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Reference Code: 2001/8/1

Title: Typescript memorandum titled 'A Note on North-South Border Policy' signed by T.K. Whittaker [Secretary, Department of Finance] and addressed to the Taoiseach

Creation Date(s): 11 Nov 1968

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 6 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

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2001/8/1

TaoiseachA Note on North-South Policy

1. Long since we abandoned force as a means of undoing Partition, and rightly so because (1) the use of force to overcome Northern Unionists would accentuate rather than remove basic differences and (2) it would not be militarily possible in any event. We were, therefore, left with only one choice, a policy of seeking unity in Ireland by agreement in Ireland between Irishmen. Of its nature this is a long-term policy, requiring patience, understanding and forbearance and resolute resistance to emotionalism and opportunism. It is none the less patriotic for that. This is the policy enunciated and followed by Mr. Lemass as Taoiseach and it underlies the contacts made by him and by the present Taoiseach with Captain O'Neill and the members of his Government.

2. De facto, at any rate, we have recognised that Northern Ireland is at present part of the United Kingdom and that the Government of Northern Ireland exercises responsibility there to the extent of the devolution granted by Westminster. The British Parliament has determined and guaranteed the constitution of Northern Ireland. We do not - or at any rate need not - expect the British Government or Parliament to repeal the Acts of 1920 and 1949 and expel Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom against the wishes of the majority in Northern Ireland. The British are not blameless, as far as the origins of Partition are concerned, but neither are they wholly to blame. Nobody can read the history of the past century in these islands without some understanding of the deep, complex and powerful forces which went into the making of Partition. It is much too naive to believe that Britain simply imposed it on Ireland. For the

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Northern Unionists the main motive binding them to the United Kingdom is fear rather than loyalty - fear of loss of power, property, privilege and even religious independence if they were subject to a Dublin Parliament. They are also conscious (as are many Nationalists, too) of the superior financial advantages, in terms of agricultural subsidies, social services, etc., of being part of the United Kingdom rather than an independent dominion or part of an Ireland receiving no annual subventions from Westminster. At present, the annual subsidy from Westminster (over and above entitlement based on N.I. tax contributions) is of the order of ¹⁹⁰~~270~~ million.

3. We have already drawn the conclusion that all we can expect from the British is a benevolent neutrality - that no British interest will be interposed to prevent the re-unification of Ireland when Irishmen, North and South, have reached agreement. This, of itself, will be cold comfort if we cannot, in addition, achieve a good "marriage settlement", in the form of a tapering-off over a long period of present British subsidisation of N.I. Otherwise, we in the South will be imposing on ourselves a formidable burden which many of our own citizens, however strong their desire for Irish unity, may find intolerable. We cannot lay certain social ills in the North at the door of Partition without acknowledging (at least in private) that conditions for the Catholics in N.I. would be far worse if Partition were abolished overnight. We could not for a long time offer more than partial compensation for the loss of the enormous U.K. grants and subsidies.

4. It is unwise to suppose that the reaction of the British Government and Parliament, of the press and public opinion, to evidence of discrimination in housing and jobs and an inequitable

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local franchise in N.I. will favour the ending of Partition. The concern aroused is rather about the image of Britain and the reaction will be to hasten the righting of social and political injustice in the local jurisdiction. The British merely want to clean up what they regard as an unrepresentable back-yard. It is possible that some British Labour Party members would like to see N.I. cut adrift from the U.K. in order to reduce the Conservative - Unionist vote and, perhaps, save money for other purposes. But these are probably a minority even in the Labour Party; any such British saving would, in any case, be at our expense in the South; and there can be no doubt that the British Parliament would overwhelmingly refuse to expel a "loyal" N.I. from the U.K. We must treat all British manoeuvres in relation to N.I. as being inspired by (1) short-term political party motives and (2) the longer-term desideratum of cleaning up a "back-yard" which gives Britain a bad image in the eyes of the world. We should, above all, be most careful, bearing in mind both our own long-term interest in "reaching agreement in Ireland between Irishmen" and our short-term economic incapacity, never to appear to suggest to the British that N.I. could be brought to heel by financial sanctions, such as the reduction or withdrawal of present grants and subsidies. The mere suspicion in N.I. (amongst Catholics no less than Protestants) that we were trying such tactics would be extremely damaging to our interests; besides, even if tried, the tactics would (fortunately) be ineffective.

5. The meetings between the Prime Ministers and other Ministers, North and South, have been directed towards fostering good-will and co-operation. They have expressly had no constitutional or

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political content. Neither side has in any way abandoned its political principles or ideals. Mr. O'Neill and his Government remain Unionists. Their aim presumably is to reduce tensions between Nationalists (North and South) and Unionists and to make N.I. a thriving, efficient entity within the U.K. in which all the inhabitants, regardless of religion or political loyalties, will be happy to live together.

6. We, for our part, remain dedicated to the ideal of a united Ireland. We need not torment ourselves by the thought that Mr. O'Neill's policy might succeed, that even Northern Nationalists would some day be seduced, by the elimination of discrimination and satisfaction of employment and housing needs, into becoming happy citizens of a N.I. within the U.K. We should rather remind ourselves how Mr. O'Neill's policy, besides being best for our Nationalist brethren in the short-run, is the most likely to loosen the roots of Partition and prepare the way for agreement between North and South on some form of re-unification. The longer-term factors are working for us. So far as Partition (and Northern "loyalty" to the U.K.) rests on fear, the grounds for this will be progressively removed by the growing prosperity of both parts of Ireland, the approach to full employment and satisfaction of housing needs, the disappearance, in other words of the root causes of discrimination. All the modern trends are towards liberalisation, towards greater concern with human rights and conditions, towards looser regional political groupings, towards greater tolerance (or indifference) in religious matters. These cannot but affect the North; indeed, they are already patently at work. There is also a growing desire, even within the U.K., for greater local autonomy and there is little doubt

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that the N.I. Government envies our distinctive statehood as shown by our independent representation on international bodies and our comprehensive responsibility for administering our own affairs and following our own economic and fiscal policies.

7. In our approach to North-South relations, it is important that we should not be the prisoners of old ideas, even as to the form that re-unification might take. Some of these ideas are no doubt still fruitful but we may have to be more original and ingenious if we are to accommodate ourselves to the realities of the present day and more particularly to the conditions that may exist when the question becomes a live one. The recent emphasis on the need for fresh thinking is timely. Our minds should be open to explore all kinds of possibilities - confederation, federation, external association, condominium, the Benelux arrangement, the political integration principles evolved in EEC. The financial subsidisation problem is only one of the reasons why a very special formula may have to be found. It need not involve any surrender of our present independence. From the standpoint of North-South relations it is unfortunate that our 1937 Constitution appears to claim for Dublin such a premature and dogmatic right, without reservations as to form, to rule the whole of Ireland. But there is nothing we can do about this, in present circumstances, except to forget it!

8. The most forceful argument in favour of the patient good-neighbour policy aimed at ultimate "agreement in Ireland between Irishmen" is that no other policy has any prospect of success. Force will get us nowhere; it will only strengthen the fears, antagonisms and divisions that keep North and South apart. Relying on Britain to solve Partition is also futile; the very

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most we can expect is generous goodwill, financial and political. Trying to get Britain to put pressure on the N.I. Government will pay no dividends politically; they are interested only in cleaning up their own image, while we will incur the antagonism of both Unionists and Nationalists if we seem to be exploiting the social rights issue for our own political ends. There is, in fact, no valid alternative to the policy of "agreement in Ireland between Irishmen"; any other policy risks creating a deeper and more real partition than has ever existed in the past. We were in real danger that such a partition would be created during the IRA raids when the people of North and South almost ceased visiting one another and the Border resembled the Berlin Wall. Misunderstanding and suspicion can be broken down only by friendly and frequent contact, just as discrimination can be abolished only by working together to create better prospects of jobs and houses for all. We can leave it mostly to public opinion and to pressure from the British Parliament and Government, to prod the N.I. Government into more vigorous and effective reforms regarding social conditions and the local franchise. If progress continues to be slow, we might consider what we could do vis-a-vis the Belfast, in preference to the London, Government.

M. J. Whitaker

11 Nov. 1968