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REPORT OF THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS VISIT

TO NORTHERN IRELAND

Thursday, 18th December 1975

1. The Minister for Foreign Affairs met an SDLP group at their party headquarters in Belfast on 18 December 1975. The group consisted of Messrs. Currie, Devlin, Canavan, Feely and Turnly and Messrs. McAreavy and Lacey of the headquarters staff. The Minister was accompanied by Messrs. Donlon and McColgan.

2. Currie said his impression was that the Convention Report would be referred back with questions and that the Convention would be re-convened, probably for about a month, with a mandate to consider the questions and look again at the possibility of agreeing on a form of government which would be acceptable at Westminster. In the unlikely event of agreement emerging, the British would probably put it to a referendum rather than call new elections. The possibility of any agreement emerging was, however, remote in the extreme and for this reason the SDLP accepted that the one month timescale was realistic.

3. Canavan felt that Dublin's efforts in the coming weeks should be to put pressure on the British to refer the Report back in a way which would spell out in very clear and unambiguous terms what the 1974 Convention Act meant. He had worries about the current British commitment to the terms of the 1974 White Paper and Act.

4. Currie thought that things were at the moment working out exactly as Paisley wanted them. The clear rejection by Westminster of the Report would, however, create difficulties within the UUUC and possibly even bring about a split when the Convention members realised that only the Westminster MPs, dominated by Paisley, would survive politically.

5. Devlin and Canavan said it was important to emphasise to the UUUC that their election manifesto committed them to devolved government for Northern Ireland and the more they were held to that the greater the internal UUUC difficulties would be when the Convention ended. Devlin added that the two key people to talk to in the coming weeks were Bob Mellish, the Labour Party Whip and Sir Robert Lowry, the Chairman of the Convention. Mellish could ensure that the Northern Ireland debate at Westminster took place before and would be separated from the devolution debates. Lowry had a key role to play in private inter-party talks and also in preparing the ground, especially among loyalist backbenchers, for a fruitful second session

of the Convention. But to be effective, he would have to resume work immediately rather than wait until the Report came back.

6. Turnly intervened to say that, contrary to what previous speakers said, the UUUC commitment to devolved government was not total. Their position was devolved government first and total integration, which for all practical purposes simply meant the maintenance of the union, second. Feely pointed out that Westminster had clearly rejected total integration.

7. The Minister then asked what form of direct rule Dublin and the SDLP should aim to achieve if further attempts at agreed power-sharing failed. He assumed some local political activity was essential and that the existing local authorities did not provide a basis for this. What were the SDLP views on a local consultative or legislative assembly?

8. Currie replied that if there was no power-sharing, there could be no question of SDLP participation in any other form of government for Northern Ireland. If direct rule continued, that would give total power to the British and the SDLP could not accept participation in an elected assembly which would be largely on the sidelines and would in any event have a comfortable loyalist majority.

9. Devlin said that the SDLP had already conceded enough and that it was now time to look not at intermediate mickey-mouse situations but to have a hard look at the long-term and the extreme positions which could well arise. Concentrating on short-term positions was cosmetic only. Though never a friend of Fianna Fáil, he thought they had at least thought their position through and it was a position which, whatever about the timing of its announcement, he found attractive. Looking south at the moment, the only attractive thing he could see was the increase in defence spending.

10. The Minister said that the medium-term was nevertheless important and it would be useful for both Dublin and the SDLP to have the same position.

11. Currie reiterated that there was no support for the consultative assembly idea within the SDLP. For one thing, it would contribute absolutely nothing to the security question. The Minister asked if

rejecting the idea completely was not playing into Paisley's hands. He would then be in almost total command of loyalist politics.

12. Feely gave as his view that in participating in an assembly, the SDLP would only be adding respectability to what the British were doing and there was no sign that the British would do anything but continue to run away from the real problem.

13. Canavan said that even the Convention was held in very low esteem by the electorate. An assembly would be an object of ridicule and would be laughed out of existence or blown out of it by the Provos. The alternative policy had already been put by the SDLP to the Government in Dublin and no response was forthcoming. The SDLP were not suggesting any handover to Paisley.

14. Currie repeated his views about the weakness of any assembly which did not have security responsibility. Their experience in the 1974 Assembly was still strong in their memory.

15. In reply to questions on a legislative assembly and increased powers for local government, the SDLP said they were strongly opposed to both. A legislative assembly would, of course, have a loyalist majority and the SDLP would continue to oppose increased powers for local authorities until there was a central devolved government in which they were partners. Currie predicted that generally from now on, there would be a considerable hardening of the SDLP position and this could begin to manifest itself as early as late January.

16. Canavan and Turnly pressed for Dublin's support for the SDLP idea of joint British/Irish control of security in Northern Ireland as a prelude to British withdrawal in the event of the loyalists rejecting Westminster's terms for the maintenance of the union. The Minister replied that this was a policy which was obviously not capable of being implemented and was not therefore a policy option in any realistic sense of the word. Feely said that Dublin could not hope to continue to shirk the problem forever.

17. Canavan raised North-South security co-operation and said that it was not good to see such a close coming together on all security matters between the two sovereign governments: Devlin immediately

intervened to disagree strongly with Canavan. He said he wanted nothing but the fullest and closest co-operation and in this he was fully supported by Currie who said that areas like his and South Armagh were suffering enormously because of the freedom of movement which Provos seemed to have in Monaghan and Louth. Everyone knew that the recent killings of the policemen in Tyrone was carried out by Provos who were now walking the streets in Castleblayney.

18. Turnly asked what Dublin would do for the minority in the doomsday situation. The Minister replied that, for reasons which he hoped would be appreciated, this was a question which he could not answer.

The Minister had almost an hour-long meeting with the Reverend Martin Smyth in the Russell Court Hotel. Smyth showed considerable interest in the Minister's visits to the United States in the Autumn and the Minister spent some time explaining his views of the situation there. Smyth was particularly interested in the Minister's assessment of Paul O'Dwyer whom he had recently met in Belfast. Smyth thought he detected the beginning of a change in O'Dwyer's attitude. The Minister said that he really had not changed substantially but that he was undoubtedly reflecting more on the question and there were some indications that he might be moving towards a slight modification of his position.

The Minister went on to say that it was clear that the British Government would not accept the UUUC Convention Report. Opposition to it was if anything more solidified on the Tory side than on the Government side; this was natural enough as the Government would have the responsibility for saying no and therefore could not at the present adopt a very forward attitude. Smyth disagreed firmly with the Minister's assessment of the likely Westminster response and the Minister replied that in his view the Unionists were not at present being dealt with frankly by their British friends especially those in the Tory party. The Minister went on to say that obviously devolved government for the North of Ireland was the most desirable option. If there was no devolved government the only person who would be strengthened by that situation would be Paisley. He would become the strong man at Westminster and the main spokesman to the British Government on behalf of the people of Ulster. The Minister feared the Unionists at times failed to look far enough ahead and tend to respond to the strong immediate pressures and thereby lose the opportunity of their ultimate long-term interests. If there was not to be devolved government the Minister wondered where this would leave the Unionists.

Smyth reacted sharply to this and said that it would leave the Unionists within the Union which is where they had always wanted to be. It was perhaps not sufficiently realised, particularly by the British Government, that 50 per cent of Unionist politicians were not professionals and that their main interest in life was not their own political survival. If the British do not give the Unionists what they

want, the Unionists have shown by the UWC strike that they can use the weapon of withholding their support and he has no doubt whatsoever that they would use this weapon again. There seems to be a considerable number of people who are unaware of the depth of attitude on the Unionist side on this matter. They have been pushed to the ultimate position and on this position they will stand and will not move. Paisley is undoubtedly a strong voice at Westminster but the fact of the matter is that he has been accused by many people of having a poor attendance record there and in Smyth's view the rallying point in the anti-devolution debate is more likely to be Enoch Powell.

The fact of the matter was that under no circumstances would people on the Unionist side accept power-sharing. He realised that this might exclude the possibility of them ever getting devolved government but they were willing to live with the consequences of this action. One possible way of resolving the deadlock would be to hold an election and let party leaders like Fitt, Faulkner, Napier, Bleakley and Craig stand on a platform of voluntary coalition. If that grouping managed to get a majority in an election the Unionists would accept the verdict of the people and become a loyal opposition. The Minister said such a proposal was based on the premise that there was in fact a majority for power-sharing in the Province. There clearly was ^{at present} not/and the likely result of any election would still be to give the UUUC a majority. Smyth did not totally agree with this and was inclined to think that if another election was held no party might have an overall majority and there would inevitably be some form of coalition government. It would be up to the leader of the strongest party after such an election to choose his cabinet. While there was no possibility of the Unionists ever accepting the SDLP in government there might well be a coalition with the Alliance Party, with people like Hendron and Napier as Catholics being given seats in the cabinet. This would effectively ensure the Catholic minority some voice in government. The Minister expressed doubts about the likelihood of Alliance members accepting office in such circumstances.

Smyth went on to say the hard reality of the situation was that they realised it was contrary to their long-term best interests not to have a devolved parliament but historically and from the very start they had never wanted a parliament of their own; they had only wanted to be

part of the United Kingdom. In present circumstances they will settle for either integration or some form of direct rule from Westminster as their second-best option. It was quite wrong to suggest that the Unionists were trying to defy Westminster. They were not doing this; they were saying to Westminster "If you give us devolved government it must be by majority rule but if you are not prepared to give us devolved government we are prepared to be ruled by you". The sticking point was the continuation of the Union and they were not prepared to accept anyone in government whose even very long-term aspirations would be ultimately to undermine the continuance of the Union.

Smyth added that while he did not question the sincerity of the Minister's personal views or the views indeed of the Government, the fact of the matter is that the majority of people in Northern Ireland regarded the Fianna Fáil position as reflecting the real attitude of most Southerners to the North of Ireland and that any solution which strengthened the Union was, in the face of this general Southern attitude, the one that they would opt for. Smyth's final point was that under no circumstances could any enforced form of government (whether constitutionally enforced or by a shotgun marriage) in Northern Ireland be a stable or lasting government.

The Minister also had a half-hour meeting with Oliver Napier of the Alliance Party. Napier's assessment was that the situation was now drifting very much the wrong way due to the indecisiveness of the British. The problem was that Rees was incapable of negotiating with anyone and the second round of the Convention (whatever it might have produced) now had practically no chance of succeeding. The recent questionnaire on financing which Rees had circulated to the parties had given the Loyalists the impression that the detail of the report might be questioned but that the underlying principles of the UUUC report were not in question. As a result they were now convinced that they would get the general basis of the report and therefore they are at present cock-a-hoop. This has raised their hopes unrealistically and when these hopes are dashed it will make the situation more difficult eventually.

Napier went on to say that up to a fortnight ago he would have been quite categorical that there was no chance of the Convention Report being accepted by the British. Because of the delays and the way the British were handling the situation he was now not so sure that the rejection would be as firm as it needed to be. The other element in the situation is that the credibility of the British Ministers in the North of Ireland had been so reduced that it had now reached a situation where no matter what they said nobody would believe it. His own view was that the Report should be rejected because it did not have cross-community support and did not conform with the terms of the 1974 Act. All the British had to do was to say this politely, firmly and tactfully. It needed to be done immediately because the Loyalists were now in a mood where they believed that it was only a matter of sticking it out and they would eventually get what they wanted whether this took weeks, months or years.

In the last 48 hours it had become even clearer that the Unionists will not participate in a reconvened Convention unless the British say no clearly and firmly. The problem was that the Unionists, due to the pressure they were now bringing on the British Government, were getting themselves onto hooks that it would be extremely hard for them to get off and because of the delay in debating the Report they now had three or four more weeks to get further embedded on these hooks. The key ingredient in the situation was the total lack of direction from British Ministers and he added that neither he nor his colleagues in recent meetings had been given any idea whatsoever what British policy is. The Craig idea, whatever chance it may have had, was now dead and he had very little hope that it could be revived even in some variant form.

An example of the fact that Stormont Castle was totally out of touch with the situation on the ground and giving no leadership whatsoever was shown in their handling of the Christmas parole of prisoners. He personally had approached Lord Donaldson and urged him to be as generous on this matter as possible. He had written to Donaldson about 23 cases which he thought fell within the general rules but in fact only two out of these 23 had been granted parole and he had learned this not from Donaldson but by ringing up the Maze, Magilligan and Crumlin Road prisons. The result of this type of approach was that people went to the UDA to deliver the goods on issues like this

and the effect of Stormont Castle's line was to throw the people into the arms of the para-militaries.

The UDA at present is reasonably quiescent and is being reasonably well-controlled by Tyrrie who is very much in charge, ably assisted by two men called Elliott and Stitt. In Napier's view there was only negligible support for a strike at present but in post-Convention frustration this could build up. The main tragedy of the situation was the lack of policy on the British part. Their only plan appeared to be to wait for something to turn up and to hope that some miracle or other would rescue them from their pursuance of a non-policy.

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