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

cc: PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield 23/1 M
Mr Brennan/ Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott - M
Mr Gilliland - M
Miss Elliott
Mr McConnell - M
Mr S Hewitt - M

1543
22 DEC 1986

A UNIONIST CONFERENCE?

Introduction

Your note of 3 December asked Mr McConnell to advise on the possibility of a "parallel conference" for the Unionists. Although your note of 5 December re-directed the task to CPL, SIL have - with the agreement of all concerned - drafted this note.

The re-establishment of dialogue with the Unionists is one of our highest priorities, and a parallel conference with the unionists seems, on the face of it, to be one possible way of achieving it. However there would be considerable and damaging consequences in giving the Unionists anything which resembled the Intergovernmental Conference (IC).

How would a parallel conference be structured?

A parallel conference might be structured in a variety of ways. But if it is to be more attractive to the Unionists than the existing offers of discussions, and to be seen to be equivalent in some way to the IC, it might have some or all of the following:-

- a) the same agenda as the IC
- b) a secretariat, perhaps permanent
- c) a commitment to try to reach agreement similar to that contained in the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

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Of these the Unionists would probably consider the commitment to discuss the same items as the IC to be most important.

Consequence of such a Body

A conference consisting only of the Unionists and the Government seems open to a number of serious objections:

- a) the Unionists would use their conference to oppose any views put by the Irish in the IC; for example they would undoubtedly use it to oppose the Public Order Order or progress on the Irish language. Ministers would be left to make an invidious choice between the views expressed in the IC and in the parallel conference. Although Ministers are already faced with this choice it would be in a new stark and more difficult form. Unless we stopped all initiatives flowing from the IC, there would be a risk that the parallel conference would breakdown very quickly.
- b) a parallel conference for the Unionists would tend to institutionalise further the division of Northern Ireland on political/sectarian lines; the SDLP would be excluded and so thrown even more into the arms of the Irish government in the face of the Unionists' privileged access to the UK Government; although divisions in Northern Ireland are already great it would be wrong to encourage them further.
- c) the Irish would not welcome a rival to the IC; because the aim of the IC is to remedy an imbalance in the presentation of Nationalist views to Government. Having corrected this imbalance, it would be damaging to reinstate it by creating another Conference.

Besides these objections there is no reason at present to think that formal consultative arrangements with the Unionists in the form of a parallel conference would be a sufficient concession to re-open a dialogue with them. Their demands have centred on the suspension of the IC, not better access to Government. And if they were attracted by such a proposal we must assume that their intention would be to wreck the IC.

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A Possible Way Forward

But if a parallel conference in any full-blooded sense would go against the Government's commitment to the IC, and achieve no useful result, we might go some way to meet the Unionist concern (expressed by David Bleakley on 1 December) that they are excluded from the Conference system. We might well renew our offer to brief Unionists about Conference meetings, as we brief the Alliance party. Such meetings might well be difficult; but they would not raise the acute difficulties that paralleling the IC would raise.

A parallel conference does not seem to be on the Unionist shopping list at present. There are signs of a reassessment of their position and of growing confusion about their protest tactics. If the Government were to make ~~any~~ new offer to the Unionists they might interpret it as a change in the Government's position and a weakening of its commitment to the Agreement. But if in future the parties resume relations with the Government we could certainly float the idea of briefings after IC meetings.

Conclusion

Any formal parallel conference for the unionists would create difficult tensions for Ministers, and cause real damage to the IC and our relations with the Irish. It is not in any case the unionists' present demand and it would not be sufficient to re-open dialogue with them. If however they resume relations and show interest in this possibility we could offer briefings after conference meetings as we do with the Alliance party.

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