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Political and Media Reaction to White Paper

1. The SDLP repeated its contention that the plan was unworkable and expressed disappointment at the limited recognition of the Irish Dimension in the White Paper. The party made no announcement about its election intentions other than to say that a decision on whether to fight would be taken in "the normal democratic fashion". The SDLP was also surprised by the inclusion of a "presiding officer" in the Assembly's structure whose task would be to appoint the chairman and members of the scrutinising committees. This had not been mentioned in any of their discussions with Mr. Prior.

2. The DUP gave a broad welcome to the Assembly elections and the powers to be given to the Assembly, particularly the scrutinising committees. The party attacked the section dealing with the Irish dimension which they claimed would give encouragement to the IRA and promised to use the elections to "thwart and destroy" the idea that Assembly members could serve on any Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Council. The party would also seek to destroy "the enforced power-sharing inference in the 70% weighted majority".

3. The OUP said it was opposed to the Irish Dimension aspects of the White Paper and would go into the Assembly elections on the basis of the 1975 Northern Ireland Convention Report.

4. The Alliance Party gave Mr. Priors plans the strongest approval. The party would contest elections and participate in the Assembly with a view to obtaining full devolution on a power sharing basis.

5. The Irish Independence Party described the plan as "an insult to all Irish people" which represented nothing more than an elaborate ploy to perpetuate British rule in Ireland.

6. Provisional Sinn Fein described the White Paper as "a futile exercise in attempting to defend Britains indefensible position in the Six Counties".

7. Republican Clubs/Workers Party said it was disappointed at the absence of any reference to a Bill of Rights in the plans.

8. In the House of Commons the Labour spokesman Mr. Don Concannon agreed with Mr. Prior on the need for peace and reconciliation and for broader political participation by people in the North. He found the proposals to be broadly in line with Labour's policy on devolution but did not think they would elicit an enthusiastic response in view of the depressed social and economic conditions prevailing. Mr. Concannon felt that the Government had put the cart before the horse with its proposals and that the first priority should be the creation of jobs and righting social wrongs. Mr. Gerry Fitt welcomed the initiative and said that another failure without ground having been well planned in advance would be a total disaster for Northern Ireland. Mr. Molyneaux felt that it was disgraceful that at a time when the forces of the Crown were setting out to free British subjects in the South Atlantic a Minister of the Crown should be launching an operation to erode the rights and privileges of British subjects within the United Kingdom. To cheers, Mr. Prior rebuked the remark by saying that the Unionist leader "does himself, his party and his fellow countrymen a grave disservice by the sort of remark he makes"

Both Mr. Julian Amery and Sir John Biggs Davison alluded to the possibility of a split on the proposals not just in Northern Ireland but within the ranks of Conservatives also.

9. Reaction to the publication of the White Paper on Northern Ireland in Britain has been more limited than might normally be expected because of the crisis in the Falkland Islands. In general the reaction is favourable but not hopeful and there is a recurrent fear of the effect of a failed initiative on the situation in the North.

10. Editorial comment was also somewhat limited. The Daily Telegraph without stating whether or not it favours the initiative makes considerable play of the dangers of failure which "will vastly intensify the conflict in Ulster, and still further diminish Britain's willingness to do her plain duty which is to govern Ulster like any other part of the Kingdom unless and until the people there have expressed a clear wish for some other allegiance". "It is ironic", the Telegraph continues, "that Mr. Prior's perilous scheme cannot even claim the merit of giving pleasure in the Republic." The paper is not hopeful about the political composition of the Assembly either.

11. The Times editorial under the heading "Mr. Prior's Error" considers that the proposals are superior to the present direct rule position but given that they are unlikely to work it thinks Mr. Prior is wrong to dismiss direct rule which it claims has worked well for the past eight years. No mention is made of reaction from the Irish Government.

12. There is no editorial reaction in the Daily Mail or the Daily Express which confine themselves to reporting the proposals.

13. The Financial Times while not having an editorial does have an analytical article by Margaret Van Hattem which notes that the White Paper puts it up to Unionists to make a deal with the Catholics "with the promise of power only when that responsibility has been carried out". The Irish Government's reasons for rejection of the proposals are stated as being "partly because they do not believe Northern Ireland is a viable political entity and partly because they do not believe the Unionists will ever concede an effective power-sharing arrangement". The writer sees this perception as understandable in the perspective of the last ten years. In conclusion it is argued "if it (the initiative), fails public opinion in Britain may finally accept what the Northern Ireland Catholics have argued all along - that a purely internal settlement cannot work. The only alternative to continuing stalemate, violence and economic decline appears to be an enlarged role for Dublin in finding new arrangements. The Loyalists have been warned". The Guardian in its editorial entitled "a real plan for progress" thinks the initiative, though not proof against failure, does effectively limit the room for sabotage. Positive encouragement is given to the "Anglo-Irish Governmental Council". It sees this body as a remedy to the lack of institutional expression of Anglo-Irish relations which has "bedeviled the supposed settlement of 60 years ago and has made foreigners of close neighbours". "Within this arrangement, the logic of which works towards confederation", the editorial continues, "it is important first to establish government by common consent in the North".