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Unionist Party Leader Molyneaux's address to his Party's 1991 Conference and subsequent interviews

True to form Mr. Molyneaux delivered a rather elliptical address to his Party's Conference on 26 October. However, the signals he gave were sufficiently probed in subsequent RTE and BBC radio interviews to give a clearer picture of where Mr. Molyneaux stands on the major political issues.

1. Talks Process

On the question of future talks, Mr. Molyneaux in his address to his Party once again laid emphasis on what he saw as his common ground with Secretary of State Brooke quoting him on 3 July as referring to the hope that it might be possible for "fresh talks to take place". The Secretary of State, according to Molyneaux never used the word "resume" in regard to talks. They were ad idem in being prepared "to put the past behind".

The now familiar theme of talks at Westminster was presented in Mr. Molyneaux's address: "these discussions should broaden to include senior and junior Ministers from various Whitehall departments and with other parties". The type of issues involved in such talks at Westminster would appear to be confined to functional issues.

In this regard in his BBC interview Mr. Molyneaux alluded to the three party approach on the Belfast Shipyard and continued "...that's why I say that if we are allowed to engage in that kind of thing, starting at that kind of level without some outside authority posing the formal question - now before we go anywhere chaps, tell me to which nation do you want to belong? - pose that question and the whole thing goes down the drain, that's got to be avoided".

Mr. Molyneaux's agenda would therefore appear to be limited to more effective direct rule. He underlined this by referring in both interviews to improving "the governance of Northern Ireland". He gave no indication of any interest in reaching accommodation on the fundamentals to the problem. Ironically the only quotation used in his speech was from Brian Faulkner when he [Faulkner] attempted to justify the exclusion of the SDLP from government on the grounds of their nationalist aspirations.

While it has been known for some time that Mr. Molyneux was unenthusiastic about the talks process which was launched last March, he admitted clearly in his interview with RTE that entering into the talks process was "against our better judgement". When challenged specifically on the future of the three strand approach Mr. Molyneux said:

"No, I wouldn't base it on that [three strands] because I think if you make it conditional on nothing being agreed until everything is agreed, the answer to that, again, is you get nowhere"

To the BBC he said,

"it was actually the three strand circus act which made the thing top heavy and wrecked the whole operation.... To me it was always a great flaw that one strand was dependent on the other and the other so-called understanding which was never very sensible, that nothing would be agreed until everything is agreed."

In summary, on the question of future talks between the N.I. parties it is difficult to see Mr. Molyneux as offering anything but very low level discussions on functional issues and even that aimed at improving direct rule and not developing new institutions beyond giving more power to local Government in the North - a favourite theme of integrationists.

2. Relations with Dublin and the Irish Dimension

Molyneux did not devote any of his speech at the Unionist Conference to relations within Ireland. His main reference to "Dublin" was to suggest that British Ministers had become aware of the difficulty in linking their comparatively stable political system "with a permanently unstable system" in Dublin. According to Molyneux, political instability was guaranteed by proportional representation in elections here.

In his interviews, by dismissing the three strand approach, Mr. Molyneux was implicitly rejecting the thesis of the three relationships vital for a solution. Indeed nowhere in his comments over the weekend does Mr. Molyneux allow for any type of all-Ireland dimension. Again, true to his integrationist instincts, he promotes the idea of a new British-Irish Agreement giving "Dublin far more say and influence in the UK in total..... if we are going to accept the principle of interfering in each other's territory, the Dublin

Government ought to have the power and the right to interfere in all the affairs of the United Kingdom and there ought to be a reciprocal right in the British Government to interfere in the internal affairs of the Irish Republic" (BBC interview). This is presumably a reference back to the Unionist position as outlined at Strand One of the talks that Irish and British governments could represent the rights of their citizens in the other's jurisdiction.

3. The Union

In his speech Mr. Molyneux put great store by what he detected as a realisation by British Ministers that the Anglo-Irish Agreement had been a mistake and referred to Foreign Secretary Hurd's recent speech en marge of the Tory party Conference in this regard. Clearly Mr. Molyneux's message was that the Union had been strengthened and that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was being superceded (interestingly Peter Robinson of the DUP has challenged Mr. Molyneux's confidence on this point).

Nevertheless, in spite of his confidence in the strength of "the Union", in a rather strange reference to Europe in his speech, Molyneux seemed to suggest that Westminster and the British people by way of a general election might surrender sovereignty to Europe following an agreement in Maastricht. In that event Westminster would have "lost its authority to continue to impose direct rule and, for that matter, the Anglo-Irish Agreement". In such a situation the Unionist Party would stake its "right to regional administration in Europe."

4. Other issues

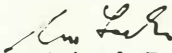
Mr. Molyneux said he didn't see much prospect of a hung Parliament after the next British election and dismissed the idea of Unionists 'doing a deal' with any of the British parties. However, commentators tended to feel that this may be a case of the man protesting too much.

Talking to the BBC Mr. Molyneux denied there were real differences between the UUP and DUP: "We are on a twintrack system, our policies are identical on the need to replace the present Agreement with a wider British-Irish Agreement, in the need to have more power returned to the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, there is absolutely no difference between us."

5. Assessment

It is difficult to take anything positive out of Mr. Molyneaux's speech or interviews over the weekend even if due consideration is given to the circumstances of a Party conference. He repudiated the basis of the talks process and returned his focus to inter party talks at Westminster to improve the "governance of Northern Ireland". There was no acknowledgement of an Irish dimension even in a diluted form - no reference even to "friendly neighbour" cross border co-operation. Instead he trotted out his old proposal of a British-Irish agreement which would presumably address citizens rights in either country as referred to by him in the talks last June.

Overall, he made no attempt to disguise his wholly integrationalist aims; it would appear that he feels the present political climate in Britain more receptive to these aims than in the past.



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