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NORTHERN IRELAND

Meeting with S.D.L.P.

Taoiseach,

The original purpose of this meeting is to iron out, at political level, directions and orientations for strategy on Northern policy.

Events have meant that the meeting must also be concerned with your forthcoming meeting with the British Prime Minister.

The agenda for to-morrow might deal with relations and possibilities between

1. Both parts of the community in Northern Ireland;
2. North and South in Ireland;
3. Ireland and Britain; and
4. Ireland and the rest of the world.

The following basic considerations may be useful for the general discussions-

- (1) All British thinking is to the effect that the Atkins process will continue for some time yet;
- (2) The S.D.L.P. should avoid responsibility for causing a breakdown in this process. It is, perhaps, even more important that an Irish government should not act so as to attract blame. If the process is to break up, it should be seen as happening because of Unionist intransigence;
- (3) If the process succeeds, there will be a form of local administration in Northern Ireland, acceptable to the minority. This could still leave the Irish dimension too much in the background;
- (4) If the process fails, the British have the option either of -
 - (a) continuing direct rule, which, at present, is operated only on a year to year basis under legislation passed in Westminster. This ensures a continuing review, before the British Parliament and public, of what is happening in Northern Ireland. For the people there, it would mean, possibly, a complete withering away of politics, as we know it. This option could be particularly damaging to the S.D.L.P.;

- (b) "exploring other ways of making the government of Northern Ireland more responsive to the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland", involving a progressive approach to the transfer of a range of powers to a locally elected assembly. This, again, is a solution confined to Northern Ireland. It is hard to see, now, how it would work. A large part of the population of the province would, no doubt, withhold allegiance to an administration established without their consent. We would all be back, where we started - or even further from a solution; or
- (c) Adopting some other approach, again, in the words of the White Paper designed to "make the Government of Northern Ireland more responsive to the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland". This alternative means going away from the White Paper framework and moving into areas which the British have been reluctant to consider even informally. It is, on this, last alternative that I think we must concentrate now.

The inference from all this is that we are accepting the British line and working with British proposals. I think this is the reality of the situation. The British have created the problem. It is on them essentially that the responsibility for proposing a solution rests. In fact, the issue is even more intricate. The British are highly sensitive to suggestions of a conference or any other form of "external" intervention in what they like to regard as a purely united kingdom question. This is a point on which the Prime Minister is particularly sensitive. It needs to be handled with great care. However, it is along these lines that the most promising possibilities lie.

Objections to a conference come also from Northern unionists. ^{These objections are} Emotional, intense, and will not be easily overcome. An essential point is that even if the British now agreed to a conference, there is no representative group in Northern Ireland which would come. All are now further back than unionist opinion was at the time of Faulkner. The question of -

- (1) how to induce unionists to a conference; and
 - (2) what group could represent them
- are basic and will require much discussion tomorrow and at other times.

Essentially, the first move must come from the British. The Unionists will not come to a conference while their future in the United Kingdom is unconditionally guaranteed. This raises the further question of how we can induce the British to modify the guarantee, without damaging or hurting unionist susceptibilities excessively. The worst tragedy of all would be change which provokes unionist militarism or terrorism on the scale of which we know they are capable. The way in which society in Northern Ireland has developed in recent years makes this prospect a real possibility, if a wrong move is made.

Trade is a large consideration in British strategic thinking. However, membership of the EEC rules out any major development in this area, as part of a Northern Ireland negotiation. Security is the other main British strategic pre-occupation. It is in this area, more than in any other, that the possibilities of interesting them lie. ^N It is in their interest, in our interest, and above all in the interest of the people of Northern Ireland that whatever settlement finally emerges should be reached by agreement. This means that any package must have sweeteners for the people of Northern Ireland. These could include -

- (1) guarantees of civil freedoms - by, for example, the incorporation in Irish law of the European Convention on Human Rights with strong and specific guarantees of machinery for appeals to the European Court of Human Rights. To assuage unionist opinion, these guarantees would probably require some form of supervising or enforcing institution involving the British, as well as ourselves. Also open under this head would, of course, be the question of re-writing our Constitution;
- (2) some assurances on the question of Finance. The imposition on the economy of this country of the burden of supporting Northern Ireland, as it is, at present, could be intolerable. We simply could not provide £1.2 billion a year, as the British are doing at present;
- (3) indications of intentions as far as possible to liberalise law here, in ways attractive to Northern unionists. (What these are is a nice question - but we must face it); and
- (4) an indication of willingness to devolve considerable ~~assembly~~ autonomy on a form of assembly in Northern Ireland, dealing with local matters.

Essentially, a great deal can be achieved here by making the economy grow (to do away with the myth that this is a poorer country than Northern Ireland) and by liberalising legislation etc.

This note does not come to conclusions - because at this stage none is possible. However, it may provide some help for to-morrow's discussions.

5th September, 1980.