducing the debate, the Secretary of State said little that was really new in substance but made some developments in his presentation of interest to us. For example, he argued that the life blood of politics is the exercise of responsibility, a point of view which has been put forward by many Irish politicians but did not seem always to be accepted in Westminster. Atkins also emphasised the need to take account of the views of the minority community and his restatement of the principle of acceptability ruled out any return to simple majority rule. He repeated the recognition accorded in the discussion paper to the role of the Republic. In spite of questions from all sides of the House,

he declined to be drawn on the expression of a preference between the two main options in the discussion paper but said he would favour whichever option would command support in Northern Ireland. This probably means that although the Government might itself prefer option one, in practice it considers it more practical to attempt to promote option two, the sharing of responsibility within the Assembly. Indeed, in conversation with NI Office Ministers I have gained the impression that because Paisley and Molyneaux dismiss option one the second choice is seen by the NI Office as the only feasible one. In any event, Atkins made it clear that the British Government did not see any great scope for innovation other than along the lines of one or other of the options. In summing up after eight hours of debate, Michael Alison, Minister of State at the NI Office, confirmed that there could be no return of power even to reformed local government, as such a proposal would also have to meet the test of acceptability, and it would fail. He also ruled out the continuation of direct rule, because of its fundamentally unsatisfactory nature. In a little noticed section, he went on to point out to the Unionists the danger of putting their trust in paper guarantees from Westminster as it could not be foreseen whether "a dominant Westminster Parliament in 40 years time will not sell the pass and abandon the Ulster Protestants", just as Gladstone introduced land reforms ^{that} "cut the ground literally from under the security and durability of the whole of the Anglo-Irish connection in Northern Ireland".

3. The British Government says it hopes to resume discussion with the Northern Political Parties in the coming weeks and to reach conclusions before the end of the Parliamentary recess. A number of their own back benchers urged them not to allow the discussion to drag on and to conclude them one way or the other within a matter of two or three months.
4. The main interest in the debate lay in the reaction of the Unionist MPs. The Official Unionists were particularly scathing on the Government's proposals and Molyneaux rejected the idea of continuing discussions based on the paper alone, although he said he would be prepared to meet with the Secretary of State and discuss propositions for Northern Ireland "that are in the best interests of all the people in the Province". He described the Government proposals as "grotesque caricatures of democracy" and "a rehash of failed experiments". He accurately pointed out that NIO and FCO officials had persuaded the incoming Conservative Government not to proceed with the Conservative Party manifesto commitment on local government. Clearly, a great deal of his criticisms of the Conference process

was aimed as much at the DUP as at the substance of the discussion. However, he firmly rejected any idea of an advisory role, which he believes could constitute responsibility without power. He accused the pamphlet circularised by the Government in 200,000 copies to popularise the discussion paper as giving rise to exaggerated expectations of what the new institutions might achieve, particularly on security and on the economy and he argued that Westminster constituted the best protection of minority interests. Bradford (OUP) and Dunlop (UUUP) also rejected the White Paper models. Bradford made an interesting presentation of the OUP philosophy. He said "that the logical extension of Unionism is total integration" but went on to say that because "successive Secretaries of State in Ulster have wavered in the face of the IRA" the Ulster based Unionist politicians must continue to demand devolved institutions but must also envisage that such institutions have responsibility and power in security matters. The position taken by independent Unionist James Kilfedder largely parallels that of the OUP.

5. Paisley's position was somewhat more positive. He agreed to continue discussions within the terms which he specified, which were, broadly, that he utterly rejected the "power sharing option" but that, as Peter Robinson subsequently put it "the alternative approach outlined in paragraphs 53 - 59 (i.e. the second alternative) could be the basis of a solution though changes would have to be made". Paisley agreed with Brynmor John that economic questions provided an inescapable background to the whole discussion and he also argued that executive responsibility for security was an area of main importance. However, he made the important point (as opposed to the OUP) that a failure to obtain devolved power for security questions should not imply that no devolution could take place. Robinson sought, and obtained from Alison a reiteration of the British Government's position: "It is the Government's hope that in due course in a different security situation, law and order matters can revert to local control". The DUP, in common with the other Unionists, naturally welcomed the reiteration of guarantees about the maintenance of the Union but Paisley himself developed his own idea that the fundamental, basic guarantee was the existence of a Unionist majority in Northern Ireland. This idea was given widespread support on both Conservative and Labour back benches and was, indeed substantially endorsed by Alison. The DUP speakers (and Kilfedder) favoured the idea of a referendum in due course on whatever proposals the British Government would finally put forward.

6. The official Labour Opposition's position was set out by Brynmor John. Although he explicitly made the point that the Commons discussion should not be regarded as an academic seminar he made a detailed critique of the discussion paper which was widely regarded by other speakers as demonstrating the pessimistic prospects the

paper had. He underlined the contrast between the principle of acceptability now favoured by the Government and the view apparently previously held that the Government would attempt to push through its own ideas. His view was that an attempt to reach finality by the opening of the next Parliament session might be too soon. In general, apart from this question of timing, the official Labour position, which continues to rest on bipartisanship, depended more on reaction to the Government's ideas than on any new ideas of their own. Brynmor, supported in this by Fitt and Dalyell, again emphasised the theme of the interconnection between economic problems and political development. He welcomed the emphasis given to the cross-border dimension and the end to the power of detention. He was against the institution of an advisory council which would provide a forum for general discussion and consultation with the Secretary of State on those matters, e.g. security, on which he remains responsible to Parliament and felt that the need to give the minority a constructive role ruled out option 2, whose mechanisms, in any event, were inadequate and unprecise. He reaffirmed the support of the Labour party for power sharing on the lines of the first option.

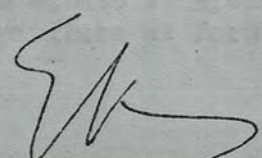
7. This support was echoed by Merlyn Rees, who wound up for the opposition. It has been obvious in recent years that the problem of Northern Ireland still hangs heavily on Rees but that his attitude is essentially negative and outdated. He continues to be critical of the role of Southern politicians and opposed to any institutionalisation of an all Ireland dimension. He described our Government's position (and that of John Hume) as "unclear irritidentism", and said that if our Government were offered a united Ireland tomorrow "they would not know what to do with it". He could not understand what constituted Ireland's unique relationship with Britain.
8. The Conservative back benchers who spoke were Stanbrook, Amery, Gardiner, McNair-Wilson, Beryon and Biggs-Davison (all right wing) and Mates and Mawhinney, who are more liberal. All the right wing speakers opposed the proposals in the discussion paper and most of them questioned the reasons why the Government had decided to depart from the Conservative party manifesto commitment merely to increase powers for local government bodies, at any rate as a fall-back position. Most of the right wing speakers regarded any form of devolution as tending to undermine the Unionists and in this they were more negative than Paisley's DUP. They opposed "distinct and alien institutions", a Single Transferable Vote system of Government and power sharing, which was described as an entrenchment of sectarianism. Ivor Stanbrook described the contributions of John Dunlop of the UUUP as "amiable and sensible" and it was obvious that this section of the

Conservative party had no sense of the outrage of much of the rest of the Commons at the practices of 60 years of Stormont rule. Only Biggs-Davison, who also maintained that the best protection for the minority was an appeal to Westminster, recognised that in Stormont's hey-day the "convention" whereby matters for which responsibility had been devolved to Stormont could not be raised at Westminster, had prevented the British Parliament from exercising a positive role. The contributions of Mates and Mawhinney were characterised by their hostility to Unionist intransigence while continuing to recognise and support the desire of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom. (Mawhinney was, of course, born in Northern Ireland and Mates served there as an Army officer.) Both claimed somewhat tenuously that there were grounds for hope. Mates accepted the need to make it clear to those who lead political opinion in Ulster what their options are and said that "we cannot go on year after year with hon members representing constituencies in Northern Ireland being destructive about proposals that successive Governments make". Mawhinney raised the question of whether the Government should be prepared to attempt to exercise influence on the existing majority opinion in Northern Ireland in favour of healing the division between the two communities, possibly by a qualified majority mechanism within the Assembly.

9. The only Liberal speaker was Stephen Ross, who agreed with "almost every word" of what Mates had said. In contrast to the other official spokesmen, he explicitly recognised the injustices of Stormont rule. He expressed a preference for the Government's first option but thought an adapted version of the second option might be more realistic. He agreed with Mates that the atmosphere in Northern Ireland might be changing and also supported the conventional view that a role by the Dublin Government could be worked out only when a devolved Government had been established.
10. The Labour back benchers who spoke were Kevin McNamara, George Foulkes, Clive Soley, Michael English and Tam Dalyell. Kevin McNamara ably voiced the arguments for Irish unity - federal, confederal or unitary - with the necessary safeguards for those who fear that their religious, personal or cultural identities may be at risk - and he felt that Dublin had not yet spelt out exactly what guarantees and commitments they are prepared to offer the majority population in the North. Foulkes and Dalyell are primarily interested in Scottish devolution and English gave a long legalistic dissertation on the subject of the Single Transferable Vote system. He did not comment on the proposals for discussion and the other three all rejected them. Indeed, there was a coincidence of views, although some different starting points, between these three and the right wing of the Conservative party. Clive Soley, on the other hand argued cogently for Irish unity and opposed the granting of a veto to a minority over the majority in the House of Commons.

11. The only other speaker was Garry Fitt, who strongly supported the first option. His lengthy intervention attempted to fight again the battles of 1974 and drew on illustrations of past or present discriminatory practices in Northern Ireland. He attacked a wide range of Northern Ireland personalities and went on to criticise the Taoiseach, in connection inter alia, with the rumours then circulating about the possible transfer of Ambassador Donlon, and John Hume, for involving the SDLP in "any attempt by Fianna Fail or any other political party in the South to better its electoral prospects at the expense of events in Northern Ireland". (A similar allegation was most offensively made by John Kilfedder). Fitt's only constructive idea was to propose a series of complex referendums whereby the people of Northern Ireland could be asked for their views on a range of subjects, thus going over the heads of their political leaders. He did emphasise, however, that the first priority is an internal settlement in Northern Ireland - the Irish dimension will flow from that.

12. Officials here have said in the last few weeks that the British Government hope to be able to assess in the light of last week's debate how and at what speed it should now move forward. If that is so, the responsible Ministers cannot have found the prospects encouraging. The Official Unionists are not prepared to consider either option and the DUP would require substantial modification in the complicated second option before they would consider it. Unionist opinion clearly continues to be dominated by the struggle between the OUP and DUP for Unionist leadership. It was also unfortunate for the Government that the debate took place against the background of what is seen from here as a deteriorating security situation on the border, with a revival in recent months of IRA units apparently operating across the border. As a result, the OUP got off the hook of its ambivalence on the merits of devolution by claiming that devolution without devolved responsibility for security was pointless.



Ambassador