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Brooke's Bangor Speech: reaction by the
Northern Ireland political parties

1. The Secretary of State's speech in Bangor on 9 January, indicating his intention to initiate "talks soon on new (devolutionary) arrangements for exercising political power within Northern Ireland", has evoked a mixed response in both communities. This note summarises the reaction to date.

Official Unionist Party

2. The varying reactions from Unionist spokesmen reflect the continuing uncertainty within Unionism about how best to advance their position. OUP leader James Molyneaux, after initially giving Brooke's speech what could be described as a "cautious welcome", subsequently appeared to revert to more negative language and by the weekend "sources close" to him were speaking in terms of "traps" and "NIO duplicity". Molyneaux himself is reported in Monday's (15 January) "Newsletter" as saying that a "power-sharing administration would be a puppet Government" and referred to such an arrangement as "unworkable".
3. John Taylor was somewhat more upbeat; he too, referred to "traps" but said that he was optimistic that they could be avoided. He added that any devolutionary arrangement would have to involve a "mechanism to improve Belfast/Dublin co-operation". (However the implication of his remarks was that the devolutionary arrangement would have to be in place first, before "Belfast/Dublin cooperation" could be explored). OUP MP William Ross said that he hoped Dublin and London were prepared to accept "that they cannot get a full-blown powersharing devolved legislative structure in Northern Ireland". OUP spokesmen emphasised that their opposition to talks while the Agreement and Secretariat continued to operate remained total.

4. More positive noises within the OUP came from Party Secretary Jim Wilson and Ken Maginnis. Wilson referred to "progress" having been made and Maginnis said that, in response to Brooke's speech, "Unionists should have the courage to take a risk" (in the interests of getting talks going).

Democratic Unionist Party

5. The DUP response has been similarly mixed. Party leader Ian Paisley was away when Brooke made his speech and the Party's initial response came from Peter Robinson. He said that "it was a very strong speech in support of devolved Government and he welcomed it to the extent of wishing to move forward the political process". Robinson's line was initially endorsed by Paisley on his return this week, when he said in a statement: "I welcome any move by the Secretary of State to return to the proper democratic process and to honour the ballot box". In a subsequent interview on Radio Ulster on 17 January, however, Paisley seemed to revert to more familiar "no surrender" language. While repeating (as he had done in his initial statement) that the "non-implementation" of the work of the Agreement and the "cessation" of the work of the Secretariat remained a precondition to dialogue, he also restated his opposition to any form of power-sharing. The general tone of his remarks was regarded as considerably less positive than his initial statement. (The presumption is that the statement was drafted by Robinson and the radio interview represented Paisley's own instinctive reaction).

Alliance

6. The Secretary of State's statement was welcomed by Alliance Party leader, John Alderdice, who said that it was possibly opening the "door to structures that might well transcend

the 1985 Agreement".

Conservatives

7. There has been no formal reaction to date from the Northern Ireland Conservatives. They can scarcely be comfortable with the idea of a Conservative Secretary of State promoting a policy of devolution, a point not lost on the Alliance Party, whose Chief Whip, Tom Campbell remarked: "The public have a right to know whether the local Tories are in favour of or are opposed to any plans which might be evolved for devolution in Northern Ireland".

SDLP

8. John Hume said that he was encouraged by the "current positive reaction from Unionists" and hoped that the Secretary of State was successful in bringing about dialogue between the parties. He made clear, however, that the SDLP does not favour a suspension of the Agreement and he called on the British Government to "stand firm against blackmail this time". Privately, Hume expressed annoyance at what he described as the "too-clever-by-half" attempt by Brooke to corner him on devolution (a reference to the section of the Secretary of State's speech on the SDLP's position in which he stated that SDLP politicians "have stressed to me that they are keen to bring (dialogue) about and to participate in it fully, with a view to achieving devolution"). He is also (as is Mallon) firmly opposed to any suspension of the Agreement.
9. Seamus Mallon said that the basic strategy of the SDLP on talks about devolution had been unaffected by Brooke's speech. Fundamental to that strategy, he said, was that Unionists should first enter into negotiations with the Irish Government, as it was only in this way that they could

assure themselves that an ultimate settlement would be stable. Privately, Mallon expressed concern that Brooke had been much too encouraging to the Unionists and that he was needlessly putting the Agreement at risk.

10. Eddie McGrady suggested that the parties should engage in a number of "pre-meetings" to try to reach agreement on the nature of the problems to be addressed, before entering full scale negotiations on possible solutions to the conflict.

Sinn Féin

11. Sinn Féin were critical of Brooke's speech. Spokesman Mitchel McLaughlin said that "British Government efforts to cobble together some sort of internal Six-County arrangement will not end the conflict or resolve the political instability". An Phoblacht suggested that Brooke had "removed some of the camouflage from the Hillsborough Agreement. He showed the true subservient nature of the Dublin Government in the pact and hinted that even this formal arrangement - much hyped by the SDLP - could be set aside in order to facilitate some new Stormont".

Comment

12. Brooke's speech, and reaction to it, received intense media coverage in the 2-3 days after its delivery. The "cautious welcome" afforded it by Unionist spokesmen was taken by several commentators as suggesting that "progress" was in the offing. The speech was overtaken as the main story at the weekend by the Belfast triple-killings and the latter has dominated media coverage of Northern Ireland this week. Meanwhile, the more negative tones emanating by the weekend from the Molyneaux camp and Paisley's "Radio Ulster" interview, will also have served to reduce some of the initial optimism engendered by the speech.

13. A major difficulty for the Unionists in formulating a response to the Secretary of State is that the Anti-Agreement pact between the OUP and DUP appears under ever increasing strain. This week's bitter attack by the OUP's John Taylor on the DUP will certainly have increased the tensions. He described the DUP as a "party in decline" and a "party of stunts". Taylor said that "it is unrealistic for the DUP to seek a solution which will give Stormont power over all security forces, including the British Army, and to have Ian Paisley as Prime Minister".
14. Taylor's comments reflect widespread concern throughout the OUP about the continued close association with the DUP. For their part, many DUP members are also unhappy with the Pact, believing that it cost them considerable support in 1989's two elections. Indeed, it is widely believed that the Pact is now confined to the two leaders. It is questionable as to how much longer even they can retain it in the face of such widespread antipathy towards it from within their own party ranks. And even if the Pact is retained for the purposes of renewed contacts with the Secretary of State (on the basis that a unilateral approach by each party would undermine further the position of Unionism), the unease within both parties about the Pact must raise serious question marks about the Unionists' ability to sustain a unified stance in any negotiating process.
15. A further source of concern for the OUP in particular as they prepare for the next round of talks with Peter Brooke is the continuing profile being enjoyed by the Northern Ireland Conservatives. A serious worry for the OUP must be that if the present Brooke initiative (if it can be called that) fails, the prospects of another being attempted for some considerable time must be regarded as remote; in that scenario the appeal of the Conservatives' argument that the

best interests of Unionists lie in greater integration (and by extension in backing the Conservatives) will undoubtedly be considerably enhanced.

16. Privately, the SDLP are sceptical about the Brooke initiative being successful, certainly in the short term. There is a sense that he is attempting to "jump too many fences at once". Moreover, the SDLP consider that the Unionists, particularly the two leaders, are not remotely close to making the kind of concessions on an Irish dimension and on power-sharing which would be necessary if there were to be any prospect of serious negotiations. At the same time, the SDLP are conscious of the danger of being manoeuvred into a position where they are perceived as the main obstacles to progress (there have already been some media hintings along such lines). However the remarks this week by Molyneaux and Paisley would suggest that this danger, if it ever existed, is already receding.

Anglo-Irish Division
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