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11.12.79

Misc.
F. 2.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

Note

This was among
a number of notes
prepared to brief
the incoming
Taoiseach
M.H.

NORTHERN IRELAND

ATKINS INITIATIVE

1. British Position

The Northern Ireland Secretary of State in his opening statement in the House of Commons on the 29th November, on a motion to take note of his Working Paper commented on some aspects of the Irish Dimension. He appeared in his speech to have moved somewhat from the line he took when launching the Working Paper when in effect he tried to rule out the "Irish Dimension" as a subject for discussion in the talks envisaged on the Working Paper. Mr. Atkins made the point that there are more kinds of Irish Dimension to the Northern Ireland problem than are encompassed by the words Irish unity. He referred to a number of items mainly in the economic sphere which are of concern and interest to people both North and South of the Border. He saw joint activity on matters of common interest, rather than emphasis on political and constitutional problems, as the most practical evidence of the Irish Dimension which he had earlier described as "a straight matter of geography".

2. In winding up the debate in the House of Commons on the 29th November, the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office Mr. Michael Alison, M.P. said "if Irish Dimension means clear moves towards the unity of Ireland it will not be on the Agenda. It is ruled out by paragraph 4 of the document. The honourable member for Belfast West chided us for being so brutally frank about that. We all know of the irreconcilable views in Northern Ireland on that matter". Later he said that if the people of Northern Ireland wanted Irish unity the Government of the UK would not stand in the way. However, so long as they would wish the union to continue the UK Government would respect that wish. He saw the Conference as "not exactly the right arena for the process of peaceful political persuasion of the majority of people of Northern Ireland" who would have to be persuaded to give their consent to the unification or reunification of Ireland. The Conference was not the place for that, Mr. Alison stated. Later he said that there was no point in the Conference discussing the long term constitutional future of Northern Ireland. Again in his concluding remarks Mr. Alison stated that the Irish Dimension must be a factor in any consideration of how Northern Ireland should be governed. He acknowledged that in that form it might well arise in discussion on new arrangements at the Conference.

3. Our Position

The Minister of State in this Department replied to

(7550)122359. 5,000. 7-78. F.P.-G28.

Taoiseach.
You may
be interested
in this note as
background
for your
meeting with
Mr. Hume
tomorrow
(at 4 p.m.)

JH
17/12

Mr. Keenan
JH
17/12

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a question put down by Deputy Blaney on the 28th November last in which the Deputy asked for a statement on the new British initiative announced for the six counties. The Minister of State in his reply made the following points:-

- (a) that the immediate need was an end to the political vacuum and stalemate in the North and that the immediate priority was to establish in Northern Ireland a system of devolved administration which the majority of people in both sections of the Community could support and sustain;
- (b) that responsibility for this rested with the British Government but that a solution would require the co-operation of the two Governments and of both parts of the Community in the North;
- (c) the Government in their initial response to the White Paper said they would be observing developments closely with a view to assessing whether it was likely to be acceptable to both sections of the Community in the North;
- (d) the Government deliberately left it to the Parties in Northern Ireland to give initial reactions to the Working Paper which in the event did not meet a basic criterion already referred to that of acceptability to both sections of the Community in the North;
- (e) the Government requested that further consideration be given to those aspects of the Paper which are the subject of current controversy so as to ensure that an appropriate climate for political progress was brought about.

4. "Representations" to the British Government

Deputy Peter Barry asked in the course of supplementary questions which arose from Deputy Blaney's P.Q. if the Government would try to identify points that are controversial from the point of view of the minority population and make representations to the Government of the United Kingdom.

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Dr. Woods in reply said the Government would do that. On 29 November, Mr. Staples, Counsellor at the British Embassy was called in to the Department of Foreign Affairs, and given a copy of the reply to the P.Q. a copy of the typescript of the exchanges on the supplementary questions together with a copy of the Taoiseach's statement on the Irish dimension of 24 November. In the course of discussion on that occasion, the statements referred to were put in context by the Department of Foreign Affairs representative. Mr. Staples asked whether any publicity would be given to the fact that representations had been conveyed to the British Government on the Working Paper for the proposed conference and was told that this was not intended as such. Mr. Staples asked that if there was any question of our issuing a statement in this regard that the Embassy be given prior notice.

5. Minister for Foreign Affairs Speech on Irish Dimension

The Minister for Foreign Affairs elaborated on the Irish Dimension in a speech which he gave on Sunday, 2nd December, the main points of which could be summarised as follows:-

- (1) The Irish Dimension is a reality:
we live on an island and cannot be isolated from one another: the dense network of relationships between both parts of Ireland in every field of endeavour is a matter of fact not a matter of opinion;
- (2) The Irish Dimension is not a claim or an ambition by the Irish Government to dominate Northern Ireland;
- (3) The Irish Dimension means acting consistently against violence from whatever source and recognises the obligation to protect the life and property of every person from violation and destruction;
- (4) It respects the integrity and richness of all Irish traditions;
- (5) It is based on an appreciation of the extent to which North and South can develop their economic links to mutual advantage;
- (6) It takes pride in the great cultural contribution of Ireland (North and South) to Europe and to the world;

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- (7) It is firmly rooted in a sense of mutual obligation and confidence that our potential at home and abroad makes past or present misunderstandings seem unjustifiable and tragic;
- (8) It is based on a preception that the distinctions between Irish people which loom large at home can shrink in significance in the wider international context;
- (9) It recognises the great and generous contribution that all Irish people can make to alleviate the problems of suffering and under-development afflicting many parts of the world;
- (10) It is based on the voluntary coming together of the Irish people which cannot be on the basis of the predominance of one set of attitudes or one tradition but on the basis of new arrangements which accommodate and foster all traditions.

6. Current Position

In summary our position remains that it is necessary for the British authorities to re-examine the proposed basis for the Conference with a view to adapting it in order to make it acceptable to all of the parties concerned. Since the House of Commons Debate of the 29th November the Northern Ireland Secretary of State has had two meetings with Mr. John Hume, Leader of the SDLP. Mr. Hume is in Strasbourg this week and has a further meeting with Mr. Atkins arranged for the weekend. I asked Mr. David Neligan, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs whether he had heard the outcome of Mr. Hume's contacts to date with Mr. Atkins. Mr. Neligan has had a number of contacts or meetings with Mr. Hume in recent weeks in the course of which the latter confirmed that Dr. Paisley was adopting a more open attitude towards co-operation between North and South and that he (Hume) considered it very important, both within and beyond the context of the present attempted British initiative, to explore Dr. Paisley's view as throughly as possible. Mr. Hume had earlier indicated to Mr. Neligan that he shared David McKitterick's analysis in the Irish Times of 1 December (copy attached) which was to the effect that he (Hume) and Paisley could resolve certain differences as Leaders of their respective Communities.

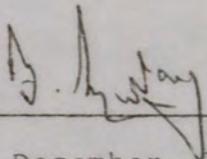
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7. In these contacts Mr. Hume has emphasised his aim of participating in the Conference - the whole aim of his Party had always been to talk he said - but on a basis which the SDLP could accept at grass roots level. In the recent contacts between Messrs. Hume and Atkins they have attempted to find a way around recent difficulties which would enable the SDLP to take part in the talks as they desire. Mr. Neligan has learned from Mrs. Rodgers, Party Chairman, that following the most recent meeting the SDLP are now more optimistic than before that a formula can be agreed upon whereby all the Parties who participate in the Conference will be allowed to discuss their respective policies. Mrs. Rodgers told Mr. Neligan that after the next meeting between Messrs. Hume and Atkins (arranged for Saturday 15 inst) it was likely that a carefully worded statement would be issued indicating that the SDLP would be participating in the Conference on a basis which would mean that "everything would be on the table". In any statement issued the SDLP will be anxious to give a low profile to the "agreement" with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State so as not to upset the apple cart insofar as the DUP or Official Unionists are concerned. Any suggestion of crowing or of triumphalism at their "victory" will be out. They will be emphasising that they are in the business of politics which involves talks, discussions, consensus, and that their situation is totally different to that of the IRA who of course are totally opposed to the idea of the Conference.

8. Mr. Neligan said in conclusion that from his recent contacts with SDLP personnel the message had come across that we should continue to exercise great care in our public reaction to the Atkins Conference and Discussion Document. If we were to be unduly critical of the proposed Conference it would create difficulties for them in relation to the question of their participation in the re-vamped Conference as now appears likely.



11th December, 1979.

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