

MR Space

Mr. Spence

NH23/1

Mr Hamilton 6/1

to see a return

MM

5/1/88

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PAB/3497/DP

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



PAB (87) 21

I attach the latest political analysis by PAB of developments in Northern Ireland since the early part of December. There was little political movement of note during the period although the prospect of further talks between the unionist leaders and the Secretary of State continues to engender a sense of optimism.

The Unionists

2. The latest round of "talks about talks" took place in London on 17 December when the Secretary of State and senior officials met the two unionist leaders who are reported as continuing to press for the possibility of replacing the Agreement, suggesting alternative structures to it, and the closure of the Secretariat while negotiations take place. There are reports that after six meetings the Government's position has been firmly explained and that it is now time to move on to more detailed talks.

3. In a Written Answer the day after this latest meeting the Secretary of State told Peter Robinson, "The Government remains committed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. At the same time, I have made clear that we are very ready to consider constructive proposals which can command widespread support. Our policy is to seek an agreed basis on which greater responsibility can be devolved to elected representatives in Northern Ireland". We understand that the question was asked by Mr Robinson in an attempt to elicit some sign from HMG that it would consider proposals, from unionists, which, if acceptable to all interested parties, could be seriously considered as alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

4. In an address in Dublin the former UUP Assembly Member for Fermanagh, Raymond Ferguson, criticised the performance of the

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unionist leadership saying that they were "far too jealous of the privilege and position that Member of Parliament status confers on them to make any genuine or real attempts to devise a form of government within Northern Ireland". In regard to the Agreement he said the leadership "delude their people that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is collapsing and will go away". He also pressed the need for the Republic to "acknowledge that it is more important... that the two communities... reach accommodation with each other than that they cling to their rights under the Anglo-Irish Agreement". He repeated his view (as expressed at the recent UUP Conference) that there are unionists who are "prepared to advocate a new constitutional arrangement which gives to the minority an opportunity to play a full part in the administration of the North and to... accept that there is an interest which the South has in what goes on in the North...". However Mr Ferguson pointed out that this view entitled unionists "to call upon the Government of the Republic to come clean as far as their attitude to partition and Irish unity are concerned". Mr Ferguson proposed a devolutionary settlement with a Northern Ireland Assembly supplemented by a second tier made up of British and Irish Government representatives to supply safeguards for both the minority and majority community.

5. Following comments he made in a newspaper interview the Irish Foreign Minister, Brian Lenihan, has come under predictable attack from unionists. Mr Lenihan said that if Irish Ministers could have discussions with their British counterparts through the Anglo-Irish process, then surely talks could begin with those he described as "fellow Irishmen". He also said that unionists could not continue to take stand-off positions. Sammy Wilson of the DUP said that Mr Lenihan had a cheek in asking unionists to discuss the future of Northern Ireland and made it clear that he believed that the Irish Government had no role to play. In his response Ken Maginnis described Mr Lenihan's suggestion as probably cynical rather than naive and accused both the British and Irish Governments of deceit. He said that both Governments knew what was required in order to get unionists to enter into dialogue. Unionists required the removal of Maryfield as it was seen as the

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vehicle by which the Anglo-Irish Conference met, and the Irish, as well as the British Government, fully understood the unionist position.

The SDLP

6. The suggestion that the SDLP in Fermanagh were planning to show their condemnation of Sinn Fein in a more tangible form was confirmed when SDLP Councillor John O'Kane proposed a motion condemning the Council's Sinn Fein Chairman, Paul Corrigan, for failing to dissociate himself from the bomb attack in Enniskillen on Remembrance Sunday. The motion was seconded by Raymond Ferguson who described Mr Corrigan as belonging to a movement "engaged in a pitiless campaign of death and destruction". In response to the motion Sinn Fein councillors accused the SDLP of "becoming unionist" and thus giving its support to "Bloody Sunday, the use of plastic bullets and the shoot-to-kill policy". Despite the passing of the motion of no confidence Corrigan, who was elected Chairman last June with the help of SDLP Councillors, refused to resign and said that he intended to carry on until the end of his term.

7. On the issue of support for the RUC the SDLP came under attack from two sides. In the Commons the Rev William McCrea denounced five Magherafelt SDLP councillors for refusing to support a motion calling for unequivocal support for the security forces. In response John Hume insisted his party was the only one from Northern Ireland represented in the Commons that had "no association of any description - and never has - with any paramilitaries". He went on to say, "my party fully and unequivocally supports the security forces in seeking out anybody who commits a crime in Northern Ireland". Following this statement Sinn Fein in Londonderry criticised the SDLP leader as being "out of touch with reality" and said that SDLP councillors "who actually live in nationalist areas... knew that the RUC remains as unacceptable as ever". In reply to Sinn Fein the Foyle MP said that the SDLP position was clear, "we recognise the need for proper law and order in our community and we support the recognised police agency, the RUC, in

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seeking out anyone suspected of serious crime". In denying Sinn Fein suggestions that the SDLP had changed its policy towards the RUC Hume went on, "It has always been our position that we will support the impartial and proper enforcement of the law... We continue to make criticisms where the RUC's performance strays from acceptable practices of law enforcement, impartiality and respect for the rights of ordinary citizens going about their business".

The Alliance Party

8. The new leader of the Alliance Party, John Alderdice, has called on Ulster political leaders to start the New Year on a fresh footing by opening up lines of communication with each other. He welcomed the continuing talks between the Government and the unionist leaders but expressed the view that the two latter are unrealistic in asking for a suspension of the Hillsborough deal. Instead he believes that local politicians should be concentrating their minds in the run-up to the review of the workings of the Agreement next year. In a radio interview Dr Alderdice said the Government should contact party leaders in the New Year with a view to working out some kind of mechanism for consultation and he suggested that if the unionist leaders reject opportunities for consultation, "we will get to the other side of the review procedure with relatively little change to the Anglo-Irish Agreement".

Sinn Fein

9. Following the issue of a statement by the IRA in which they sought to reassure people in the Republic that they were not involved in an armed conspiracy against the Republic, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams accused the Catholic Church, the SDLP and the Dublin authorities of joining with the British "in a campaign of ostracisation and attempted isolation of Sinn Fein". Adams claimed that 20 years after the launch of the Civil Rights campaign people were still denied the basic civil and human rights which were at the centre of the Civil Rights movement. He also repeated the offer made earlier in the year in the Sinn Fein discussion paper "A Scenario for Peace" for loyalists to reassess their position and "join with the rest of the people of Ireland in formulating a national consensus for government".

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General

10. In Belfast City Council a row concerning alleged sectarianism developed at a meeting of the Community Services Committee at which the only business conducted was the approval by the unionist majority of grants to three community centres in loyalist areas. Dr Brian Feeney (SDLP) said that if the unionist councillors continued with this practice, the SDLP would seek legal means to force them to spend money in nationalist areas. Fred Cobain, leader of the UUP Councillors in Belfast, denied any charges of sectarianism and Sammy Wilson (DUP) said that the items passed were chosen because of the danger of losing the grants for the centres unless urgent action was taken. He defended the policy of conducting only "urgent" committee business as part of the campaign to remove the gunmen from the council chamber, "We are conducting business on the basis of what needs to be done at once and what can be left until later in order to put pressure on the Northern Ireland Office to get rid of Sinn Fein on the councils. The SDLP should be joining us rather than criticising us". On other occasions unionist councillors have employed different tactics by refusing to attend Committee meetings thus ensuring that the lack of a quorum prevented business from being transacted. Mr Cobain explained the change in tactics had come about because of concern that the ordinary citizens of Belfast were suffering from the absence of unionists at meetings.

11. The Presbyterian Church's Government Committee have called on the British and Irish Governments to begin reviewing the Agreement now in order to spur politicians to make greater efforts to find a solution. In response the Secretary of State made it clear that, "There will be a review of the Accord next November but that doesn't prevent people giving me any views they want to give me now". Paisley referred to the Government as slamming the door on the Presbyterian Church and James Molyneaux referred to the Presbyterian Church's advice as more accurate than any given to the Secretary of State by his Northern Ireland Office advisers.

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12. As a result of comments made at a meeting of Castlereagh Council local DUP Councillor Denny Vitty is understood to have been reported to the RUC by Alliance Councillor Addie Morrow. At a special council meeting held to discuss terrorism and the Agreement Mr Vitty is reported to have said, "We are in a war situation and traitors and collaborators should be shot in a war. Traitors in the name of Morrow should be shot". Subsequently Mr Vitty contacted Mr Morrow and assured him that under no circumstances would he ever advocate such action, but it is understood that a statement had already been given to the RUC. The Alliance leader, Dr Alderdice has indicated that he will be writing to the DUP leader, Ian Paisley, asking him to take disciplinary action against Mr Vitty.

McMichael

13. The murder of John McMichael on 22 December has led to fears that the IRA are seeking to provoke a loyalist backlash. Mr McMichael, a leading member of the UDA, was killed when a booby trap device, attached to his car, exploded outside his home in Lisburn. He is reported to have been the commander of the UDA in Lisburn but is equally well known as the UDA's main spokesman and as their leading political thinker. He is believed to have been the main author of the UDA's paper for political progress in Northern Ireland, "Common Sense", which was published earlier this year and advocated a form of powersharing.

14. The IRA claimed responsibility for the attack saying that McMichael was a leading member of the illegal loyalist terrorist group, the Ulster Freedom Fighters. UDA leader, Andy Tyrie, denied that McMichael was a commander in the UFF and described him as a "political adviser". The killing was condemned by many political leaders and Paisley and Molyneaux were among leading unionist politicians who attended the funeral. The murder was also condemned by Cardinal O Fiaich who for some reason known to him but not shared by the Catholic community at large, chose to praise McMichael as a man who worked untiringly for peace. In fact there have been suggestions that many Catholics, including some who would not normally give any credence to Sinn Fein, have found themselves in

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sympathy with the IRA claim that "John McMichael was the foremost paramilitary thinker in the UDA. He was the boss of all the UFF murder squads, a fact which appears to have gone unnoticed by SDLP spokespersons who have been eulogising him". Sinn Fein/PIRA also said tht according to the sentiments expressed one would believe that McMichael had been a member of the Alliance Party.

15. There have been a number of views floated as to why the IRA decided to kill McMichael at this time. Coming on the heels of the Enniskillen bombing and the murder of loyalist firebrand George Seawright (claimed by the Irish Peoples' Liberation Organization), the IRA may have believed that the death of a leading loyalist could be the final application of pressure necessary to create a backlash and plunge the Province into a series of tit for tat sectarian killings in which the prospects for cross-community talks and progress would recede. On the other hand some commentators have expressed the view that the killing was carried out by the IRA in an attempt to re-build support and sympathy after the wave of revulsion following the Enniskillen deaths. In the light of the condemnation heaped on the IRA and Sinn Fein (especially from within the Catholic Church and community) the killing of a leading loyalist paramilitary figure like McMichael may have been an attempt to prove to the nationalist community that the IRA can, and will, mount attacks against individuals who are seen as being responsible for leading groups which kill and intimidate Catholics. Whilst few Catholics will regret the passing of John McMichael there will be considerable apprehension amongst ordinary members of that community (as well as leading figures) that loyalist paramilitaries will carry out some form of retaliation.

Comment

16. Developments during 1987, although not reflecting massive progress, at least suggest that 1988 will open in a slightly more optimistic mood than 1987. The fact that the two unionist leaders are continuing to talk with the Secretary of State tends to raise hopes that something positive may happen. However the policy pursued by Messrs Paisley and Molyneaux of keeping the content of

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the discussions a secret from their respective parties still causes concern and irritation among the rank and file. Both leaders will be conscious of the fact that since the General Election in June their unionist supporters have been looking for something positive to develop. The shifts within the parties, the resignation of Peter Robinson as deputy leader of the DUP and the loss of Frank Millar from the UUP have probably emphasised even more clearly to the two leaders that the days of simply "saying no" are past.

17. The SDLP still seem content to rest on their laurels and build on the achievement of the Agreement - whilst watching over their shoulder at Sinn Fein. They appear, for the moment, to be happy to watch developments between the unionist leadership and HMG, but the crunch for them will come if and when the local political parties are able to gather round one table to discuss the way forward.

18. The Alliance Party, infused with the new blood of Dr John Alderdice, will inevitably continue to struggle to extend the middle ground but their prospects for 1988 look little better than they experienced in 1987.

19. Sinn Fein remain unbowed by the condemnations heaped upon them after the Remembrance Day attack in Enniskillen and show no sign of dropping "the armalite" aspect of their strategy. Recent statements from the leadership seeking to reassure supporters in the Republic that the war is in the North against the British and not against the Dublin authorities reflects an element of concern that a loss of sympathy south of the border would weaken the struggle in Northern Ireland.

20. One clear issue that is coming through the political morass is that despite the failure of local political parties to agree on an acceptable path for progress, most people in Northern Ireland are determined to carry on with "business as usual". For all the criticisms directed at the Government, people see that the Government is governing, official business is being carried out, Ministers are out and about, and the Province has enjoyed a good run

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of royal visits which are always well received. In many ways an outsider might simply see the wrangles of the local political parties as a luxury for those who are inclined towards politics. It has been clear from the attention directed to the activities of, and arrangements for, Christmas that most people are once again determined to show that there is a life beyond the traumatic events perpetrated by terrorists and the constant posturing of politicians.

21. It is impossible to predict what may happen in January to blow away the Christmas cobwebs, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that all hopes for progress need not be thrown out with the dead Christmas trees and paper chains.

[Signed]

J E McCONNELL
Political Affairs Division
4 January 1988

DP/1083

cc PS/Ministers (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Mr Bloomfield - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Burns - B
Mr Chesterton - B
Mr Innes - B
Mr Elliott - B
Mr Steele - B
Miss Pease - B
Mr Spence - B 5/1/88
Mr Wood - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Daniell
Mr D Kirk - B
Mr Coston
Mr Hewitt - B
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