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Title: Report written by Seán Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs, of recent conversations he had with SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] Assemblymen and other representatives of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Topics discussed included the prospect of British withdrawal and independence for Northern Ireland, the recent wave of sectarian assassinations in Belfast, the actions of security forces in Catholic areas, the chances for a fruitful Convention, the SDLP's lack of influence, SDLP attitudes towards the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary], and recent riots by IRA internees in Northern prisons. Includes a covering note from HJ McCann, Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs, to Liam Cosgrave, Taoiseach.

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Visit to N.I. 23-25 October, 1974

1. The following report is based on conversations in recent days with SDLP Assemblymen, - in particular lengthy private conversations with - Messr. Hume, Currie and Devlin, and with prominent members of the minority community including Mr. Seamus O'Hara, vice-chairman of the NI Housing Executive, Mr. Tom Conaty of the Belfast Central Citizens' Defence Committee, the Roman Catholic Chaplain at Long Kesh and the Chairman of the Board of Visitors of NI Prisons. I visited Dungannon, Armagh and Belfast on 23-25 October and met John Hume in Dublin on 25 October.
2. There is a widespread feeling that the British are intent on a complete withdrawal from NI and a stronger conviction than ever that there is now no prospect that the British will confront loyalists, either politically or even in a limited security operation e.g. by attempting to seek out illegally held arms, ammunition and explosives in notoriously militant loyalist areas. The recent wave of sectarian assassinations in Belfast has created there a climate of fear and despair deeper than at any time in recent years. For every attempted assassination reported in the press there are, said to be two or three more not reported by the intended victim who is either too frightened or not injured and the cumulative impact of an estimated 100-130 assassination attempts in about four weeks in a geographically limited area in west and north of Belfast is enormous. The greater Newtownabbey area is particularly badly hit, as it was during previous assassination campaigns, and the total inability or unwillingness of the security forces to provide protection even in the very obvious danger areas such as the Rathcoole housing estate has convinced most Catholics that they can expect absolutely nothing from the British administration. (It is worth recalling that the Minister for Foreign Affairs raised the specific case of

Newtownabbey with the Secretary of State for NI at a meeting in ^{DUBLIN} London on 13.5.1974). According to Mr. O'Hara almost all Roman Catholic families have now been intimidated out of Rathcoole and a 1500 estate which was planned by the Housing Executive as a mixed 50/50 estate and which at one time had about 500 RC families now has 37 such families and it is expected that they will be out by Christmas. Though it is widely believed that the estate is UDA controlled and provides a safe haven from which to launch assassinations and other violent incidents there is said to be no evidence of any searching or even patrolling of the area by security forces. By contrast, minority areas e.g. Andersonstown continue to be saturated with British troops who are involved in a very high level of house searches and arresting of youngsters for four hour "screening" but who provide little obvious protection against assassinations by e.g. screening people coming into minority areas. (In a twenty four hour stay in Belfast, I drove four times into the Falls area via Sandy Row without being challenged. In that period there were five reported assassination attempts in Belfast, including three in the Falls. The other two were in or near Rathcoole).

3. It is against this background of fear and despair - though it should be mentioned that there is no campaign of sectarian assassinations outside Belfast and indeed that there is relatively little violence or inter-community tension elsewhere in NI at the moment - that the political situation has to be assessed. The SDLP, most of whose Assemblymen say they have no doubt that the British are preparing to get out, believe that the Convention elections will be held at latest next Spring and they are convinced that the Convention is doomed to failure. Many of the SDLP leaders have in recent weeks had private conversations with loyalist leaders and these contacts have convinced them that there is not even an outside chance of a fruitful Convention. The party is still considering its

attitude to the elections and though they have by no means reached a final decision they are not at the moment inclined to participate in the Convention and thereby contribute towards giving a loyalist takeover a veneer of respectability. The current debate within the party centres on whether they should boycott the elections completely - and thereby possibly surrender their position to the IRA - or participate on an abstentionist platform. Their internal party discussion on this or indeed any question is not helped by the fact that there is apparently no party consensus on what their fallback position should be in the event of the Convention failing. Hume sees a move towards NI independence, more likely negotiated than unilaterally declared, as almost inevitable but says that he cannot at this stage even seriously contemplate it. He is not prepared to trust the majority who have all the machinery of state, particularly the police and public service, on their side and he feels that in this situation any outside guarantor, whether British, Irish, UN or combination of the three, would be meaningless. Recalling his experience as Minister of Commerce during the UWC strike, Hume says that the only acceptable guarantor would be one who could at a time of crisis generate and distribute electricity and provide adequate security for NI as a whole. He does not see that the British have the will to be serious guarantors, the recent problems in Cyprus have left him with little faith in UN guarantees and he does not hesitate to say that the Republic lacks any real capacity to contribute towards an effective independent guarantee system. If anything, Currie is even more negative than Hume on an independent NI and says that for the SDLP to give it any consideration at the moment would be political madness in that it would undermine the minimal prospects there are for their NI and north-south partnership policy. Currie is deeply suspicious of loyalists trends towards NI independence which he says they see as simply another way back to indefinite one party rule. He has discussed it informally with a number

of loyalists - including John Taylor who, he says, has now no influence on Unionist Party affairs and has almost no prospect of winning an Assembly seat - and nothing they have said give him any reason to trust them.

4. The SDLP are very reluctant to contemplate an indefinite period of direct rule. Their main stated objection to it is that it would do nothing to stop the IRA campaign but in private they add that it would in effect make them redundant. Since the re-imposition of direct rule in May, they are very conscious of their loss of position and their inability to exert any real influence on day to day political developments. (Currie pointed out that there was nothing they could do to focus attention on internment as effectively as the IRA had done by burning Long Kesh and getting people out in street protests again). They feel they did well to hold their vote at the recent Westminster elections but they are not confident of their ability to do this after an unsuccessful Convention exercise followed by more direct rule. More than at any time in recent years, the SDLP feel their position seriously threatened by the IRA. Both Devlin and Currie say that there can now be no settlement to which the IRA are not a party and though Hume does not fully agree he would certainly like to see some way in which the IRA could be brought more directly into the political process so that the possible 10% of the minority who support them would be fully committed to any agreement reached. Outside the SDLP, the general minority view, especially east of the Bann, would seem to be that the best that can be hoped for is an indefinite period of direct rule though there is considerable fear that not only would the IRA continue its campaign of violence but that loyalist frustrations in a period of prolonged direct rule would also ensure considerable violence from that source.

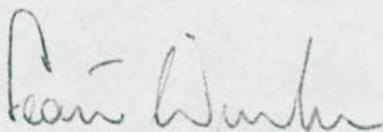
5. The SDLP as a whole continue to feel that their position has been seriously undermined by statements made by the Taoiseach and Ministers in the last few months - they were, however, very pleased with the references to NI in the Taoiseach's Dáil speech on 23 October - and while they understand the motivation behind them they are convinced that such speeches undermine the negotiating position both of Dublin and of the SDLP and thereby make successful negotiation almost impossible. They regret as much as anyone the return to tribal patterns in NI but say that once this has happened there is nothing for Dublin to do but to join its tribe. They see no hope of a moderate unionist position emerging and in this situation see little point in our getting involved in conciliatory gestures e.g. on the Constitution at a time when the unionist population is not only so united in its intransigence but is also imposing its will on the British Government without regard for the position or feelings of the minority. Leaving aside the merits of any such moves or their impact in NI, the SDLP feel that the worst possible time to get involved in a potentially divisive debate on a subject connected with NI is at a time of imminent major crisis when the future of NI may have to be the subject of discussion by the Government here with the British and possibly other foreign authorities.

6. The recent assassination campaign has brought to the surface again differences of opinion within the SDLP on their attitude to the RUC. The Belfast Assemblymen, notably Fitt and Devlin, have in public statements in recent days gone very close to asking the minority at least to co-operate with the RUC if not to consider joining the force and there is no doubt that in doing this they are reflecting a widespread feeling among elements of the minority community in Belfast that at the moment the RUC would be better than no police force. Hume and Canavan, however, who have since the Devenney death and other Bogside/RUC incidents in 1971 been the party strategists

on policing but who come from an area which is not directly affected by assassination threats, are still holding the party as a whole to the position that the SDLP cannot endorse any police force in the absence of acceptable political structures. A majority of the non-Belfast Assemblymen objected strongly ^{to} ~~at~~ a recent meeting between their Belfast colleagues and the RUC Chief Constable to discuss police action on assassinations and Hume in particular feels that Fitt is allowing himself to be used in a major British exercise to seek minority support for the RUC without regard to the views of the SDLP as a whole. Hume has always seen the withholding of support from the RUC as one of the SDLP's negotiating cards and thinks this would be the worst possible time to make any concession. He claims that the logic of Fitt's position would be for the British to organise assassination campaigns all over the place so that the minority would be driven in desperation to a "come back RUC, all is forgiven" position.

7. Conditions in NI detention centres following the IRA organised disturbances of 16/17 October are giving rise to concern not simply because of the appalling conditions in which detained persons now find themselves - not only in Long Kesh but also in Crumlin Road jail where the trouble was much more serious than reported and the injuries sustained both by warders and prisoners relatively greater than at Long Kesh - but because of the impact the situation is having on the minority community. It is in this area that the SDLP feels itself particularly outflanked by the Provos. Even Catholics who were not in principle opposed to internment have long felt that conditions at Long Kesh have been intolerable and in its three year history the authorities showed no willingness to make serious efforts in such matters as heating, privacy, recreation facilities and structural repairs. In burning Long Kesh, the IRA capitalised on this feeling and they are now milking it for what it is worth. (The SDLP's position

on internment is such that most internees will not accept visits from the party's Assemblymen and the SDLP's refusal to join with other parties in visiting Long Kesh after the burning was influenced to a large extent by the knowledge that they would not be very well received by the internees). While the British decision to leave the internees in considerable discomfort while they take their time about rebuilding or making alternative arrangements may make sense in the limited context of detention policies, it makes very little political sense at a time when many in the minority community are once more inclining to the view that the IRA may, after all, have something to contribute to a solution and on this issue at least they have no difficulty in identifying themselves clearly with the IRA position. Both the Long Kesh chaplain and the Chairman of the Prison Visitors Committee which has spent considerable time recently in Crumlin Road jail described the conditions as totally unacceptable. Not only are the physical conditions appalling but apparently morale among prison staff is at breakdown point so that the ability of the authorities to make any serious improvement in the situation is seriously limited. Prison policy is, for all practical purposes, now made by warders who can hardly be said to take a balanced view of the needs of the community as a whole.



Seán Donlon

26 October, 1974