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Salient features of the Devolution Debate in
the House of Commons, 28 April 1982.

In the course of the debate in the House of Commons on 28 April a number of points of interest were raised by different speakers.

Mr. James Prior

- (1) He justified the need for cross-community support by the terrorist campaign. "If we are to reach the point where everyone in Northern Ireland can unite to defeat the Provisional IRA and the men of violence, all the people of Northern Ireland must be able to feel that they are part of any Assembly in Northern Ireland and they can therefore fully support the forces of law and order. That is absolutely essential. That is why, in the proposals that we are putting forward, there has to be some cross-community support".

Comment

This is open to the interpretation that, if the IRA campaign were not there, cross-community support would be less necessary. The requirement of 'some' cross-community support does not allay suspicions that that support would not necessarily have to include the SDLP.

- (2) However, he went on to say that his proposals would not necessarily have much impact on the security problem. 'I do not necessarily agree that there is any connection between the proposals and what would happen in the Assembly and to terrorism. If we can achieve political stability, that would help towards solving the security problem, but the two things are not necessarily of the same order'.

Comment

In so far as Mr. Prior's thoughts are consistent, he would appear to be anxious to create a united political front against terrorism, even though this may have no discernible impact. In other words his aim is to eliminate the political opposition to Government security policies, while realizing that the security problem itself may remain..

Mr. Don Concannon

- (1) He makes the point that an Assembly or devolved Administration will have little impact on the economic situation. Whitehall would hold the purse strings, and elected representatives would have to work within the framework of Tory economic policies.
- (2) 'welcome though sections of Part 3 are, we express profound disappointment at the derisory attention given to the Irish dimension'.

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- (3) He advocated the setting up of the Parliamentary tier and for it now to be debated in Parliament. 'The Inter-Government at Council should be given a much higher status than it has now'. He also recommends the setting up of committees to consider issues such as energy, citizenship and human rights to be drawn from the Dail, the H of C and the Assembly.
- (4) On devolution, 'of course it is right to listen to the views of the Assembly on this matter, but the Government have a duty to state openly that in the case of Northern Ireland devolution is possible only where the minority community is taken into partnership in executive functions. In short, only a sharing of power should be acceptable'.
- (5) After devolution. 'We should never forget the sorry state of Northern Ireland today. It was brought about largely by the abuse of executive power....we must retain the office of Secretary of State even when the maximum of powers have been devolved'. He also recommended continued close scrutiny by Parliament.

Humphrey Atkins

- (1) The burden of his case was that while direct rule had been fair and impartial 'the one thing that it has not done, however, is to bring an end to violence!.
- (2) He claimed that in 1980 'one of the few things that united the different political parties in Northern Ireland was their opposition to being treated in the same way as England, Scotland or Wales.'

James Molyneaux

- (1) His main point was total opposition in Ulster across the board: 'the Secretary of State has assembled every Ulster Party of consequence in total opposition'. The Assembly will consist 'solely of Opposition parties with the object of making their obstruction of the Government all the more effective'. Prior will make Ulster ungovernable even more effectively than Paisley. His scheme was 'a Heath-Robinson contraption'.
- (2) He claimed a senior civil servant had said to him: 'Mr. Molyneaux - you and I are intelligent enough to know that the only real solution is a united Ireland'. The Foreign Office was following the same policy as it had with the Falklands, 'opposition to anything that would tie them closer to Britain and make more difficult the Foreign Office's desire to get rid of them'.
- (3) Molyneaux quoted John Hume approvingly on unworkability. The three main parties were not voicing mild criticism or reservations. 'They are expressing total opposition, total disbelief and total lack of confidence in the structure. They stand on common ground.' A weighted majority of 91% was opposed to the plan, and would the Government 'recognise that the wishes of the Ulster people, too are paramount?'.

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Rev. Ian Paisley

- (1) He cited Kevin O'Higgins as the model for dealing with terrorism (one of a number of signs that Paisley has been reading Irish history lately)
- (2) On Integration: 'Any hon. member who thinks that Northern Ireland is the same as Yorkshire should feel his head'.
- (3) Complaints that Government will continue the Union only as long as the majority wants, but no absolute commitment. Michael Mates intervened to ask if Paisley thought the Union should be maintained against the wishes of the majority.
- (4) Paragraphs on the Irish dimension. He quoted the view that the advocacy of change, including fundamental change, was a legitimate activity and that those who advocated such change should not be debarred from public life. Paisley claimed no Unionist disagreed; anti-Partitionists were never barred from public life, only from Government. Comment: Paisley's remarks underline the view that recognition of the legitimacy of the Nationalist tradition, of which Prior and Gowrie make so much, does not in fact represent any particularly significant progress. Cooperation on matters 'that do not touch the Constitution is possible between Northern parties, but I could take no part in a Council that included members of a Parliament that claims jurisdiction over the part of Northern Ireland which is in the United Kingdom'.
- (5) Workability: 'For the secretary of State to tell us today that he rolls out devolution but that he might have to take it back again, is a recipe for instability and ruination in Northern Ireland'. When did 70% of H of C vote for anything? If six elected and do not attend, 80% will have to be in favour.
- (6) If a figure for devolution 50% + 1, with Republican-Unionist mix, value of votes different. 'A vote for a Republican is more important than a vote for a Unionist. If someone can persuade half a dozen Republicans to join him in the spoils of office, the House will consider devolving power. That system of Government will not bring stability to Northern Ireland.....the minority in such a Government hold them to ransom. They need say only that they will withdraw for the Secretary of State to roll up devolution, to pack it up and to say that it is all over'.
- (7) If the Assembly does a good job, helping economy, agriculture, education, their power may be given a proper democratic basis. Comment: Paisley sees Assembly as possible stepping stone to majority rule.

Julian Amery

- (1) The proposals will construct a dock. 'The accused in the dock will be my right hon. Friend and his successors. My right hon. Friend and his successors will be viciously attacked in that dock by a consultative Assembly. If it became necessary to close Harland & Wolff, the Assembly could be a wonderful arena in which to lambast the British Government for the consequences of such a decision'.
- (2) Very significantly he actually prefers an Anglo-Irish link to a

Belfast-Dublin one. 'Surely if we want to keep the unity of this kingdom alive and to strengthen it, the right link should be between Westminster, including Northern Ireland Members, and Dublin but not a separate Belfast-Dublin link'.

- (3) Potential investors would be made a little hesitant by the curious hybrid Administration, some of it rolled off into devolution, some of it still controlled by the Northern Ireland Office and some in danger of being rolled back'.
- (4) He argues Northern Ireland politicians should be included in Government.

Harold McCusker

- (1) Would insist on discussing security. Unionists would complain about security force deaths the SDLP about children killed by plastic bullets. 'That is a recipe for conflict that that will bring the entire edifice toppling down if it is ever erected'.
- (2) On Integration: 'I did not believe that it was possible for anyone to come to this house and say "all I want is to be treated like my fellow citizens", and be refused, but I have come to accept that I shall not be treated like my fellow citizens'.
If House insists on devolution will try to cooperate.
- (3) Anglo-Irish Council contains 'potential for treachery: If we are to be betrayed, the instrument for betrayal is already there, but let us use that instrument so that the British Government can put real pressure on the Government of the Republic to do something to end the terrorism.'
- (4) 70% support must be sufficient without qualification for devolution. 'If the Government will not make that recommendation, I seriously doubt whether I shall fight an election.'

Barry Porter (Ccn's.)

- (1) 'For the Secretary of State to pray in aid Mr. Oliver Napier who has been elected to nothing in his life, so far as I am aware, except the leadership of the Alliance Party, leads me to believe that his case is weaker than I thought'.
- (2) Pleased to hear 'the Secretary of State giving stronger support to the Union than I have heard before', but nothing in White Paper.

Mrs. Shirley Williams

- (1) Drew attention to power of Presiding Officer. Support of SDP conditional on certain questions being answered. No clear SDP policy visible.
- (2) She suggested a European Community joint committee 'in which the United Kingdom, the Republic and representatives of Northern Ireland take part, so as to deploy some of the money voted by the European Community for the benefit of the two parts of Ireland alone!, such as a gas pipeline, electricity interconnection, railway electrification, higher education.

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Mr. Michael Mates (cons.)

- (1) 'I believe that the future of Northern Ireland is firmly and completely within the United Kingdom, certainly for the rest of this century and probably for half of the next'.
- (2) He was opposed to the return of Local Government powers. 'To those of my hon. friends who say that we can solve the problem by giving back Local Government powers to one, two or more larger bodies in Northern Ireland, I say 'Remember Poleglass'. There just two years ago, when elected representatives were given the power to decide whether dustbins were emptied, they decided not to empty Catholic dustbins.....for far too long there has been abuse of in Northern Ireland which has brought about the present desperate position.'

Mr. Martin Flannery (Lab)

'Those who wrecked power sharing believe that this scheme is a step back to the old Stormont, so that they can do exactly what they did before'.

Mr. James Kilfedder

- (1) 'His scheme of creeping or rolling devolution will never advance beyond a talking shop. A talking shop in Northern Ireland after 13 years of terrible violence, instead of creating Political stability, will worsen the situation and will act as an incentive to the terrorists to increase their campaign of murder, mutilation and destruction'.

Comment

He seems to recognize that minority support is crucial to the success of any initiative, as he later made explicit.

- (2) 'It seems that the SDLP will have the power to decide whatever there will be a Government in Northern Ireland. The Government have decided that the SDLP will have the power of Veto. The Unionists will not get powers, unless the SDLP agrees.'

G. Fitt

- (1) He predicted that the Unionists would get together, elect a Presiding Officer and ensure all chairmanships and deputy chairmanships go to Unionists.
- (2) He agreed with McCusker, 'it would court disaster to allow the Assembly to discuss security'.
- (3) He expressed hope that the discussions with Harland & Wolff would produce positive results.

Clive Soley (co-author of Labour Party policy document on N. Ireland)

'Unless the Assembly has some financial power to intervene in the economy of Northern Ireland, that economy will continue to collapse. I would also suggest, particularly to the Right Wing members of the Conservative Party,

that the more that happens the greater will be the impetus towards a united Ireland'.

Nicholas Scott (Junior Minister)

'It would be equally unrealistic to imagine that the necessary long term stability could be established, unless the political deadlock in the Province can be overcome and eventually broken without long-term stability, we shall find it very hard to make significant progress on the economy or security'.

Robert Hanning
12 May 1982