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5. Party's Approach to Specific Issues

(a) Prior Initiative

The Labour Party broadly supported Mr. Prior's initiative in Parliament last year with Don Concannon saying that their main reason for doing so was that they saw the establishment of an assembly as an essential prerequisite to a united Ireland. Concannon did express doubts as to the timing of the initiative remarking that the dismal economic state of Northern Ireland did not provide the most propitious time for Mr. Prior's plans. As the Prior initiative was launched in April 1982, Mr. Concannon sought the views of the Government here through the Embassy, London. The Embassy reported at the time, following a conversation with Mr. Concannon, that he was clearly very disappointed at the critical response of the previous Government to the Prior proposals, although he did not say so directly.

As the Prior Bill went through Parliament, Labour adopted the tactic of allowing Conservative members dispute among themselves as right-wing Tories sought to mount a filibuster blocking the initiative. Labour's proposed amendments (concerned e.g. with strengthening the cross-community support provision in the Bill, providing for institutionalised contact between the Northern Ireland Assembly and Dublin etc.) were presented in a constructive way and during the filibuster their interventions were few and short. Even the junior spokesman, Clive Soley, who strongly supports unity in Ireland, personally felt that the Prior initiative was well worth undertaking. His view was that if it led to the establishment of an Executive then this would help reduce tension in Northern Ireland. If on the other hand, as he agreed was more likely, Mr. Prior's initiative failed to reach this stage then the way would be clear, Soley felt, for a serious look at Irish unity as a solution to the problem. In the run-up to last year's Labour Party Conference Soley anticipated criticism from constituency representatives about the rather neutral and effectively supportive stance adopted by the Parliamentary Party during the Prior Bill's passage through the Commons. He said that while they would be quite happy to defend that stance it would be made clear that the legislation in the form that it emerged was not the Bill which a Labour administration would have introduced. In the event, at the Conference, Concannon and Soley reviewed the positions which the Party had taken at Westminster during the progress of the Prior bill at the most important of the fringe meetings concerned with Northern Ireland, one held by the Northern Ireland Group of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

There was no significant criticism of the Party's attitude to the Prior proposals at the meeting.

Following the Assembly elections Concannon told the Embassy that he felt the way forward was in a strengthened Irish dimension. Soley, for his part, despite some personal inclination in that direction, did not think that it would now be practicable to call for the dismantling of the Assembly and that it would be preferable instead to seek to supplement the arrangements now in force under the Prior initiative. Although he was reluctant to give a definite forecast on the question, he also felt that this would be likely to be the approach of a future Labour administration. Soley was of the view that to do otherwise would be to invite a direct and unhelpful confrontation with the Unionists on terms particularly favourable to them. While a Labour administration of which he was part would undoubtedly have to face-down Unionist opposition on many matters it would be tactically wiser to do this in terms of policies which would have a more obvious positive connotation and might even be presented as being in the Unionist community's own interest.

(b) Plastic Bullets

Following some successful lobbying of trade union leaders, including Moss Evans and Ray Buckton, the sponsors persuaded the NEC to include a composite motion on Plastic Bullets in the scope of the brief debate on Northern Ireland at the last Labour Conference. In the event the mover of this motion and the one on British withdrawal already mentioned concentrated her remarks on the plastic bullets issue. Subsequent speakers from the floor were unanimous in supporting the imposition of a ban on these weapons although it was noticeable that for some the major concern was to avert their future use in civil or industrial disturbances in Britain itself. There was almost unanimous approval for the Plastic Bullet motion.

However, it should be noted that in an emotional contribution during the debate, Don Concannon, said that he was unwilling to increase the risks faced by the security forces. It was wrong, he said, to equate the disturbances in the North with riots in British cities. Terrorists prepared to kill and maim were sheltering behind young stone-throwers and indeed the police and army often used plastic rather than lead bullets, in controlling riots despite the risks involved. In conversation after the debate Clive Soley, the junior spokesman, made clear his disagreement with Concannon's handling of the debate. Although

to some extent personally undecided on the feasibility of an immediate ban he thought that a posture of outright opposition was both unnecessary and tactically unwise. Moreover, he wondered whether Concannon's own standing within the Party may have been damaged by his excessively truculent approach. At the fringe meeting organised by the PLP Northern Ireland Group, Soley said that whatever about an absolute prohibition it was clear that plastic bullets were being grossly over-used. He would demand a special report on each occasion a plastic bullet was discharged and greatly speeded-up action by coroners in cases where they resulted in fatalities. One suggested alternative to plastic bullets to which he later said he was giving some thought is the greater use of snatch squads. Another M.P., Reg Freeson, (who called for a North-South forum in a supplementary question in the House of Commons on 9 February this year) commented from the audience that the reduction in the use of plastic bullets in recent months showed that public pressure did produce results. He called for an examination at the technical level of available alternatives. Soley himself repeated his views on Plastic Bullets to the Irish National Council on 3 December last stating that he supported the Conference resolution calling for their banning but that such a ban could not be implemented overnight since some other method must take their place

(c) Prevention of Terrorism Act

The NEC Statement adopted by Conference in 1981 stated that the PTA should be repealed. It was a Labour Party Minister, Roy Jenkins, who introduced the Act in the wake of the November 1974 Birmingham bombings. Some Labour MP's have long argued against its provisions. Kevin McNamara, for example, has said that it inhibits Irish people from taking part in legitimate political activity. Last year it was expected that the Labour party, on the recommendation of the shadow Home Secretary, Roy Hattersley, would vote against the annual renewal of the PTA. In the event, the Shadow Cabinet in response to Home Secretary Whitelaw's promise of a review of the Act, decided that Labour MP's should abstain, enforcing this decision with a two-line whip. Clive Soley who voted against renewal was asked to resign his position as spokesman by Michael Foot and did so on 17 March last year. The party leader was particularly anxious at the time to stress collective responsibility on the Front Bench in order to try to keep Tony Benn in check. (Kevin McNamara by now a Defence

junior spokesman, in fact, abstained as instructed). Soley feels that the PTA was useful in defusing emotions after the Birmingham bombings and that it has its uses in information gathering. Nevertheless, he persisted in his opposition last year and gave three reasons:

- (i) His previous opposition to the Act
- (ii) His belief that the PTA causes alienation which helps the paramilitaries
- (iii) Labour's policy document stating that the Party should abolish the PTA.

He also claimed in private that both Hattersley and Foot himself are fundamentally opposed to the Act. Having made his point, Soley was, in fact, re-appointed junior spokesman on Northern Ireland at the end of April 1982.

The Labour Party now appears likely to vote against renewal of the Act next month - following what is regarded by the Shadow Cabinet as an unsatisfactory outcome of the review initiated by Whitelaw. Lord Jellicoe's report published earlier this month recommended a number of adjustments but accepted that the major provisions of the Act should remain in force. However, the likely two line whip enforcing opposition this year will allow those Labour MP's who still support the Act to pair with Conservatives and thus effectively abstain. It is thought that former NIO Ministers Roy Mason, Merlyn Rees, Stan Orme and even Concannon may well take advantage of this. David McKittrick of the Irish Times reported on 17 February 1983 that several Shadow Cabinet members argued that some special legislation would still be necessary but that the form it might take had not been discussed yet in detail.

(d) Voting Rights

No significant group in the Labour Party has supported the withdrawal of Voting Rights from the Irish Community in Britain. There is, of course, an element of self-preservation in this although there is also evidence that the Irish vote in recent years has not gone to the Labour Party in the same proportions as hitherto. Party spokesmen have however, in supporting a continuation of the status quo in Britain, stressed the desirability of extending voting rights to British citizens in this country.

Answering questions on the Labour Party's submission on voting rights to the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee on 8 December last, the Shadow Home Secretary, Roy Hattersley, said that a future Labour Government would restore Irish voting rights if the present administration withdrew them. He commented as follows on the removal of the vote from Irish people: "All it would be is an act of collective retribution. It would be punishing the Irish for what the worst amongst them do and that is why we are very much opposed to it". Hattersley in answer to a question about the consequences for relations with this country declared that "it would be a formal announcement that we wanted to detach ourselves from the Republic, that we did not want warmer and closer relationships with the Republic". However he also stated that it was "very much regretted" that successive Irish Governments had not extended voting rights to British citizens.

(e) Parliamentary Tier

During the House of Commons debate on the Prior initiative, Labour's spokesman, Don Concannon, called for a debate on moves to set up a parliamentary tier of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council. However, he also told the Embassy in London that he saw some difficulties connected with the establishment of such a body. He feels that not many MP's are interested in Northern Ireland and that the response from the Westminster Parliament to proposals to establish some form of Anglo-Irish parliamentary structure is unlikely to be very great unless the forum has real powers. In fact, at an early stage in the debate on Prior's proposals Concannon tentatively suggested to the Embassy that the best way forward might be to have some kind of inter-parliamentary committees which could be associated with Ministers perhaps in an advisory capacity.

Kevin McNamara M.P. during his visit to Dublin in April 1982 said that MP's were unexcited by the prospect of a parliamentary tier. He pointed out that the view prevailing amongst back benchers generally in Westminster was that this would mean a meeting of the existing Anglo-Irish committee there with the attendance of some T.D.'s and Northern Ireland representatives. Indeed, Concannon who has talked to the Embassy recently about the need for a strengthened Irish dimension told the Ambassador in December that he wanted to see the Westminster Anglo-Irish interparliamentary group meet in February or March.

Clearly the Labour Party's concept of an Anglo-Irish parliamentary institution is not more advanced than that of the present British Government.

(f) Ken Livingstone's Invitation to PSF

The decision by the Home Secretary Mr. William Whitelaw to sign exclusion orders against Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison in December 1982 following an invitation to them from the left-wing Labour leader of the Greater London Council, Ken Livingstone, provoked varying reactions from within the Party. Michael Foot, clearly embarrassed by Livingstone's antics, criticised the Home Secretary's decision and told the Commons that he was concerned over anomalies in the law that denied men who could walk about freely in Belfast the right to do the same in London. But he also made clear that he had asked Livingstone to withdraw the invitation. Don Concannon concentrated on tactical aspects

of the matter throughout the controversy over Livingstone's invitation to the PSF members. Following the Government's decision to ban them which came in the wake of the Ballykelly bombing he said "The Government has made a tactical mistake. They have given them game, set and match. Sinn Féin will make more publicity out of this than if they had ever come across."

However, Denis Healey interviewed on Channel 4 News felt that the Government had "little alternative". He said: "with the strength of public feeling about their arrival, and the extraordinary persistence of Mr. Livingstone in keeping the invitation open after the horror and tragedy of the bombing incident it became inevitable". Roy Mason and Merlyn Rees also came out in favour of the Government's decision.

The Northern Ireland Group of the Parliamentary Labour Party in a statement on the Ballykelly atrocity repeated their commitment to ultimate unity in Ireland and said that "this policy inevitably means an on-going series of discussions with elected representatives of all shades of political opinion, North and South of the border. The need to consult with the existing party machinery in the timing and location of these discussions has always been of paramount importance and remains so. Recent events demonstrated the wisdom of that approach and we shall continue in that fashion."

Jock Stallard, chairman of the PLP Group told the Embassy earlier this month that there would be pressure from left-wing activists in the Party for contact with PSF during a forthcoming visit

by members of the Group to Belfast (pl. see separate note on PLP Group at 5). He said that the critical attitude which many centrist Labour MP's had adopted towards Whitelaw's decision on Adams and Morrison was also relevant.

(g) EEC and Northern Ireland

At the last Labour Conference it was noticeable that Michael Foot's repetition of the Party's commitment to withdraw from the Community was somewhat ritualistic. The impression given in the aftermath of the Conference was that withdrawal would not, at least, be a first priority of any incoming Foot administration. At a press conference last week Eric Heffer, the Party's spokesman on Community affairs, acknowledged that while it was originally intended that basic negotiations on pulling out should be concluded within a year, these would now take between fifteen and eighteen months. However, this should not be taken as a sign of a weakening in Labour's resolve as the document Heffer launched at this press conference (Annex 2) sets out in more detail than before the process by which the Party would withdraw Britain from the EEC. Heffer also rejected the alternative strategy of those in the Labour Party, such as MEP Barbara Castle, who say that Labour should just carry out its own policies within the EEC and defy the Community to prevent it doing this.

The Party's junior spokesman on Northern Ireland, Clive Soley, told the Embassy last November that if British withdrawal from the EEC came about (and he favours this) then he would wish to see established mechanisms which would ensure that this would not cause further division between the two parts of Ireland. He argued that, in fact, if handled properly such a development could provide an opportunity to radically realign the North's domestic economic policy far more closely with the Republic, and that measures to give this institutional expression would have to be seriously considered. He remarked that both he and the party leadership in general would be keen to discuss this matter in some detail when they visited Dublin.