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Mr Prior's Speech on the Forum Report - Analysis

Prior's speech of 2 July was approved by the Prime Minister and the British Cabinet. He departed occasionally from the text.

Irish terminology and theory

It is interesting to see how far the terminology used both by the Forum and by the Irish Ministers has been adopted by the British over the past twelve months as reflected in this speech. The issue of the conflict of "identities" has been taken up by the British in terms which are close to our own approach. It is accepted by them as one of the five realities which Mr Prior identifies. Moreover, our argument that a major grievance and source of alienation on the nationalist side is the absence of any means of the Irish identity of Northern nationalists being given expression is accepted to a significant degree e.g. "there is a substantial and significant minority of people in the province who are strongly committed to Northern Ireland sooner or later becoming part of the United Ireland, they feel no sense of identification with many aspects of government nor with those whose job it is to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland. They resent the fact that there's so little scope for expression of their Irish identity, they see themselves as excluded from any exercise of political power over the affairs of the province. This increases the suspicion with which they view the actions and motivations of both Unionists and the Government here."

There is also an acceptance of legitimacy of historical grievances blending into contemporary grievances which is interesting.

"Perhaps in historical terms, and some would have said even in modern terms, the Irish or the Northern Irish have suffered at the hands of the British."

There is also an acceptance that there are good grounds for contemporary grievances e.g. "Arrangements should be directed at recognising the Irish identity and at developing the minority's participation and confidence in all the structures

nationalist, and particularly at local government level, they should be coming not at the Irish Government itself /...

and process of Northern Ireland. There are aspects of our practice and administration which are not sensitive enough to these requirements."

Another consistent theme in the speeches of Irish Ministers and in confidential exchanges is that the two Governments should meet the needs, rather than the ideal wishes, of all concerned. It is interesting to note that Prior seems to have taken this up e.g. "The government and administration of Northern Ireland must be undertaken in the light of the needs and the responses of the people there".

Role of Dublin

This is acknowledged at various points and will be covered later. There is, however, one specific acknowledgement which is unprecedented. Inviting the various parties to participate in talks, Prior says "Nationalists can do so knowing that we want to find an acceptable way to involve them and that we are concerned about the views which the Irish Government have expressed on their behalf". This is very interesting given the fact that successive British Governments have refused to accept the right of the Irish Government formally to speak on behalf of nationalists in Northern Ireland and indeed have occasionally formally rejected that right. It is interesting to note that this was not ad libbed by Prior but was in his prepared text precisely as it was spoken by him.

Five reasons why situation is not satisfactory

Summing up the reasons for taking action Prior says: "The present situation is not satisfactory - not for the Government who face the continued drain on our political, economic and human resources; not for nationalists in Northern Ireland who feel cut off from decision-making and from a proper recognition of their identity; not for the Unionists, blamed for their intransigence and as cut off from decision-making as the nationalists, and particularly at local-government level, which they value so much; not for the Irish Government challenged

to propound and justify nationalist aspirations and menaced itself by terrorism and not for our two countries knowing that Northern Ireland can remain a source of friction and ill-will between us."

It is worth noting that this "point of departure", so to speak, is almost identical to that of the Forum Report.

WORSE TO DO NOTHING

"The dangers for the people of Northern Ireland of staying put, of doing nothing, are greater than the obvious risks of seeking to make some political advance."

This is the position taken by Mrs Thatcher several months ago, following her meeting with the Taoiseach at Chequers, according to her closely official advisers.

Urgency

Prior twice states that he now feels a sense of urgency about making political progress. This is satisfactory in terms of the requirement of urgency in the list of Realities and Requirements set out in the Forum Report.

Opportunity

At several points Prior states that there is now an important moment of opportunity e.g. "I think there is much more hope of a positive climate than there has been for some months." He also quotes approvingly from the Taoiseach's Belfast Telegraph article of Friday, 29 July, to the effect that the Taoiseach is struck by the extent to which the Forum Report and "The Way Forward" together provide a basis for dialogue. Prior himself finds considerable common ground between the two documents at various points.

The Forum Report

Merits

Prior finds the merits in "the serious examination of the nationalist aspiration, its emphasis on the importance of consent, its unequivocal condemnation of violence, its attempts to understand the Unionist identity and its openness to discuss other views".

Prior also accepts the emphasis given by the Irish Government to the Realities and Requirements set out in the first paragraph of Chapter 5 and indeed responds to the Taoiseach's invitation that the British themselves should set out their own definition of the realities of Northern Ireland.

Demerits

Predictably, Prior is critical of the dismissal by the Forum Report of earlier efforts by British Governments to solve the problem.

He is also critical of the three options of the Forum Report but makes a crucial qualification:

"The Report outlines three models: one is a unitary state, the second is a form of federation and the third is called Joint Authority. Now the Report makes clear that each is to be achieved by agreement and consent. In as much as any of these models significantly alters the sovereignty of Northern Ireland, it is a dangerous fallacy to imagine that the Unionists will agree. It's equally false to imagine that the Government or any one else can engineer or can induce such agreement. I do not know how those who seek a unitary state by consent imagine that they can secure it in the foreseeable future."

The underlined sentence leaves an important opening in view of the fact that the Taoiseach has stated publicly, and this view has been privately insisted upon with the British, that Joint Authority does not necessarily involve a change of sovereignty. The particular phraseology employed here in

fact reflects a considerable diplomatic effort carried out in recent days.

Five "Realities"

Prior identifies five "Realities" in the Northern Ireland situation, following the procedural approach of the Forum itself.

1. The first "Reality" relates to the conflict of identity of all those not described in such general terms.

"And it is a fact that the majority of the people in Northern Ireland are totally committed to maintaining it as part of a united Ireland on any terms.

Unionists utterly reject incorporation into an Irish state for what they see as its Roman Catholic ethos, its tradition of neutrality and political parties from a very different background, but at the same time

there is a substantial and significant minority of people in the Province who are strongly committed to Northern Ireland sooner or later becoming part of the United Ireland, they feel no sense of identification with many aspects of Government nor with those whose job it is to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland. They resent the fact that there's so little scope for expression of their Irish identity, they see themselves as excluded from any exercise of political power over the affairs of the Province. This increases the suspicion with which they view the actions and motivations of both Unionists and the Government here. And fifteen years of violence have deepened suspicions and mistrust in both communities."

2. "The constitutional provision for Northern Ireland should only be amended by the freely given consensus of its people If it were possible for the implications of that reality to be fully accepted, then it should open up the possibilities for dialogue without fear of

misunderstanding or misrepresentation. The more the demand for repeal, perhaps the greater the suspicion."

3. "As long as Northern Ireland is a sovereign part of the United Kingdom, its Government and administration are a matter for this Parliament to decide. This does not necessarily mean that the Province will be governed in exactly the same way as other parts of the United Kingdom or that it must be governed exactly as the majority wish." Prior seems to have jumbled his text a little in reading at this point because he read the concluding sentence of his prepared draft as part of Reality No. 4. That sentence, which it is important to have on the record some way or the other, reads: "When it comes to the government and administration of Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom, there is no Unionist veto just as there is no nationalist veto."

4. "The government and administration of Northern Ireland must be undertaken in the light of the needs and the responses of the people there We recognise the sense of grievance and frustration which history has created in the minority community. So at the same time as we are committed to the support of the majority and their right to self-determination, we have to be equally committed to the minority. Arrangements should be directed at recognising the Irish identity, and at developing the minority's participation and confidence in all the structures and processes of Northern Ireland. There are aspects of our practices and administration which are not sensitive enough to those requirements and we are ready to discuss with the constitutional representatives of the minority community to identify what these are and see what we can do to help."

5. "Geography, as well as the fact that many people in Northern Ireland feel an allegiance to Dublin and to the Irish state, calls for a close relationship

between the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic." Prior cites historical, cultural, family and trade links, as well as common political principles. "We have a joint and abiding concern for the peace, stability and prosperity of these islands. We have a terrorist problem whose political creed knows no boundaries, and which is a problem and threat to both of us."

...all together, there is nothing in the
Future action ... to react negatively. Much of it

On the Anglo-Irish access, Prior, recognising that there is already a degree of institutional cooperation, says there are also ideas in many areas - security, economic, parliamentary - which are worth exploring for the benefits they will bring to all sides. He goes on to envisage a Parliamentary Tier between Westminster and the "Dail". There must, however, be no suspicion that these actions are in reality advancing the Republic constitutional claim, against the wishes and consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland. "The need for assurance and countering alienation is not all one way, and that is where Dr FitzGerald's recent interviews on TV and in the press have been valuable."

"The British Government", Prior says, "will want to have talks with each of the parties involved and with the Irish Government".

"Throughout all our talks we shall be testing whether, and if so in what way, those we meet wish to be involved with the arrangements which might be developed. Unionists can take part in the knowledge that the position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom is secure. Nationalists can do so knowing that we want to find an acceptable way to involve them and that we are concerned about the views which the Irish Government have expressed on their behalf."

"In addition, the Prime Minister will meet the Taoiseach before the end of the year. We want that to be a useful and constructive meeting."

Prior preferences: devolved administration

"It would complement well the development of normal Anglo-Irish relations. Within the various levels of administration in Northern Ireland, it should be possible fully to reflect the width of interest within both communities and to safeguard the concerns of each as well as recognising the British and Irish aspects."

Comment: Taken all together, there is nothing in the speech which should force us to react negatively. Much of it is at least complementary to the Realities and Requirements of the Forum Report and there are a number of important acknowledgements of our inadequacies in the situation of Northern nationalists. The speech dwells at some length on the need for talks and it is interesting to note that Hume, Paisley and Molyneaux all looked forward to talks, although the latter two did not see any role for Dublin in them. In fact the whole debate has created a general expectation that there will be talks of some sort and that may be the most significant public gain to emerge from it. (Note: It is interesting to note that Prior did not read a sentence in his text following his statement of intent to have talks with each of the parties involved and with the Irish Government. That sentence was: "These may lead in due course to the parties being brought together for discussions if that seems most helpful, although I have my reservations about any early move by us in that direction." He evidently thought it prudent not to include that sentence. There are good reasons for not doing so before the 12th July and indeed before creating what the Forum Report describes as the "framework and the atmosphere" for such discussions. Indeed, looked at in the perspective of the July marching season, it is rather striking that the tone and content of the Prior speech were as positive as they were.) All in all, it was a helpful performance on Prior's part, some of which may not be obvious to the Irish public.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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