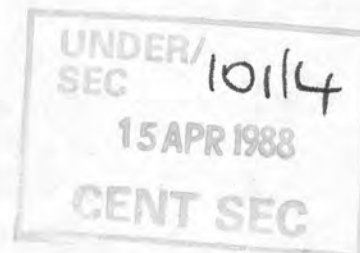


MR Spence  
CONFIDENTIAL AND PERSONAL

PAB/3877/DP

PAB (88) 5

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



I attach the latest political analysis by PAB of developments in Northern Ireland since the latter part of February. In the light of the tragic events of Milltown Cemetery and Andersonstown in mid-March and the meeting between the Secretary of State and SDLP, there has been a growing hope that something positive may be starting to develop.

The Unionists

2. In an address to the Ulster Unionist Council's annual meeting on 26 March the UUP leader, James Molyneaux, referred to a gulf separating the peoples of Britain and Ireland and said it was up to unionists "to rescue the two governments from the quicksand and guide them back to firm ground". He identified Mr Haughey's celebrated phrase "the totality of relationships between our two peoples" as a good starting place to heal present difficulties and he discouraged the pursuit of solutions "by grubbing around the back streets of Belfast". He also touched on the recent series of talks about talks with HMG and said that he and Mr Paisley were still awaiting any "meaningful response".

3. In a recent radio interview Ken Maginnis of the UUP urged fellow-unionists to "bite the bullet" and agree to share responsibility in a devolved government. He said that if unionists did not seek to reach some settlement then "we will see, very shortly, a second major step taken towards a United Ireland". He also indicated that it would not be possible to reach a political solution without the suspension of the Secretariat at Maryfield. He challenged unionists to seize the initiative especially in circumstances where SDLP are trying to make things difficult for unionists by talking to Sinn Fein. There are reports that following his comments Mr Maginness has been taken to task by his party leader



who is believed to be taking a more hard-line stance in the face of the SDLP-Sinn Fein talks and what he feels is the lack of a Government response to the proposals put forward by the two unionist leaders.

The SDLP

4. A meeting with the Secretary of State took place on 29 March and was attended by senior party members - John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Eddie McGrady, Austin Currie, Sean Farren and Dr Joe Hendron. Whilst little was said about the actual content it is widely believed that the SDLP presented their views on political progress with devolution as one of the options discussed. In essence the meeting is believed to have discussed the conditions which, in the SDLP's view, are necessary for political stability. Despite the secrecy surrounding what was actually discussed the community perception is that the talks went well, because, at the conclusion John Hume expressed the view that all-party talks would take place "sooner rather than later". It is expected that further meetings will be held between the Secretary of State and the SDLP.

Sinn Fein/SDLP

5. The announcement that four key figures from the SDLP had a meeting with Sinn Fein just after the Milltown Cemetery and Andersonstown incidents in West Belfast has prompted much criticism. The Sinn Fein representatives at the meeting with the SDLP were Gerry Adams, Danny Morrison, Tom Hartley and Mitchell McLaughlin. John Hume was accompanied by his deputy, Seamus Mallon, Sean Farren and Austin Currie. The significance of this group is that they form the small team set up to consider devolution. Although details of the talks were not disclosed, SDLP Chairman, Alban Maginness, said they were "attempting to get the Provisionals to stop the violence". He acknowledged that they might not be successful but said that "from time to time politicians have got to take risks". A meeting of SDLP executive and constituency representatives held in Co Donegal on 27 March is reported to have given its full support to Mr Hume's discussions with Sinn Fein. However throughout the party there is less unanimity and Eddie



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McGrady was public in his condemnation referring to the discussions as "ill-advised". Alban Maginness denied this was a split in the party and described Mr McGrady's position as a "tactical disagreement".

6. Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams has said that the talks were not the start of negotiations for an IRA ceasefire and he also made it clear that a continuation of partition was not acceptable, "We are engaged in discussions with the SDLP to find out and seek agreement on conditions in which peace and justice can be established. The only way the British Government can facilitate that is to leave Ireland."

7. The talks between the SDLP and Sinn Fein have been condemned by the Unionist, Alliance and Workers' parties as giving credibility to supporters of violence and as jeopardising the prospects of talks between the constitutional parties. Subsequent comments by Seamus Mallon advocating a place for Sinn Fein in inter-party talks have also been condemned amid speculation that the SDLP and Sinn Fein may be planning to form a "pan nationalist front" - on the condition of an end to violence. Paisley made it clear that unionists would never sit at any conference table with Sinn Fein, "There is no question of my party ever talking to Sinn Fein." Peter Robinson said he wanted to see the IRA "eliminated - not elevated".

Campaign for a Devolved Parliament

8. A pressure group known as the Campaign for a Devolved Government has circulated a copy of their document "A Better Deal Together". The sponsors include the former Chief Executive of the Housing Executive, John Gorman, Charter Group stalwarts Harry West, Austin Ardill and David McNarry and the organizing committee is chaired by Peter McLachlan. The group calls for the scrapping of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the ending of direct rule, the setting up of a devolved parliament enjoying cross community support, the provision of a written Constitution incorporating a Bill of Rights recognising the differing religious and cultural affiliations in Northern Ireland.



"What Chance for Ulster" - David Trimble

9. David Trimble, law lecturer at Queens University, member of the UUP and influential in the Ulster Clubs has produced a booklet entitled "What Choice for Ulster" which is heavily based on Ulster Clubs thinking. It proposes to examine a range of options for political development, but its arguments are often weak and lacking in rigorous analysis. It dismisses out of hand both acceptance of the status quo and a united Ireland. It also rejects devolution and integration with the rest of the UK, concluding that "independence" is the only way forward; this conflicts with the thinking of the UUP leadership and the idea is therefore unlikely to have much impact. It nevertheless reflects one strand of unionist thinking.

The Alliance Party

10. In relation to recent speculation about dialogue, Dr Alderdice, leader of the Alliance Party, said that "people should not immediately become too optimistic about the possibilities for an early and satisfactory agreement. An energetic and sustained effort will be required by all parties for lasting progress to be made". In confirming that he had approached the Secretary of State about talks with his own party, he expressed the view that the present exercise was one of repairing the political lines of communication and although this would make dialogue possible, there existed wide gaps between the parties, both in terms of intentions and aspirations.

11. The Alliance Party Conference was held over the weekend 8/9 April. Generally it was a low key affair with Dr John Alderdice, who was facing his first conference as leader, trying to sell himself to the Party. The general feeling was one of wait-and-see, there was no strong feeling that he had fully convinced everyone that he was the man to lead them in the current climate. This may have been due in part to the tone of his speech, deliberately low key and designed to set out the party's aims, almost in a sense a rededication to the Alliance ideals of fairness and community commitment to equity. There was also some unease that the presence



of David Steele and Des O'Malley coupled with the many references to creating new formal links between themselves and other liberal parties, heralded the beginning of a shift in the party towards new political allegiances outside the question of political development within Northern Ireland.

Comment

12. In the aftermath of recent violence there has been a discernible desire in the grass roots for political progress as the means of reducing the sort of sights witnessed at Milltown Cemetery and Andersonstown. Comments by church leaders and politicians, the meeting between the Secretary of State and the SDLP and the positive signs arising from the last meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference have all combined together to reflect (and encourage) the hope that political progress can be made.


13. However the desire for political progress does not mean that unionists or nationalists are ready to relinquish their positions on the future of the Agreement. Unionists are still determined that progress cannot be made whilst the Agreement still functions in its present form despite the acknowledgement by Molyneaux that any solution might involve an interest for Dublin and some recognition of a wider "totality" of relationships between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

14. In seeking to make progress the question of the SDLP's willingness to see a devolved government in Northern Ireland still causes concern. There are some disquieting signs that the SDLP still believe that the Agreement offers them a better hope for the future than some local rapprochement with Unionists. The continuing talks with Sinn Fein are construed by unionists as evidence that the SDLP are attempting to sabotage the opportunities for inter-party talks. Unionists abhor any suggestions that there might be a place for Sinn Fein at any conference table even if by then the IRA have called an end to their campaign of violence. Any role for Sinn Fein in a discussion process would be seen by unionists as that party having successfully "bombed and killed" their way to the conference



table.

15. In view of the unionist position on Sinn Fein, a view which has wider support within the United Kingdom generally, it is still not clear what the SDLP may be attempting to achieve in their discussions with Sinn Fein; Gerry Adams has made it clear that a ceasefire is not on the cards and that a solution within a purely Northern Ireland context is not acceptable. It may be of course that the SDLP are simply trying to clear the scene, so that they can begin negotiations with unionists and others being able to say to their community that they tried, without success, to bring Sinn Fein on side. However that may be to attach too much subtlety to the SDLP's thinking. Whatever their reasoning, the prospect of such discussions continuing to run for some time can only give rise to doubts among Unionists about the SDLP's genuineness and wish to successfully harness the current desire for progress, and in turn encourage a unionist belief that some form of "pan-nationalist front" is in the offing.

  
J E McCONNELL  
Political Affairs Division  
14 April 1988

DP/1602

cc PS/Ministers (L&B) - B  
PS/PUS (L&B) - B  
PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B  
Mr Stephens - B  
Mr Burns - B  
Mr Chesterton - B  
Mr Innes - B  
Mr Miles - B  
Mr Steele - B  
Miss Pease - B  
Mr Spence - B  
Mr Wood - B  
Mr Bell - B  
Mr Daniell  
Mr D Kirk - B  
Mr Coston  
Mr Hewitt - B  
Mr A Mackay MP c/o PO  
NIO(L) - B