

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

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP:

NOTE OF MEETING ON 12 JANUARY 1989 IN OAB

Present: Mr Burns (Chairman)

Mr A W Stephens

Mr Thomas

Mr Miles

Mr Spence

Mr Kirk

Mr Bell

Mr J McConnell

Ms Marson

Apologies:

Sir K Bloomfield

Mr Wood

Mr Daniell

Mr Masefield

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Unionists

1. The Duisburg initiative appeared to have run into the sand partly because of the Unionist perception that the SDLP were not interested. The Unionists were disillusioned by the last meeting attended by Messrs Allen, Robinson, Hume, and Mallon. They felt they had been lead to believe there would be a positive response from the SDLP who, in the event, repeated their view that they would not be party to any subterfuge on the Agreement. The Unionists currently felt that they had made all the moves. They were concerned that the SDLP would make a statement about Duisburg and publish what the SDLP referred to as the "Unionist document". Messrs Allen and Robinson were meeting shortly to decide on the way forward. Molyneaux had said publicly that prospects of talks with

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the Secretary of State on devolution were now over; Unionists were no longer interested and any gap in the IC would not guarantee success. A meeting was planned by the UUP to discuss Molyneaux's statements. However, while Molyneaux was out of tune with some members of his party there was no reason to believe there would be a split within the UUP. In contrast the DUP leaders were comparatively close to their party members. It was possible that the DUP were unhappy with Molyneaux's "back to basics" stance. The DUP were certainly worried about the forthcoming local government elections.

2. In summary the Unionists were currently in turmoil and would probably look to HMG. It was significant that they would be coming to talk to the Secretary of State before they spoke to the Prime Minister about Harland and Wolff; this could be due to constituency pressure. In addition Molyneaux had recently written directly to Dr Mawhinney on an education issue.

Alliance

3. The activity of the Alliance Party had been largely behind the momentum of Duisburg. They had threatened to revise their position on the Agreement in the event of failure of the talks. Alliance had made it known that if Mr Needham addressed the North Down Conservative Association, Ministers would be invited to address Alliance local party meetings on party political matters also.

Nationalists

4. The only factor likely to put pressure on the SDLP would be their belief that the Unionists were talking with the Government.

5. The parties had proved they could talk together; it was worth trying to keep them talking.

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NEXT STEPS

6. The Secretary of State and Dr Mawhinney had held meetings with officials on 10 and 12 January, and a further meeting with the Secretary of State was planned, on political development. An assessment of the political situation indicated there was currently no greater chance of rapid progress on the political front than there had been last May; but neither, since Duisburg, were the prospects much worse. The Government's strategy, therefore, remained unchanged; the way forward was to encourage inter-party talks with the aim of moving to, or towards, devolution. The question to be addressed was whether, with the failure of Duisburg, the Government should take action. In favour of action, there was much interest currently around in the parties for political movement. If HMG did nothing it would be criticised. Indeed the Government's concern not to upset the Duisburg procedure may have given the impression that Ministers were doing very little. Arguments against taking action in the form of a dramatic 'initiative' centred on the Government's need to look to the parties for ideas on how to agree. The chances for progress soon were not good because of the forthcoming elections. If the Government put forward detailed ideas it would be unlikely to help even if the parties were attracted.

7. The Secretary of State was disturbed at the extent to which the message in Northern Ireland was that the Unionists had put forward ideas and HMG had failed to respond. Mr King wished the Government to be more public about its position. The message should be promulgated that it was not HMG's fault that no progress had been made. There had been also a deliberate attempt by the Unionists to force a split between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on the issue of political progress in Northern Ireland. Therefore the Government should re-take the initiative in ways which would attempt to coax the political parties and other major players into bi-lateral talks with the Government. The Secretary of State's representative would probably be Dr Mawhinney, subject to Mr King's

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agreement, since the Secretary of State himself was unlikely to have enough time to indulge in a further round of talks with the parties and in any case should be kept 'in reserve'. Thought should be given to the question of a major speech in which the Secretary of State could announce this move (it might also be announced to the parties in advance), but it would be important not to allow it to be seen as committing HMG to an Initiative: it was for the parties to make the moves of substance.

8. HMG's aim, was inter-party talks. The objective was to maintain and increase political momentum and to capitalise on the interest that existed in talks taking place. Basically the same strategy remained but with added impetus. Real movement to or towards devolution was unlikely in the next six months, but an immediate start should be made. There were short and long term interests in doing so, and those short term would end around Easter with the start of the election campaigns and the results of the Article 11 review. Medium term attractions consistent with HMG's policy to or towards eventual devolution should be identified, such as local government options and improving direct rule. Matters would, of course, stop short of integration. It was not in the Government's interests to make any initiative appear to be over-significant for fear of raising expectations. The discussions needed to be seen for what they were, and in the meantime HMG would continue with good government.

9. In addition to private conversations with the parties, it would also be necessary to speak to some influential public figures to pass the word generally that HMG was not standing in the way of political progress, but was doing its utmost to facilitate it. Rather than sending formal invitations through the post, party leaders should be invited publicly, and pursued by Ministers until they agreed to a meeting. If they continued to refuse to meet, HMG would have conducted its project in such a way that Unionist refusal would be public.

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10. Any fresh initiative on dialogue should be given added impetus with the carrot and stick syndrome. A small stick from the Unionist point of view would be publicising the talks so it would be obvious that HMG was doing something and that the party leaders were not responding. A Unionist carrot was that once in discussions they would have broken their boycott of Ministers and were looking for a solution to this particular dilemma. Messrs Taylor and McCrea were the only two MPs who had not spoken to Ministers. Talks about political development should be easier for the Unionists because it would allow them to talk about demolishing the Anglo-Irish Agreement; but they would need to be asked what they would like to achieve if there was a gap in the conference. An SDLP stick might be the Unionists talking with the Government. It would be vital to remember that HMG's views had to be sold to the Irish. One of the carrots for the Irish would be allowing the Taoiseach to claim some glory in his last (?) term in office, in which event his general interests might coincide with HMG's. His ultimate prize of course was unattainable. However, a specific Irish carrot might lie in Unionist statements that if inter-party talks occurred they would be prepared to meet Haughey, to determine Irish views.

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

11. The quiescence of Anglo-Irish relations should be viewed as a positive state of affairs. Leaving aside internal Irish political problems such as possible elections and Haughey's last year, 1989 would be an interesting year in Anglo-Irish relations. HMG should be ready to exploit any opportunities that arose. The Review search for mutual political achievements of the Agreement was still in progress. An obvious candidate was the British Irish Parliamentary body. Any problems on the Review would not be substantial. There would be some good things to play for on a wide range of issues. Mid-February would provide a number of opportunities for both Ministers and officials in Dublin.

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12. It would be necessary to hold a conference before long. It was important to discuss with the Irish, at a senior level, HMG's political efforts rather than simply informing them through official channels. On the question of extradition, the Secretary of State should ask at the next conference meeting how matters stood. The problems on this issue were currently for the Irish. The British approach should be to remain cool and to convey the importance of this stance to Number 10.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ISSUES

13. Three factors were relevant on the local government front. Proceedings under the Elections Bill, the forthcoming elections, and the DOE consultative paper. Councils were currently in the countdown to the May elections. The November consultative paper had elicited very little response except for criticism on the UUP/DUP side about reducing local democracy in Northern Ireland. There was continuing trouble with Sinn Fein presence on councils and a widespread feeling that the declaration would not have the intended effect.

14. The Elected Authorities Bill had passed through the Commons Committee very fast, basically unamended. McGrady and Forsythe were the Northern Ireland representatives on the Committee. There would be considerable difficulties in following through the declaration and this fact appeared to be registering with MPs. The SDLP were unreconciled to the Bill and the Unionists were becoming less interested in it without amendments. The timetable was Report and Third Reading on 26 January; Second Reading in the Lords on 9 February; and Royal Assent by 21 March.

15. Central Secretariat should alert departments to the need to identify and inform constitutional political parties of matters that might be of particular interest to them in the run up to the local elections. CPL would consider in March whether pre-election guidance should be provided for Ministers.

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INFORMATION STRATEGY GROUP

16. Minutes of meetings of ISG which had been circulated had overtaken the need for a progress report on this front. Ministers and officials needed to be fully aware of the differentiation in what could be said about PIRA as opposed to Sinn Fein. ISG would produce a paper on its deliberations and would propose a Ministerial group meeting.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

17. Members of the group were asked to consider whether video-conferencing should be used for regular discussions on political matters to update PDG officials on both sides of the water. This would enable PDG meetings as such to be called less frequently, and probably only when there were new moves to plan.

SUMMARY OF ACTION

- 18 i) CPL to provide a briefing paper for the Secretary of State's meeting on political strategy (remit now fulfilled);
- ii) CPL to continue work on paper for Ministers, covering devolution and areas of agreement between parties;
- iii) Central Secretariat to alert departments to identify areas of interest to parties in run-up to local elections;
- iv) PAB to produce paper commissioned in minutes of last PDG meeting.

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DATE OF NEXT MEETING

19. To be arranged subject to views on paragraph 17.

CLAIRE MARSON

Constitutional & Political Division

23 January 1989

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