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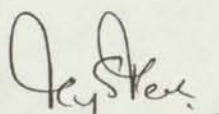
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PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - m

cc: PS/Ministers (L&B) - m
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L) - m
PS/PUS (L&B) - m
PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Brennan o/r - m
Mr Stephens
Mr Chesterton - m
Mr Merifield
Mr Carvill
Miss Elliott - m
Mr Bell - m
Mr Blackwell
Mr G Hewitt
Mr Ehrman - m

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

At Mr Merifield's suggestion, I attach a background paper which assesses the current attitudes of Northern Ireland parties to a possible Anglo-Irish agreement. The Secretary of State may find this useful in the context of the meeting he is holding this Friday.


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Political Affairs Division

11 September 1985

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NORTHERN IRELAND: STATE OF THE PARTIESIntroduction

1. Voting patterns in Northern Ireland are almost wholly determined by the question of national identity. The overwhelming majority of Protestants support one of the two main unionist parties whilst a similarly large proportion of Catholics vote for either the SDLP or Sinn Fein. Within the two tribal groups loyalty to the cause is of paramount importance so that, although opinion polls frequently suggest that individual attitudes are far more moderate than those espoused by the main political parties, electoral support for the middle ground has rarely exceeded ten per cent. When the two communities feel under pressure, such support can fall even lower: in 1985, the Alliance vote was down to seven per cent and almost entirely confined to the Greater Belfast area. Since every election is regarded as a referendum on the border, it is virtually impossible for people to break away from their traditional voting patterns.

2. Inter-party rivalry in both camps further undermines moderate politics and helps to produce cautious and conservative leadership. Public opinion is volatile and can easily be stirred up by particular incidents or issues. During the Hunger Strike, for example, attitudes soon became deeply polarised and few Catholics were prepared to openly condemn the protest even though a majority of them opposed the activities of the IRA. Similarly in 1974 at the time of the Ulster Workers Strike, Protestant support for the power-sharing executive quickly evaporated under pressure from extremist elements. A terrorist murder, or an alleged 'shoot to kill' incident, can similarly stimulate sharp community reactions, destroying in the process any developing understanding between the two communities.

Broad Approach of Parties

3. The prime objective of the two main unionist parties is to maintain Northern Ireland's position as part of the United Kingdom. Although united in their opposition to Sinn Fein and the continuing Anglo-Irish negotiations the current pact between the UUP and DUP masks considerable differences of approach on the question of internal political development.

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The DUP supports the restoration of devolved powers believing that a local administration would represent the best defence against a united Ireland. They have spoken about the need to protect minority interests but at bottom see democracy in terms of unallayed majority rule, refuse to offer the SDLP a front line position in any future devolved administration and strongly oppose the idea of 'power-sharing'. In the Ulster Unionist Party, support for devolution is strongest at grass roots level. Amongst the leadership, the UUP is now dominated by integrationists partly because senior members of the party no longer believe that devolution can be secured on terms acceptable to unionists and partly because devolution is seen as a tool for eventual British disengagement from the North. This trend has been reinforced by the presence of 11 UUP MPs at Westminster. The arguments within the UUP and their failure to make any specific proposals for minority participation, make it difficult to take 'The Way Forward' seriously despite the generosity of its language. In any event The Way Forward rested on ideas for devolving very limited areas of administration. This concept has not been clearly spelled out and in the absence of any positive presentation of ^arole for SDLP, has struck nationalist politicians as a return to the majority manipulation of local government rather than as a constructive initiative.

4. Under the leadership of John Hume, the SDLP has turned its back on the idea of a purely internal settlement based on power-sharing and now insists that Northern Ireland's problems must be solved within an all-Ireland context. In Mr Hume's terms this is a return to the three R's (reform, reconciliation and, in time, reunification). In his Deputy Leader Seamus Mallon's words the approach represents evolution to a United Ireland. This shift of emphasis has resulted in part from the continuing refusal of the unionist parties to countenance the involvement (except in a minority capacity) of the SDLP in any devolved structure but also reflects the general hardening of attitudes within the minority community caused by the Hunger Strike. The emergence of Sinn Fein in the last five years has significantly reduced both the SDLP's room for manoeuvre and the influence of moderate elements within the party. Nevertheless, the SDLP remains a broad coalition of nationalist opinion held together by its opposition to the use of violence and its loyalty and respect for Mr Hume. They welcome the current Anglo-Irish dialogue which they see as a vindication of the Forum approach and as an opportunity to secure an Irish influence on Northern politics.

The Current Scene

5. For nearly a year, Northern Ireland politics have been dominated by the Anglo-Irish dialogue. Frequent press speculation about the scope and content of the talks has served to fuel unionist fears and to raise hopes within the minority community. The effect has been to place local politics into suspended animation with all parties refusing to commit themselves until the negotiations are completed and they have had an opportunity to see how any agreement will work out in practice. Although there have been attempts this year to move the political debate forward - by employing Mr Patten as an 'intermediary' between the party leaders - it became apparent at an early stage that none of the parties were prepared to go beyond their public positions of principle. Attempts to establish whether there was any room for compromise on a structure for devolved government failed to draw any response.

6. Failure to reach agreement with the Irish Government would be welcomed by the unionist parties who would almost certainly react with the same air of triumphalism which accompanied the outcome of last November's Chequers Summit. There is no reason to believe that, having got what they wanted on Anglo-Irish relations (ie a breakdown) they would be prepared to be more generous in dealings with the SDLP over any internal arrangements. For the SDLP (and for John Hume in particular) the breakdown of the bilateral talks would be a bitter blow. It would undoubtedly strengthen the hand of the 'greener' elements within the party and might well damage the SDLP's long term electoral prospects. But in the short term at least, it is likely that Mr Hume will be able to hold his party together and to prevent any serious fragmentation. Although the party might be coaxed back into the political action by government moves which demonstrate a willingness to take practical steps to recognise the nationalist identity (and thus 'take on' the unionists) it would be highly suspicious of attempts to draw them into a future assembly unless it was on terms closely akin to those of 1974.

7. A successful outcome to the talks would clearly have a major impact on Northern Ireland politics. The SDLP would clearly wish to present the agreement as a significant first step in an evolutionary

process leading towards Irish unity. Great play would be made of the extent to which HMG is seen to react in response to Irish representations and the party would encourage the greatest possible Republic of Ireland activity on behalf of the nationalist community in the North. They have indicated, however, that they would be prepared to consider participating in some form of internal political arrangement but would insist initially on 'nothing less' than the power sharing role offered in 1974. They would wish, in any case, to secure a mandate for participation from their electorate. Some doubt still remains about the timing which the SDLP would prefer and some leading members of the party have suggested that October 1986 is likely to be too soon to offer the electorate a chance of voting on Anglo-Irishry and a devolved system of government in the Province. But despite this declared willingness to involve themselves in the search for a devolved structure, the SDLP's first preference would be for the introduction of proportional voting for Westminster seats coupled with the continuation of direct rule and the development of whatever Anglo Irish arrangements flow from the conclusion of an agreement.

8. An Anglo-Irish agreement will leave the unionist community with a deep sense of anger, frustration and uncertainty. With no other prospect in view, unionist politicians can be expected to mount a major challenge to the implementation of the agreement and street protests, similar to the Ulster Worker's Strike of 1974, remain a possibility. The UULF still remains waiting in the wings although Messrs Molyneaux and Paisley have managed to keep themselves at arms length from an organisation which embraces loyalist paramilitaries. They have, however, allowed leading members of both parties to become more closely associated with the Front. Much will depend on the presentation of the Anglo-Irish agreement in nationalist circles in both the South and the North. Unless the unionist community see some constructive proposals which would involve their representatives in the administration of the Province they are likely to be drawn into introspective anger based upon their opposition to Anglo-Irishry and what they will see as a diminution of sovereignty de facto if not de jure.

E.R.

e Assembly

9. Against this background the Assembly is likely to go into progressive decline. It has already become short of work and as uncertainty over their future grows some key members may begin to look elsewhere for alternative employment. The Alliance Party has already served notice that it will withdraw from the Assembly if that body is used as the focal point for protest against the development of Anglo-Irish relations or for intemperate debates upon security policy. The UUP remains luke-warm.

Sinn Fein

10. The continued existence of Sinn Fein coupled with unionist accusation of government 'double standards' creates offence on both sides of the community divide. To date, Sinn Fein has been able to sit back and reap the publicity benefits of unionist activities at council level. It has also managed to blur the distinction between itself and the SDLP to the detriment of the latter.

Conclusion

11. As the above analysis suggests, the nature of politics in Northern Ireland is a constant struggle to avoid 'victories' going between one side or the other. The 'victories' need not necessarily be particular benefits but can also relate to 'symbolic' actions which assume an importance far beyond their reality - ie the 'Derry' name change issue. The experiences of recent years has shown that politicians from both sides are unable, by themselves, to resolve their basic differences and move towards a compromise, of politics. It is therefore necessary for government to discharge its responsibilities by taking firm action. A continuation of the present status quo is clearly unacceptable.

12. From the Belfast point of view, therefore, it would be essential for the government to take the lead whether or not the Anglo-Irish talks succeed. Local politicians, from whatever side should not be allowed the luxury of sitting back and assessing the results (or otherwise) of the present talks. We will need to have a clear policy line on political development within Northern Ireland which should be made public as soon as possible.

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