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*Mr Conitt
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REPORT ON THE AIRLIE CONFERENCE, WARRENTON, USA: 6-9 JANUARY 1985

The Committee for a New Ireland held a conference on Northern Ireland at Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, from 6-9 January 1985. It was arranged by Professor Padraig O'Malley and followed two similar conferences held in Boston, the last in March 1984. Mr Patten represented the British Government accompanied by Sir Alan Goodison (FMA Dublin), Mr Bloomfield, Mr Barrie (PCO, RID) and myself. Mr Sheinwald (Washington) and Mr Beattie (BIS, New York) completed the official group. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Noonan, the Minister of Justice. Mr Quinn, the Irish Minister for Labour, attended as a member of the Irish Labour Party. All the main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland, the Republic and in Great Britain were represented, although Pianna Fail not officially so. This was the first of these conferences attended by the DUP. The rest of the conference was made up of a group of American guests, including academics, journalists and policy advisers all with some knowledge of Irish affairs, and some other British academics and commentators. Altogether about 80 people were present.

The conference was well but intensively organised. It was cited comfortably in the Virginia countryside well away from other distractions. There were 3 sessions a day, starting at about 9.00am and finishing at about 7.00pm with about an hour for lunch. All were chaired by Mr O'Malley. There was a representative panel of 8-10 people for each session, all of whom made a statement lasting about 10-15 minutes; each then asked a question of another panelist and questions and statements were invited from the floor. The panelists were all British or Irish politicians and with one or two very minor exceptions, they were also the sole contributors from the floor.

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The subjects covered by the sessions were economic realities; aspirations and identities; recently published documents; British Government policy; consent; security; and Anglo-Irish relations. Brief papers were prepared and presented by academics from Britain and from Ireland in advance of the panelists' statements.

Much of the discussion was on familiar and well-worn lines. The main thesis of the Nationalist representatives was that their position had been comprehensively and generously stated in the Forum Report, and that it was now up to the British Government to decide what to do. Mr Quinn said that the ball was now in the British Government's court. Most of Mr Mallon's interventions involved pointing out that the only people who could now act was the British Government. Mr Patten successfully deflected the pressure by a statement of the Government's present position, while recognising that if the present round of inter-party talks was not successful, then the Government would have to continue to act as the sovereign power.

The Government's position was considerably strengthened by the skilled presentations of the Unionists. In particular, Mr Robinson's presentation of his party's wish for talks with the SDLP without pre-conditions made a considerable impact. The official Unionists were less direct, but they did not reject the concept of inter-party talks in Northern Ireland. Mr Hume's response was prevaricating and unconvincing. Without specifically rejecting the invitation, he said that while he was always ready to have talks, there would need first to be agreement on the basic problem (which he saw as transcending Northern Ireland) and an agreed agenda. He saw no prospect at present of an agenda being agreed. Before an audience which was overwhelming sympathetic to the Nationalist position, there was some incipient suspicion of what

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became known as Airlie House Unionism, but by the end of the conference most seemed satisfied of Mr Robinson's sincerity and were probably impressed by the quality of his performance. Mr Hume's response must therefore have been a disappointment. He must be judged to be the main casualty of the conference. It will have increased observers' concern about the future of the SDLP.

A number of spectres stalked the conference. Sinn Fein was absent; but its appeal and its threat to constitutional politics were recognised. There was the familiar argument that Sinn Fein would gain by the failure to reach a settlement. It was suggested that any settlement had to take account of those who voted for Sinn Fein. Both Mr Noonan and Mr McCartney spoke in apocalyptic terms about the threat of terrorist violence to the island of Ireland. No mention was made about the threat in Great Britain, or to the Brighton bombing.

The other spectre was Mr Haughey. Would any development which was not acceptable to him likely to survive his return to office? And could the unionists safely make any move which put them more at the mercy of Mr Haughey's irridentist claims? Some suggested that Mr Haughey might well be different in Government, and Mr Patten thought that the process of developing Anglo-Irish relations was irreversible. But the doubts remained.

There was no-one present from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Mr McCartney argued forcibly for a pluralist society throughout the island of Ireland; and the Irish Republic politicians present seemed generally sympathetic to the prospect of making the Republic's constitution and practices more pluralist and less tied to the Church. But while the

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point was barely touched on most observers seemed to recognise that these were aspirations which were at best very long term.

There were a number of other themes running through the conference:

- i) consent. Discussion of this formed the most interesting session, and the theme was returned to on a number of occasions. The different areas of consent were recognised. On the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, the unionists argued that their strength lay not in the law, but in their position as the majority. Predictably Mr Hume was not prepared to recognise the constitutional guarantee - the aim should be to maximise consensus among all those involved, but no-one's wish should be paramount. The Unionists tried not to be drawn on whether they would accept constitutional change if and when Nationalists formed a voting majority in Northern Ireland. It would depend on whether Nationalists had recognised the democratic rights of the Unionists majority in the intervening period. Most people seemed to accept that while consent was paramount, the transformation of Unionists from a voting majority to a substantial minority in Northern Ireland would not effect the central problem.

Most people seemed also to recognise that the constitutional guarantee did not extend to the form of Government and administration in Northern Ireland.

There was little emphasis, however, on the concept of

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wide-spread acceptance throughout the community. The official Unionists present, in particular Mr McCartney, were obviously attracted to the idea that the British Government should make the decision. Miss Short wanted the British out and a series of co-operative structures with the Republic which would in effect make the constitutional guarantee meaningless. Mr Mallon represented the official SDLP position that it was for the British Government to decide with the Irish Government what should be done. Mr Robinson's advocacy of inter-party talks in Northern Ireland countered this view; as, perhaps more unexpectedly, did Mr Currie forceful intervention that "we are our own men and women in Northern Ireland ... I want a say in deciding my future".

- ii) Unification. Most Nationalists present seemed to accept that the traditional concept of re-unification was not realistic. Even the aspiration was not a territorial claim, but a wish to bring about the unity of the people of Ireland. It was an appeal to the hearts of the people of Northern Ireland, not to their land. Mr McCartney was sympathetic to this concept. Mr Allistair, however, made it clear that his heart was British, and it would not soften to the blandishments of the Republic. Mr Wilson made much of the irridentist claim in Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. Professor Murphy had earlier argued that the Articles should be replaced by an

aspiration to unity by consent.

- iii) Involvement of the Irish Republic. The DUP were predictably firm about their allegiance only to the UK Parliament, but Mr McCartney probably caught better the Unionist mood by saying that while he accepted the interest of the Irish Republic and the bona fides of those present, he did not trust Fianna Fail and that a constructive relationship with the Republic could only be developed in an atmosphere of trust. At a different level, Mr Noonan said that the Irish Government were interested only in a political solution, not a security package.
- iv) Parliamentary Tier. Dr Mawhinney advocated the establishment of a parliamentary tier between London and Dublin at the final session - it had not been referred to previously. The idea was not resisted in terms - but nor did it arouse much enthusiasm, and the Nationalist politicians made clear that they did not consider it was sufficient of itself.
- v) Minority identity. There was some pressure from the SDLP and others for the Government to take measures to recognise the minority identity in Northern Ireland, including the repeal of the Flags and Emblems Act. Mr Mallon argued that such measures should not be used to influence the shape of any wider development that should be taken, because they were right in themselves. Conversely, perhaps, he argued that a range of measures

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on security (stretching from reviewing Secretary of State pleasure and life sentences case with a view to increasing the rate of release to disbanding the UDR) should be taken to create a new and less repressive climate in Northern Ireland.

Mr Noonan

vi) Security. /argued that the British Government had substituted a security policy for a political policy. That had lead to increased terrorism, and increased passive support for the IRA in the Republic. Mr Hume said that the Government's political policy was an aspiration; in contrast its security policy had become a harsh reality. Both he and Mr Mallon believed that security policies in Northern Ireland had caused and increased alienation; the vicious circle should be broken by less oppressive security. Predictably, Unionists concentrated on the need for firm security policies: no political settlement would appease the IRA. Extradition was for them a symbol of the Republic's good intent. Senator Robinson (Labour) suggested that the way might be open following the Shannon and McGlinchey judgements for the Republic to sign the European Convention on the suppression of terrorism.

vii) The Young. There was a general appreciation of the central importance of the changing demography in the

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island of Ireland, and the size and views of the young population. At times people argued that the young, alienated unemployed were more likely to support violence and presented an increasing threat to the stability of the island. At other times, they were seen as the principal force for hope. Unlike their forebears, and perhaps even the present generation of decision makers, they would break out of rigid and bigotted positions to create a better society.

viii) Priority. The conference was much struck by Mary Holland's observation that Northern Ireland was not seen by the British public as a high political priority. All British politicians accepted this, although Miss Short and others pointed out that this could quickly change. The Unionists aswell as others accepted that the problems were urgent and needed to be resolved.

Conclusion

In assessing the contributions made throughout the conference, and in the light of comments from Mr Patten and Mr Dubs in winding up, observers are likely to have appreciated that the room for manoeuvre was limited. They would no doubt also be weighing whether there existed what Mr Patten described as a box bounded by the constitutional guarantee and the concept of consent in which progress could be made; or whether Mr Rums's pessimistic view that the gap was too wide was correct. Nor would it have been clear to observers that any progress in the coming months was

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likely to be able successfully to accommodate the full political identities of both sides; whether it would have to come down largely in favour of one or the other; or whether a reasonable compromise could be negotiated between or handed down to the various parties involved. The conference had been largely successful in allowing the expression of present positions with all their ambiguities and uncertainties, without closing off options. But it seemed clear that such a climate would not remain for much longer. Mr McCusker was right to say at the end that the conference was unique: it would not happen again.

J. M. Lyon

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15 January 1985

cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B)-
PS/Ministers (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield - M
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens - M
Mr Merifield - M
Mr Carvill - M
Mr Gilliland - M
Mr Reeve - M
Mr Abbott
Mr Clark, PCO, RID



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