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12 June 1981

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

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Attention: Mr Sean Whelan, Anglo Irish Division

The Department will be aware that John Hume, Leader of the SDLP, accompanied by Seamus Mallon, spent two working days in London on 9 - 10 June. They met for an hour with the Leader of the Labour Party, Michael Foot, and also had meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Humphrey Atkins and the Conservative and Labour Party backbench Committees on Northern Ireland. They had discussions as well with David Alton, the Liberal MP for Liverpool Edge Hill, and with a number of senior British and London-based foreign journalists. The Embassy assisted them with some of these meetings and they paid a call on the Ambassador.

The two main topics on which the SDLP leaders concentrated were the direction in which they believe British policy should move if there is to be political advance on the Northern Ireland problem and secondly the continuing political difficulties caused by the hunger strike.

On politics they felt that it is time for the British Government and for the Opposition to examine in a fundamental way the goals they seek in their Northern Ireland policies. If there could be a serious and detailed debate in Westminster on the political future of Northern Ireland this could be helpful and a break in the bipartisan approach might assist in this.

For their part they saw no further use in pursuing a policy designed to lead to a power sharing executive in Northern Ireland.

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The Unionists, including both Paisley and Molyneaux, whose differences were in personality rather than policy terms, are not prepared to accept the power sharing concept. Mallon, speaking privately, went somewhat further saying that the SDLP would lose much of its support if it now pursued power sharing alone given previous failures. He also hinted that in some instances in local government areas they would be better off without it, in that they have more power on boards than they would have in a strictly power sharing arrangement.

In these circumstances the SDLP want the British to accept that the ultimate purpose of their policy should be a united Ireland, whether of a federal or unitary nature. It is true that given present loyalist perceptibilities the British would not feel that Irish unity is immediately realisable. In many areas of policy where goals cannot be achieved immediately successive British governments have so ordered their affairs as to move towards their goals step by step. In Hume's view that is what the British should do now. They should accept that Irish unification is the ultimate purpose of their policy and should manage their affairs in Northern Ireland accordingly. Hume stressed in his contacts with the Labour Party that what he was proposing is that British politicians should take a positive attitude to Irish unity in place of the negative one of troop withdrawal which some Labour members support.

On the hunger strike Hume and Mallon took a view similar to that of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, arguing that the continued existence of the hunger strike makes it easy for the provisional IRA to build up support in the minority community. Mrs Thatcher was, they thought, the best recruiting sergeant the IRA has had since 1972.

It is thought likely here in Labour Party circles that the movement of the writ for the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election cannot be long delayed. The first reason for this is that there is pressure on some Labour Party backbenchers to move it, as there is also on the Plaid Cymru MP's. The second and more persuasive reason is that according to Labour MP's the longer the delay in the Warrington by-election the stronger the chances of Roy Jenkins in

winning the seat from Labour. There is therefore seen to be considerable advantage to the Labour Party in moving an early writ for Warrington. Indeed on the date Hume departed it became known that the Labour Party would like the Warrington by-election held on 16th July. To do so without moving a writ for Fermanagh-South Tyrone would be very difficult. Foot remains of the view that there should be no change in the criteria governing the eligibility of persons for election to Parliament. The Government intends to change the law and thereby prevent long-term prisoners standing or taking parliamentary seats.

When questioned about his party's views Hume said that in present circumstances it would not be possible for them to contest the seat. The situation on the ground is seen as one of confrontation between the Government and the hunger strikers. Should no attempt be made by the Government to reduce that confrontation the SDLP could not be expected to fight on behalf of the Government which is what they would be doing. In those circumstances the SDLP would be severely defeated. Should the Government offer changes on the lines of the statement of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace the SDLP could then go to the electorate and endorse the proposals, even if the hunger strikers rejected them. On this basis Hume feels they would get a large majority and this would in turn put pressure on the hunger strikers to settle. In such circumstances it is likely that Hume, Mallon or Duffy would contest the seat. Hume remains opposed to changes in the electoral law.

Meeting with Michael Foot

The meeting lasted just under an hour. They remarked that their impression was that Foot was not now as sympathetic to SDLP ideas as he had been in mid-May when they last met. According to Hume this was reflected not in anything that Foot said but in a cold atmosphere. Foot listened to what they had to say on the hunger strike in the Maze but showed no evidence that he was prepared to do anything other than give full support to Mrs Thatcher on the issue. Following discussion about Labour preparations for the forthcoming Conference debate on Northern Ireland which is due in October, Hume is convinced that Foot will go for power sharing

probably with the proviso that if the Unionists do not accept this the guarantee would thereby be under threat. Hume said privately that if the frontbench and the Labour Party Study Group adopt a policy calling for power sharing, they are in effect merely avoiding any real movement for at least another two years. It was Hume and Mallon who did most of the talking during the meeting. Hume thought Foot listened but was not convinced. Hume was very annoyed when it emerged the following morning in the newspapers that Foot had also had contact with Fitt during the day, as a result of which Fitt was able to claim that he had Foot's support for his views on the hunger strike, which is that the Government should not make any concessions.

Other Labour Party Contacts

Hume had what he termed a very successful meeting with the Labour backbench Committee on Northern Ireland. He said that the underlying feeling at the meeting, which was attended by an unusually high number of MP's (in excess of forty), was that it is time for the Labour Party to adopt a new strategy on Northern Ireland. He found them very sympathetic to the views he was putting forward.

Hume and Mallon discussed their ideas in some detail over dinner with a small group of Labour backbenchers. Present were Jock Stallard, Chairman of the Labour Backbench Committee on Northern Ireland, Alec Lyon, Clive Soley and Kevin McNamara. The discussion was not about the desirability of a united Ireland, which all four think is the only solution, but focussed on ways of bringing it about. Hume said he thought Foot and the Labour Party Study Group would probably end up by recommending that the answer to the problems of Northern Ireland lies in some form of power sharing within Northern Ireland and that if the Unionists are not prepared to accept this then the guarantee would come under threat. This gave some, though not much, comfort to the Labour MP's present as they thought that Foot was prepared to leave out a tie up between power sharing and the guarantee. Hume said the SDLP had sat down on many occasions with the Unionists in Northern Ireland with a view to obtaining power sharing. Their efforts had failed. The

Unionists had shown that they are not interested in it and any attempt to base a policy on it alone was merely a waste of time. What must be done is that the British Government accept that the answer lies in some form of Irish unity. Hume himself thought that it would probably need to be a federal solution. In other policy areas where the British Government cannot immediately achieve its object they work in stages towards that ultimate goal. They should do the same in regard to Northern Ireland.

Hume did say on another occasion that if an attempt were made at power sharing within the context of the Anglo-Irish talks then he could consider it. A lengthy discussion followed as how best to take such steps. Soley said he believed in unity by harmonisation. Social security, pension benefits etc, North and South could be brought into line and payment of the benefits to persons North and South could be made through Irish Government offices in Dublin with the UK providing the money required to pay the Northern Ireland benefits. Similarly, industrial development promotion for the North and industrial policy should be based in Dublin but paid for by the UK Government. Hume taking up this unity by harmonisation idea said that an important area in which Dublin could look after the interests of the North much more effectively than London was in the agricultural area. Agriculture is a very important industry in Northern Ireland and its interests are not being properly supported within the British market which is consumer rather than producer oriented. Lyon thought another area where harmonisation could be important, especially in dealing with Conservative backbenchers, would be the whole electoral franchise area. They were very surprised when Hume explained the various Northern Ireland franchises to them and particularly the local government one. Soley's reason for putting these views forward is that he thought it would strengthen the London-Dublin links and make the North dependent on the South.

The Labour MP's present concentrated on tactics rather than issues. They would not expect the NEC Study Group, which is trying to prepare a document on which Labour policy on Northern Ireland will be based, to come up with anything more adventurous than encouraging power sharing, if that. Rees, Concannon and Mason they

dismiss as being prisoners of their own experiences when they were in power in the Northern Ireland Office. They were very critical of Foot and of Benn. Stallard said Foot frequently consults Gerry Fitt and Conor Cruise O'Brien, adding that he has very little sympathy for Roman Catholics, and that he is, in his sympathies a Unionist. They had no hope that Foot would adopt a stand like that proposed by the SDLP unless he is forced into it. They have some hope that they may, with trade union support, be able to get a simple resolution through the next annual Party Conference. This would take the form of a declaration that the ultimate solution to Northern Ireland is a united Ireland and that the Labour Party supports measures leading towards that end.

Those present are prepared to support the Irish Government and the SDLP and they pressed Hume very hard on what line they should now follow. He put it to them that a united Ireland should be actively pursued. He would accept a federal form of a united Ireland. He said he thought there would be no loyalist backlash if such policies were pursued. On the contrary they could unleash real political movement.

Meeting with the Secretary of State, Mr Atkins

It lasted about an hour. One of the main purposes, from the SDLP point of view, was to discuss the future membership of state boards, many of which are to be appointed/reappointed shortly by the Secretary of State. Hume found Atkins not prepared to move on the hunger strike. Mallon had the impression that Atkins is himself in favour of granting some concessions and that he appreciated the SDLP argument but was not in a position to effect changes. They also discussed political and economic matters. Mallon thought the meeting a good one.

The meeting with the Conservative backbench Committee had to be curtailed because of voting in the House of Commons. Hume and Mallon were asked to return again in a fortnight's time. Hume found this encouraging as he also found the reception accorded to him.

In conversation Hume said he is convinced that the Secretary of State will not long remain in his position. He thought he might be elevated to the House of Lords and could take over Lord Thorneycroft's position as Conservative Party Chairman. The most likely person to succeed him, in Hume's view, is James Prior, presently Secretary of State for Employment. The Department will recall that there have been hints that the British are considering another initiative in Northern Ireland. Hume felt one area being considered was the creation of a Northern Ireland Assembly about which he had been teased out recently.

Daithí Ó Ceallaigh

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