

cc PS to Chairman
Dr Oliver
Mr Blackburn ✓
Mr Corbett
Mr Williamson (file copy)

MEETING WITH SDLP 26 JANUARY 1976

PRESENT:

Chairman
Dr Oliver
Mr Blackburn
Dr Hayes

Mr Fitt
Mr Currie
Mr Devlin

1. Mr Fitt apologised for the absence of Mr Hume. Mr Fitt drew attention to speeches by UUUC leaders which he regarded as inflammatory and seditious. It was impossible for SDLP to do business with UUUC while they persisted in such speeches. They would lose all credibility in their own community and people believed it was no longer possible to reach an honourable agreement with UUUC given the public stance of some of the loyalist leaders. He argued that a significant section of the UUUC leadership, particularly Messrs Powell and Paisley did not want a devolved government and would make the achievement of it as difficult as possible. There was therefore no point in negotiating with them.
2. Mr Fitt argued that SDLP could not concede any more at present than they had done. They were competing for support in the Catholic community with Provo IRA and could easily be destroyed if seen to weaken, especially when, no matter what concessions they were to make, UUUC would not agree. SDLP had moved far from the old Nationalist line - they had recognised the state of Northern Ireland, they had recognised the right of the majority in NI freely to decide their own constitutional position, they had recognised the Union and had accepted that there could be no change in the constitutional position unless the majority in NI freely voted for it. They had given up the Council of Ireland without a public struggle and their supporters would not take any more.
3. Chairman said Mr Craig had expressed the hope that SDLP would come out in support of the RUC, so as to strengthen their position and he and other groups had suggested that SDLP might produce detailed proposals of their own. Mr Devlin dismissed the police issue as irrelevant and blamed Mr Craig's downfall on poor party management rather than an association with SDLP policies. He said they had prepared detailed proposals for a constitution in a more hopeful atmosphere last summer, but would not now publish these. They had already shown in their acceptance of the 1973 Act their willingness to accept the consequences of broad agreement in principle. If the concept of power-sharing at the top could be accepted, they would find no difficulty in agreeing details. They were not looking for one or two jobs - they believed this was the only way of assuring support throughout the community. Equally they had thought of the Irish Dimension as a means of defusing militant nationalism.

- Mr Currie said they had concluded that no agreement would be reached in Phase 2 and people should save their policies for possible adoption in a third phase. There was no hope of agreement with UUUC and SDLP could only accept participation in cabinet (or whatever the top level was).
5. Chairman said it was clear that Westminster would not reimpose 1973 Act. There would be no imposed power-sharing. Equally, if UUUC did not come to terms with SDLP, there was little likelihood of them getting a devolved government either. UUUC tactics seemed based on the idea that Westminster would ultimately weaken and give them at least a large part of their demands, by which time SDLP would have been destroyed.
 6. Mr Currie said they could only lose at the present time. They had made great efforts not only to withstand extremists in the catholic community but in persuading the Irish Government and opposition to take a more reasonable line. Their people were now frightened by sabre rattling UUUC speeches and by sectarian murders. It would be very difficult to prevent a slide into a situation dominated by paramilitaries on both sides. Fianna Fail was getting more hawkish and increased loyalist violence would lead to calls for the Irish Army to protect catholic areas. Mr Fitt added that recent leaks of official documents to Mr Paisley convinced the catholic community of the hopelessness of their position.
 7. Mr Blackburn pressed SDLP on police policy and in disclosing their proposals - but without success. Dr Oliver said they should not regard themselves as friendless - Mr Craig and Mr Faulkner had both exhibited a desire to help them reach a settlement. Mr Devlin said that only a settlement approved by Messrs Baird and Paisley was worth having.
 8. The meeting lasted over two hours and was pessimistic throughout. SDLP were not willing to discuss anything but cabinet-membership - which UUUC had excluded. They recognised that 'widespread agreement' implied the consent of the majority community also and that failure of the Convention would be followed by a political vacuum. Mr Fitt thought the death of F Stagg would be in any case the signal for a Provo offensive. Despite all this, SDLP could find no basis other than cabinet membership on which to begin talks. They were not willing to put their proposal on ice while they looked at other options - because they did not believe that any other system would work and in any case UUUC would not agree to anything they put forward.

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