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The Labour Party and Northern Ireland

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Brief for Wilson
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Within the Labour Party the great majority of M.Ps. would have no particular or personal views about Northern Ireland policy and would, in the absence of constituency and public opinion pressure, go along automatically with the policy of the day, unlike many Tory M.Ps. who, because of social, family and financial connections with the North, tend to be under greater pressure to take up a policy position. There are however two groups which might be called the SDLP Support Group and the Disengagement Lobby, who on occasion dissociate themselves from Government policy or from aspects of that policy.

The SDLP Support Group, who work closely with Gerry Fitt and other SDLP members, often take a line in Parliament very close to the SDLP position. The number prepared to support such a stand would at most be about twelve, with Paddy Duffy and Kevin McNamara being the two best known members. The most recent occasion when they defied the Whip was in the debate on the 9th July last on the renewal of the Emergency Provisions Act.

With regard to the Disengagement Lobby it should be stressed that the move for outright disengagement has no support in the Cabinet, and among backbenchers is confined to a hard core of six or eight. This is likely to remain the position unless the British Army casualty rate were to disimprove. If however this aspect of the security situation were to deteriorate, and was coupled with the absence of positive political progress on power-sharing, then the pressure for withdrawal could receive a new impetus. At present there are about 30 to 40 Labour M.Ps. who, while not now prepared to support withdrawal would be extremely sympathetic to a radical policy reappraisal and might even welcome an explicit threat of withdrawal if the Government's terms of reference on power-sharing were disregarded.

On the other hand, many left-wing M.Ps., in particular those associated with the Tribune Group, would oppose withdrawal because of their fear of a fascist state being established in the North - they were, for instance, particularly concerned about what they considered fascist manifestations during the recent UWC strike.

At Cabinet level, with the exception of four senior Ministers, there is no great political concern or interest in the Northern situation. Ministers in the present Labour Government have tended to be very bound up with the work of their own departments.

The four Cabinet members who in effect decide on policy are the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, Merlyn Rees and Roy Mason. Jim Callaghan is probably politically the surest of the four but it is doubtful if he has concerned himself closely with Northern Ireland affairs in his present term of office. Given the ineffectiveness of Rees and Mason, and Wilson's loose style of leadership, it is hardly surprising therefore that the situation in the North has seriously drifted.

Constituencies with a large Irish vote may be relevant in present circumstances. The position generally up to now has been that M.Ps. have been able by and large to take the Irish vote for granted. Whether this situation will change with the reported intervention of the Irish Civil Rights Association (ICRA) to contest some of the marginal Labour seats remains to be seen, though the present assessment is that an ICRA intervention would have little impact.