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M.C.A. Oliver
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NOTE OF MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE HELD IN STORMONT CASTLE ON TUESDAY 26 MARCH 1974

Present

Secretary of State for Northern
Ireland
Permanent Under Secretary of
State
Principal Private Secretary
Mr D Gilliland, NIO
Information Service

Chief Minister
Minister of Commerce
Minister for Law Reform
Minister of Agriculture
Minister of Education
Minister for the Environment
Minister of Finance
Minister of Health and Social Services
Minister of Housing, Local Government
and Planning
Minister of Information
Minister of Community Relations
Minister for Co-ordination and Planning
Minister for Manpower Services
Chief Whip
Secretary to the Executive
Deputy Secretary to the Executive
Head of Press Services
Principal Private Secretary

1. Introductory

The Secretary of State welcomed the Northern Ireland Executive on its first visit as a body to see him. The Chief Minister apologised for the unavoidable absence of the Deputy Chief Minister.

The Secretary of State said that the meeting would be of value to him as there was still a marked lack of knowledge about Northern Ireland among those based in Great Britain. Only those resident in Northern Ireland could make a full assessment of the position and even more important only they could solve the problems of the country. He and his colleagues were reconsidering the Government's wider policy in relation to Northern Ireland and he would be expected to report to the House of Commons at an early date - possibly on the Thursday of the following week. On the question of security he had commissioned a full review by the Service Chiefs and indeed he had had a lengthy discussion with them immediately before the meeting. On the general political front, Sunningdale was still the basis for progress, and the House of Commons was firmly behind it. If there was any disagreement, it was from a small group of MPs - few in proportion to the volume of public support behind them - expressing the view that the Government should pull out of Northern Ireland altogether. There was at the moment no real leadership for this movement but there was evidence that there was substantial support among the public. All parties to the Sunningdale Agreement would have to implement their obligations. While the military solution could not be ignored, it was, in his opinion, of less importance than the political solution.

The Secretary of State referred to the increase in violence in recent weeks and asked for the views of the Executive as to the cause, which he thought might possibly be one of the following:-

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- (1) A political vacuum caused by the general lack of progress on Sunningdale.
- (2) The General Election results in Northern Ireland.
- (3) The outturn of the General Election as a whole with the possibility that there was little confidence in Northern Ireland for a Labour administration.
- (4) The 'Provisionals' determination to use force as a means of pushing their way into politics. .

He wondered whether the upsurge of violence would have occurred regardless of these considerations, because the Executive posed a threat to those who believed in the use of violence for the achievement of their own ends.

In the three weeks since he had taken up office he had been disturbed by the apparent apathy of a large number of the public. Community involvement appeared to be light and so long as a particular district remained relatively immune from violence the people living in it seem to take little interest in the problem of adjoining areas or in the general political and security problems affecting the Province. He saw the emergence of the United Loyalist group in the Commons as causing little difficulty as the three major Parties were united in their support for Sunningdale. He was confident that he could get their support for the Executive, to which he offered all possible help in re-establishing itself and reasserting its authority.

The Chief Minister expressed his appreciation for the new Government's goodwill for the Northern Ireland Executive and what it had been doing under the Constitution Act and the Sunningdale Agreement. He accepted that there was a lack of public interest in political developments but put this down to the continuing and increasing violence which dominated people's thinking. In his view, the escalation in recent weeks was due to an effort by the men of violence on both sides to down-grade and indeed kill off the Executive which had been making progress up to the time of the General Election but which had been brought to a halt and had lost its initiative at that time.

The Minister of Commerce saw the escalation of violence as being variously attributable to:-

- (1) The Provisional IRA being so decimated over recent months that it had had to mount its campaign in sporadic fashion and one of these efforts was being experienced at present.
- (2) The Provisionals' determination to give the new Labour Government a rough "welcome" to shake its resolve.
- (3) The United Loyalist victory in the Westminster Elections, which had created the impression for the time being that Sunningdale had been discredited.

The Minister for Law Reform saw the recurring violence as a swing back from the beginnings of despair by the IRA up to the time of the General Election. The uncertainty since then, however, had given them an incentive for "one last shove" which, they thought, would bring down the power-sharing concept and force Great Britain to wash its hands of Northern Ireland. The IRA had not worked out what institutions would fill the place of those abolished. While there was no evidence of joint action between the Provisional IRA and the Protestant extremist groups, he saw a community of interest in which the

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Short-term objective of both was to break down the Executive before it came firmly established and accepted.

The Secretary of State reminded the Executive that while the victory of the 11 United Loyalists had been trumpeted throughout Northern Ireland it would have little effect at Westminster where they were only 11 out of a combined total of 635 members. Apart from wielding a voting power in certain circumstances, they would make little impact.

The Chief Minister accepted that the effects of their victory were disproportionate to their numerical strength but nevertheless he feared that the effects had seriously slowed down the momentum of the Executive's work and could only be overcome by sustained progress over the next six months.

The Minister for the Environment said that security was the key to the solution and that the recent upsurge of violence had helped the anti-Sunningdale cause - every bomb and bullet being worth 1,000 votes to those who believed in that cause. It was not just a case of hardline extremists voting against Sunningdale. In his own constituency, with a substantial block of votes which in normal times would be labelled 'liberal' or 'moderate', he had found the anti-Sunningdale votes coming through in strong numbers. This was a signal to the Executive to put the brakes on political developments until there had been some success on the security front.

The Secretary of State enquired whether the failure of security measures was attributable to the Republic or to the UK Government and the Minister for the Environment said that he thought both were to blame, while the Executive - which had no powers on security - was being held responsible by the public. He saw little evidence of the bona fides of the Dublin Government, with no movement on extradition and little sign of positive cross-border co-operation. As to the UK Government, he accepted that in dealing with violence they had to balance the possibility of antagonising large sections of the community against giving "a free run" to terrorists. He felt it was not for him to suggest strategy and tactics to the security forces but merely to acquaint them, through the Secretary of State, with the problem. He would suggest, however, that people generally were prepared to accept inconvenience, even hardship, to achieve better security results. If there was no diminution of violence, if the present level were to be accepted by the UK Government, present institutions could not flourish.

The Chief Minister explained that the Executive had hoped that the new institutions would have led to a reduction in violence but in the three months so far this had not been the case. The Army therefore should not be inhibited in its campaign against the terrorists.

Pointing out that any difference of opinion between himself and the Minister for the Environment was not indicative of any split in the Executive, the Minister of Health and Social Services gave as his view that there were several sources of the present violence:-

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- (1) The standstill after the Sunningdale Agreement Stage 1.
- (2) A massive attempt by the Provisionals to force through a form of truce by their own strength as they had done in the Summer of 1972.
- (3) The activities and utterances of certain Assembly Members (who were abstaining from the Assembly for most purposes) which often seemed to stimulate crime.
- (4) A general pattern of thuggery, where easy money could be obtained by intimidation and armed robberies.

The SDLP recognised that violence would not disappear overnight and he suggested that as the legislative powers of the Executive were severely restricted, one solution would be a major financial boost from the UK Government to give it credibility. He believed that the present institutions should go ahead in spite of violence and that, when conditions had become more settled and the freak results of the Elections had passed into the background, there should be a referendum.

The Minister for Manpower Services said that before the General Election there had been some evidence of the breaking up of the various Loyalists groups but the Election campaign and its results had brought a temporary unity. Time and progress would again bring a split between the different elements. He agreed with the Minister for the Environment that there was a public demand for a hard line against terrorism but disagreed that the public would itself accept inconvenience. He had an open mind on a referendum as it would be normal to have two positive choices in the referendum whereas here at the moment there seemed to be only a positive choice - for Sunningdale - and a negative choice - against Sunningdale - but with no real alternative. The Election results in his opinion were second choices or negative choices. It was up to the Executive to pin down the Loyalists as to what their alternative proposals were.

The Minister of Housing, Local Government and Planning said that he saw the aim of extremists of both sides as being to bring down the power-sharing Executive. The Provisional IRA was certainly trying to give the impression that it could impose a solution by force. The General Election could not have come at a worse possible date, but it had been a high water mark of Loyalist opposition to Sunningdale. The Executive must get the "show back on the road" quickly. The Sunningdale Agreement had not fully satisfied any of the Parties to it but it was the best possible compromise and the UK Government must continue to underpin it and the Irish Government to honour its obligations. It was evident that some pro-Assembly Unionists had lost confidence and the Rev Paisley was manipulating and playing on these fears and intimidating the waverers. The Executive must recover its pre-election momentum and regain control of the Assembly. He would be quite happy to see a referendum and to have his policies accepted or rejected openly. He saw no real hope in a military solution of the present security problem as, if it was possible for terrorists to penetrate the protected centre of Belfast, there could be no such solution without completely stifling the business and commercial life of the country.

out of their responsibilities and cited a noticeable lack of support for the UDR. People in Northern Ireland had always tended to opt out of politics and because they did not participate, to maintain bigoted attitudes. He thought that the Secretary of State would find it surprising that well-educated moderate progressive people were adopting hardline attitudes in present circumstances. He did, however, see one gleam of hope in that Mr Hugh Smith of the Vanguard party wanted to resume his activities in the Assembly against the general attitude of the United Loyalist group. It must be made clear throughout Northern Ireland that the Executive wielded much more power than the 11 United Loyalist MPs at Westminster. In the last 2 years, however, there had been radical change and it was understandable that the public had not yet accepted the new arrangements.

The Minister of Finance made reference to a speech by the present Secretary of State, while in opposition at the time Direct Rule was introduced, and while commending his foresight on the various subjects mentioned, pointed out that security was no better in the two years since that time.

The Minister of Community Relations agreed with the Minister of Health and Social Services that the Provisional IRA seemed to be striving for the same position of bargaining through strength as they had achieved in June/July 1972. He accepted that the General Election results showed a protest vote but he was convinced that there must be no going back on Sunningdale. On the security problem he thought that saturation by troops was not the answer, that the Roman Catholic population wanted to reject the IRA but could not trust itself to do so until there was proper policing and full confidence in the Police.

The Minister for Co-ordination and Planning did not believe that there was a military solution and that the support of the guerillas must be removed. On the other side, loyalist extremists could be undermined by the success of the new institutions.

The Secretary of State recalled that he had made his position clear about not holding discussions with the IRA. He referred to the large number of people enjoying an easy life through violence and intimidation in what was virtually a "Chicago" situation and wondered whether this undercurrent of violence would go on even after internment had been phased out and political institutions firmly established.

The Minister for Manpower Services thought that once the cloak of respectability presently available was removed these underground elements would quickly disappear.

The Minister of Commerce on the other hand thought that the troubles would not end instantaneously, as the major riots of 1920/22 drifted on spasmodically until 1927. He thought however, that it would be easier to deal with minor outbreaks once the major problem had been solved.

The Chief Minister believed that once real violence had ended both communities would co-operate to exterminate minor violence and intimidation.

The Minister of Education referred to the good work done by his department and of the need for better coverage and more resources for the process of rehabilitation.

The Chief Minister reminded the Secretary of State that all the former Ministry of Home Affairs services concerned with prisoners and their aftercare had now been transferred to the Northern Ireland Office.

The PUS said that the machinery for the rehabilitation of prisoners was in existence and he would be ensuring that it was working properly. He wished "to make some other points:-

- (1) He noted that there was a large measure of agreement at the meeting on the analysis of the current situation and agreed that the new institutions were at their lowest ebb and operating in a political vacuum. Both the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic had been standing still for some weeks.
- (2) It was necessary for the Executive to get back into the position of dominance it had achieved before the General Election and this must be demonstrated both by constructive acts in the Assembly and by backing from Her Majesty's Government.
- (3) There was no straight answer to the security problem - a position which was true of all guerilla situations. Political and security situations must be considered together and while a security review was in progress, in his opinion political achievement was even more important.

The Minister for Law Reform said that in his constituency of East Belfast there was much gangster activity although none of it by established illegal organisations on the Protestant side. He was not happy that the machinery for handling the mis-called "political crimes" was working properly. A new political initiative was necessary either through legislation passed at Westminster or "consent legislation" passed at Stormont for reserved matters.

The Secretary of State agreed to look at the pattern of legislation and to discuss with the Chief Minister. He went on to summarise his views that "the show must be got back on the road" and that power-sharing and the other concepts of Sunningdale must be reinforced. He looked to the Executive for more positive achievements and the use of the media to acclaim those achievements. More time must be bought for the Executive and he would certainly do all in his power to achieve this. He saw security as being his ultimate responsibility with the Army and the Police offering him advice which he had to balance against other considerations. In general he would like to see fewer soldiers on the streets of Northern Ireland as the rotation of units on a four-month basis was not the best approach either to the security problem in Northern Ireland or

to the use of Army manpower generally. Such a reduction of Army strength would however, have to be complemented by a strengthening of the Police Force.

The Chief Minister intervened to express concern at the suggested force reduction as, in the known absence of any major strengthening of the police, there was a danger that Northern Ireland would be "left naked".

The Secretary of State accepted this view but in the long-term thought that it was wrong to keep 15,000 soldiers in Northern Ireland with no real attempt to improve policing.

The Minister of Health and Social Services agreed with the Chief Minister that there should be no reduction of Army force levels without full consultation with the Chief Minister and the Executive.

The Secretary of State said that he was giving thought to the weakening of certain groups by involving them in politics and this could mean legalising the Sinn Fein organisation.

The Chief Minister said that this could be very dangerous for the SDLP Members who had shown great courage in their recent political advances.

The Minister of Housing on the other hand said that he preferred to fight any political opponent through the ballot box.

The Secretary of State pointed out that should the Emergency Powers Act not be renewed, there was no ready alternative and a brief discussion ensued on the possibility of releases from internment. On the question of finance the Secretary of State assumed that the Executive was drawing up its programme and that the UK Government would give it sympathetic treatment. The Executive had almost four further years to run and during that time it must prove itself. It was however, eventually up to the people of the Province to decide how they wanted to be governed.

The Chief Minister recalled the support of the Secretary of State in and out of office for the new political arrangements. He was concerned, however, that at Westminster there always seemed to be an undercurrent of suggestion that some renegotiation of the Constitution Act might be possible. He thought that this was dangerous and was being exploited by the United Loyalist Group.

The Secretary of State confirmed that there was no intention to depart from the Constitution Act but the real problem would arise should the present power-sharing arrangements break down, leaving him with no workable alternative. He concluded by

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thanking the Executive for putting their views to him so fully and frankly and hoped that it would be possible to have further meetings at frequent intervals.

L S DUNCAN

5 April 1974

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