

E. R.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP:

NOTE OF MEETING ON 14 MARCH 1989 IN VIDEO CONFERENCING ROOMS

London:

Mr Burns (Chairman)
Mr Thomas
Mr Blackwell
Mr Kirk
Ms Marson
Mr Lawton Smith

Belfast:

Sir K Bloomfield
Mr Wood
Mr Miles
Mr Spence
Mr J McConnell

Apologies:

Mr A W Stephens
Mr Masefield
Mr Daniell

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Anglo-Irish

1. The NIO's Review Steering Group had met and re-drafted the British draft of a communique (pending the outcome of the Review) making it more robust. The Secretary of State would consider and comment on the draft directly and the communique would then be put to the Irish for discussion. Two Conference meetings would probably be needed to reach agreement on the conclusions to be expressed in the communique.

2. Relations with the Irish were fairly good. HMG's concerns about the Taoiseach's USA visit speech had been voiced. Officials had suggested mentioning the International Fund and had cautioned the Irish against irritating unionists (as Haughey had done in his Ard Fheis speech) on the political development front. Haughey's visit to the USA was primarily to make friends with the new President and his speech would therefore be cast in the diplomatic rather than party mould. There might be difficulties ahead with the Irish - the

E. R.

ending of the Review; the question of Ryan; and the three High Court appeal reserved judgments on extradition cases. These would have to be addressed in the next few weeks when the current good relations between the British and the Irish would be needed. It would be in our own interest that the Irish should have the earliest reasonable notice about matters of interest to them.

3. Officials' recent visit to Dublin had raised several points. The Irish had been asked to take account of the effect their actions and statements could have on internal politics in Northern Ireland and therefore to consult HMG on issues likely to have an effect on Northern Ireland. They should avoid making representations solely on behalf of the nationalist community thereby placing HMG in the position of appearing to represent the unionists. These points were reflected in the British approach to the Review. O'hUiginn had expressed his own concern and hostility to any suggestion of reciprocity but other senior Irish officials had been more receptive.

4. Dr Mawhinney attended a dinner at Maryfield on 13 March where Mr Haughey's speech at the Ard Fheis was discussed. There was a good exchange. The Minister's comments on education and Irish language issues elicited a positive reaction from the Irish side.

Party Positions

Nationalists

5. The more talent and confidence grew in the SDLP the greater the discontent with Hume's solo act became. The party was very concerned about the local government elections. Hendron and others were preparing defence papers for the aftermath. Durkan had indicated that the SDLP would return to the argument that they had reached the rockbase of Sinn Fein and could only chip away at its support. Hume was not interested in the lack of electoral interest in the SDLP in West Belfast, which had the largest concentration of nationalist voters in the Province. His own political base in Derry

E. R.

was very strong. The SDLP felt they would lose seats in important areas and gain them in unimportant ones. All members of the party seemed keen to meet Dr Mawhinney and to talk.

Unionists

DUP

6. The party appeared to be doing little. Whether or not the manifesto was complete, it would be separate from that of the UUP. It was expected to be the usual line - hammering Sinn Fein and HMG and going for devolution. The DUP continued to demonstrate when meeting outsiders its keenness to escape the boycott hook.

UUP

7. Molyneaux was in ebullient mood telling members of the party something would be happening on the political front in the autumn; he appeared to believe HMG would talk about a new Agreement and was telling people there would be a Cabinet reshuffle in July. He had renewed his relations with Ian Gow after an interval since the Friends of the Union conference. The UUP was considering an amnesty for boycott dissenters but any publicity might deter them. Belfast Council and many others were still firm on the boycott.

8. Ministers were concerned to reconsider a demarche on MPs who avoided writing to Ministers and wrote to officials instead: but any further consideration needed to be based on up to date information about the current state of the boycott. PAB was commissioned to produce an assessment (with Central Secretariat assistance) of the complete current picture of the unionist boycott.

9. There was a case for Ministers publicly emphasising the narrow contribution that (unionist) councillors made to representing their electors' interests in day to day matters. CPL should consider (consulting PAB, Central Secretariat and Sir K Bloomfield) whether Ministers should comment on this before the elections. Any

E.R.

statement would need to be made two weeks or earlier before polling day to avoid allegations of interference in the electoral process. Any Ministerial statement should embrace the two themes in the 14 February speech of political progress to or towards devolution and involving political parties in the practical business of governing Northern Ireland now - after the elections there would be many appointments to boards to be made from the ranks of local councillors; the creation of a new political institution was not the only way of involving local politicians. It should not detract from the Mawhinney Round and it need not necessarily be made or given by the Secretary of State. Advice should be submitted to Ministers by mid April.

10. Both pieces of work commissioned in paragraphs 8 and 9 should be offered to Ministers together.

Others

11. The Alliance party was battle weary and experiencing internal difficulties. There was a rumour that Alderdice would not be running in the Euro elections. A meeting with Dr Mawhinney had been arranged. Alliance was seriously calling into question support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement; this may be to capture moderate unionist votes but appeared to be for the more genuine reason that the Agreement seemed not to be of benefit. These points would be mentioned in briefing for the Minister's meeting. The party was suffering from the Cushnahan factor; he had been the face of Alliance for a long time and his reappearance in another jurisdiction for another party would harm Alliance. Unfairly this would reflect more on the party than on the man.

12. At the CDP meeting with Dr Mawhinney, Robinson, of the newly revived ULDP, was absent. Three of those present were involved in the UDA campaign for political recognition. If the ULDP was to take over the UDA's more respectable activities, the UDA itself would be left with a stronger paramilitary image, inviting fresh calls about its proscription. Two of the three ULDP candidates running in Derry

were reported to have UDA connections and McMichael's son was the Lisburn candidate.

13. The North Down Conservative Association believed electoral representation was unimportant since they considered the Chairman would have sufficient influence with a Secretary of State if the latter was a Conservative.

POLITICAL STRATEGY

14. There was not reason to reconsider the fundamentals of our policy. The task was to question how the strategy was working rather than to question the strategy itself. A number of Mawhinney Round meetings had been held and this quiet evidence of Government activity had itself dispelled any earlier belief that matters were being allowed to drift. Various expected themes had emerged - all those so far seen saw the desirability of political progress/talks with parties; progress towards devolution; and the need for an Irish dimension. The unionists were still reluctant to talk but the "cocoon of nationalist mist" had been penetrated with Hume being more specific about the need for political progress within Northern Ireland. The business theme in the 14 February speech had not yet been addressed. This should be included in the Minister's briefs; he should be encouraged to sell joint meetings with HMG about broad objectives on the economic front.

15. There would be pressure at some stage to say whether the objectives had been addressed. These had been -

- i) showing a profile for HMG, which had been done - there had been no repeat of unionist criticism of HMG not acting;
- ii) seeking to bring pressure to bear on the electorate and, through them, on politicians;
- iii) exploring the hypothesis that there was interest in the community in making political progress.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

The Minister had done very much what he had hoped - stimulated interest; met people; and received views. Moreover it had been useful to diversify the approach to parties.

16. There was clearly more mileage in the Mawhinney Round. It would probably have to come to an end towards the end of April (because of the local elections), but it would be important also not to prolong the round once it became clear there was no further progress to be made.

17. The Minister was being told by the parties about a desire for devolution; he was not asking about other options such as local government or, more importantly, being told about them. If the talks showed that there were other things the parties wanted to talk about that was obviously acceptable. However the 1988 'talks about talks' showed Molyneaux's and Paisley's clear wish that HMG should direct any discussions. Although devolution seemed a long way off as an achievable aim its benefits should be borne in mind - Northern Ireland was a fractured community and devolution was the splint which could bind it together; involving local people in government was good in itself. It was possible that the Mawhinney Round, aided by a helpful result in the local elections and followed by an initiative by the Secretary of State may well produce action. At some stage the Secretary of State would have to invite his colleagues' comments.

18. CPL was tasked to produce a paper for Ministers assessing the Mawhinney Round. Officials should in addition now focus on what should be said later in the summer. The renewal debate would provide a platform (and indeed a need to offer a statement of current policy); the conclusion of the local and Euro elections, and the completion of the Mawhinney Round might provide the political opening. Mr Thomas was asked to produce a paper considering what HMG would then be in a position to propose and or deliver and whether this had any implications for what the Mawhinney Round should be doing.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

-6-

CPL/JT/5930

19. After the local elections further talks may be appropriate to test any conclusions; this would be a new process, rather than a continuation of the Mawhinney Round.

ARTICLE 11 REVIEW

20. The Secretary of State was not in a position to judge at the moment whether the Review could be concluded before his visit to the USA or the local government elections. If before the local government elections he would want to ensure the outcome was not seen to affect the elections in an unhelpful way.

21. Officials should consider the impact the Review would have on the public in Northern Ireland. CPL was tasked to provide a short paper, by 5 April, enumerating what seemed to be the main points on political development which the Secretary of State would need to project if they were not already projected in the Review. It should cover the overall effect of the Review in terms of domestic political development in Northern Ireland. The key question would still be the Duisburg riddle concerning the two governments' attitudes to suspending the Agreement. The Secretary of State would need to consider this before the conference meeting after next - the first conference meeting would deal with the Review at a very basic level. The Secretary of State would need to consult the Prime Minister and colleagues; he would probably wish to tell the Prime Minister of the conclusions to which the Review was heading after the 5 April meeting.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ISSUES

22. A number of issues had to be considered - likely changes in the councils and what action should be taken; current thinking on handling the outcome of consultation on the DOE proposals; and proportionality in appointments.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

23. Reactions to the DOE consultative document on local government had been varied but predictable. Castlereagh Council had torn the document up and intended returning it to the Government; the SDLP had been very supportive; the UUP and DUP had attacked the document for taking more powers away from the councils.

24. The present arrangements for council nominations to boards could not be defended. The option was to remove district council powers to nominate; but perhaps the structures of some public bodies should be studied to see whether district council representation was necessary although the only action possible at the moment seemed to be to exhort the political parties to nominate fairly. The parties should be watched after the local government elections to see how they behaved; if the answer did not lie in proportionality, because of the Sinn Fein problem, it pointed to taking the power of nomination away. But proportionality should not be ruled out.

25. Any changes in local government would need to be explained in relation to the government's view of the political future; it would have to be tied in with political development so there would need to be consultation first. By the autumn it would be obvious whether the current talks were achieving anything or what should be done to settle into an existing mode. Thus, the autumn would confirm or change government policy. Mr Spence was asked to produce a paper, for consideration at the next PDG meeting, covering local government issues of concern - proportionality; the DOE consultative paper; the connection/implications with the powers and composition of boards and with province-wide devolution; and the value of a 'Macrory Mark II' consultation.

SUMMARY OF ACTION

26. i) PAB to produce an assessment (with Central Secretariat assistance) of the current picture of the unionist boycott.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

-8-

CPL/JT/5930

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- ii) CPL (consulting PAB, Central Secretariat and Sir K Bloomfield) to produce, by mid April, a paper considering the need for a Ministerial statement covering the current inactivity of district councillors.
- (Commissions 1 and 2 to be offered to Ministers together).
- iii) CPL to produce an assessment of the Mawhinney Round for Ministers.
- iv) Mr Thomas to produce a paper considering what Ministers should be saying/proposing/delivering at the end of June.
- v) CPL to produce, by 5 April, a paper considering the effect on political development of the Review and the areas which would need to be 'safeguarded'.
- vi) Mr Spence to produce a paper, for PDG on 2 May, on the possible ways forward on local government issues.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

27. The date of the next meeting will be Tuesday 2 May, 10.00 in the video conferencing rooms. The agenda will take account of Mr Thomas's paper and there will be a substantive discussion of local government related issues based on Mr Spence's paper. DOE (NI) should be invited to be represented.

(SIGNED)

CLAIRE MARSON

Constitutional and Political Division

23 March 1989

OAB Ext 6575

C O N F I D E N T I A L

-9-

CPL/JT/5930