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New Ireland Forum

Briefing Note for Chairman

Origins of Forum

1. The Forum stems from a statement issued by the Government on 11 March - copy attached as Appendix 1. The terms of this statement had previously received the agreement of Mr. C. J. Haughey, T.D., Leader of Fianna Fail and Mr. John Hume, M.E.P. Leader of the SDLP in the course of intensive contacts on the day of its issue. The issue of the statement of 11 March was the culmination of a process of gestation which had begun in the autumn of 1982.

2. In his Heinz Fellowship Lecture at the University of Pittsburgh on 30 September, 1982, the Taoiseach, Dr. FitzGerald who was then in Opposition, said:

"Moreover, in doing this [taking initiatives of a pluralist character in respect of matters within its own control] an Irish Government should be prepared together with the other Parties in the Dail, to consult with all those in Northern Ireland who may be willing to talk to us, however informally, whether they be organised in political parties or not, and whether they seek, oppose, or (less probably!) are indifferent to the development of a new political relationship between North and South.

We must seek in discussion with all in Northern Ireland who may see merit in reducing the tensions within our island, their help in identifying those aspects of the Constitution, laws and social arrangements of our State, which pose obstacles to understanding amongst the people of our island."

3. Simultaneously, the SDLP Manifesto for the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly was launched. It set out a proposal for the establishment of a Council for a New Ireland in the following terms:

"The immediate objective of the SDLP is therefore a quick end to the proposed Assembly. We believe that

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a solution should then be sought once again in its proper framework. It is abundantly clear that a purely internal solution to the problem of Northern Ireland is not possible. A solution must deal with the problem which is one of relationships not only within Northern Ireland but within Ireland and between Britain and Ireland. The Anglo/Irish framework is therefore the proper framework for a solution. It is long past the time when the British Government should allow its policies to be dictated by the intransigence of Unionism. It is also time for those who believe in a New Ireland to spell out their proposals in some detail. Towards that end it is the intention of the SDLP following the Election to propose to the Irish Government the setting up of a Council for a New Ireland made up of members of the Dail and those mandated in this election. The Council should have a limited life and have the specific task of examining the obstacles to the creation of a New Ireland and producing for the first time on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in the country who believe in a New Ireland, an agreed blueprint so that a debate on real alternatives can begin within the Anglo/Irish framework. The SDLP would hope to play its full part in such a body."

4. Appendix 2 reviews the further development of their proposal by the SDLP leadership and reactions to it in the two parts of Ireland. The reactions of the unionist parties and of the Alliance Party were negative while the positions taken up by the parties in the State, before and during the General Election campaign were cautious holding positions, indicating that the proposal was interesting and would be considered but not giving any firm commitment to adopt it. The initial Fine Gael reaction referred to the Taoiseach's speech in Pittsburgh while Mr. Haughey, in an article published under his name in the 23 November issue of the Irish News said:

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"The results of its [the Council's] work could form the basis of an Irish position at an all-party constitutional conference to solve the Northern Ireland problem. I believe this could be useful and I look forward to discussing it with the SDLP when the elections are over".

5. Following the General Election held on 24 November, the section on Northern Ireland in the Fine Gael/Labour Programme for Government contained the following:

"5. It will pursue the cause of human rights in both parts of Ireland and will initiate a review of the Constitution in consultation with other political parties in the island with a view to effecting such changes as may remove obstacles to North/South understanding, as well as a study of possible scenarios for a coming-together of North and South on a basis that would secure the identities of both traditions in this island."

The approach to the issues raised by the SDLP proposal was naturally considered by the Government soon after taking office and was discussed with the SDLP in the course of the visit to Northern Ireland by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Due to preoccupation with other issues, consideration had not been completed by the time of the SDLP Annual Conference at the end of January, 1983. In the course of a message to Mr. Hume, for the Conference, the Taoiseach undertook to give the proposal very careful attention after the Budget. It was also indicated at the Conference that the Fianna Fail response to the proposal would be made known at the party Ard-Fheis on 26 February.

6. Mr. John Hume held a round of separate meetings with the leaders of the three main parties in Dublin in mid-February, at which the SDLP proposal and the issues it raised were discussed. Subsequently, on 24 February, 1983 the Government issued a

statement - copy attached as Appendix 3. This was followed on 25 February by letters from the Taoiseach to Deputies Haughey and Mac Giolla, inviting them on behalf of their parties to preliminary exploratory meetings to discuss the initiation^x of consultations for the purpose set out in the Government statement.

7. On 26 February, Mr. Haughey said, in the course of his Presidential address to the Fianna Fail Ard-Fheis:

"What ought to happen now and it cannot be much longer delayed is that the two sovereign Governments should come together and create a framework for a new political settlement.

The starting point for such a new political settlement must be an all-round constitutional conference to be convened on the basis that it would be a prelude to a final withdrawal of Britain from Ireland within a stipulated period of time, enabling the Irish people North and South to come together and freely determine their future. Such a multi-representative constitutional conference, would work out the conditions for the transfer of power to new political structures for the whole island.

We would support as a valuable first step in preparation for the final constitutional settlement the SDLP proposal for a Council for a new Ireland. Such a council could in advance prepare an outline plan which would command the support of all shades of nationalise^x opinion and could then be put before the all-round constitutional conference.

8. The Taoiseach, accompanied by the Minister for Foreign Affairs met Deputy Mac Giolla who was accompanied by Deputy de Rossa, on 4 March. Following an exchange of correspondence about the basis and purpose of the exploratory meeting and of the subsequent substantive consultations, the statement of ^{that date} 11 March

the Taoiseach met Mr Haughey on 11 March following which

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was issued in the circumstances described at the outset.

Meetings of Party Leaders

9. On 16 and 18 March, pursuant to the final paragraph of the statement the Taoiseach issued invitations to the Tanaiste, Mr. Haughey, Mr. Mac Giolla, Mr. Hume, Mr. James Molyneaux M.P., Leader of the Official Unionist Party, Rev. Ian Paisley M.P., M.E.P., Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and Mr. Oliver Napier, Leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland to a meeting of the leaders of all the parties who wished to participate in the Forum, to discuss the arrangements involved. Letters were subsequently received from Rev. Paisley, Mr. Napier and Mr. Mac Giolla indicating that they did not propose to attend and that their parties would not participate in the Forum. No reply was received from Mr. Molyneaux but it was made clear in public statements that the Official Unionist Party would have nothing to do with the Forum.

10. A meeting of the leaders of the four parties who wish to participate was held in the Seanad Ante-Chamber, Leinster House on 14 April, 1983. Mr. J. Tobin, Clerk of Seanad Eireann acted as secretary. His report of the meeting, subsequently approved by the party leaders is attached as Appendix 4. The statement for the media read by Mr. Tobin at the conclusion of the meeting is attached as Appendix 5. A further meeting of the party leaders, again with Mr. Tobin acting as secretary, took place on 21 April. The report of that meeting is attached as Appendix 6 while the statement for the media issued at the conclusion of the meeting is attached as Appendix 7.

Reactions to announcement of Forum

11. The initial British Government reaction to the Government statement of 11 March, 1983 came in the form of a statement that evening from the Northern Ireland Office. This said

"It is, of course, open to the Government and parties of the Republic to discuss what structures and arrangements would in their view be appropriate

if what the statement describes as a 'new Ireland' were to come about.

"It is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide whether they wish to participate in such discussions, but these discussions cannot affect the fundamental position that Northern Ireland is and will remain part of the United Kingdom while the majority of its people so wish.

"That is formally set out in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act of 1973, and the Government of the Republic are also committed to that principle."

Subsequently, responses to press queries by the Northern Ireland Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and No. 10 Downing Street were in precisely these same words, indicating close co-ordination.

12. The initial reaction of official Northern Ireland's spokesmen for the British Labour Party and of interested backbench members of the party was uniformly favourable, with positive comments coming from Messrs. Concannon, Soley and Kevin McNamara.

13. In more recent comments, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. James Prior was reported as speaking as follows on 13 April at a Stormont Castle Press Conference:

"The Ulster Secretary said he hoped something useful might emerge from the Forum but it was entirely a matter for the parties in the Republic and the other participants.

He conceded that there was a danger that the forum exercise would further alienate unionist opinion in Northern Ireland.

'On the other hand', he said, 'one has to accept life as it is and try to see whether anything constructive can be achieved'.

14. In the course of Mr. Prior's replies to supplementary

questions in the House of Commons on 14 April, the following exchanges took place:

" Mr. Canavan: Will the Secretary of State urge the so-called Unionists in this House to participate in Dr. Garret FitzGerald's initiative for an All-Ireland Forum to discuss possible constitutional changes leading to the peaceful reunification of Ireland, which is the type of true unity to which every genuine Unionist should aspire?

Mr. Prior: That is entirely a matter for the Unionist parties.

Mr. Flannery: Does the Secretary of State agree that this forum, which is, I believe, being initiated today in the Republic, is a step forward and that we should give it some help? Does he regret, with me, that the Unionists are opting out and just want to have their own way, which will result in the stalemate and the killing going on for ever unless we begin to talk to one another about the problem?

Mr. Prior: I certainly think that we should all talk to one another about it, but I believe that any forum or initiative of this nature which in any way puts at risk the view of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland that they should remain part of the United Kingdom is bound to start at a major disadvantage. Having said that, I must add that any constructive talks will be welcomed, just as the SDLP playing a part in the Assembly in Northern Ireland will be welcomed.

Mr. Winnick: Does the Secretary of State agree that, on the basis of present policies, including the Assembly, there is no way in which one can see an end to the crisis and the bloodshed that have engulfed the Province over the past 10 years or more? Would it not be a welcome step if the forum now starting in Dublin and the British Government could find ways and means of coming to an agreement under which there would be far less of a hard-line sectarian attitude among the Unionists in the North and the

Irish Republic itself, by constitutional amendments, made itself more attractive to the majority of the people in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Prior: A great deal could be done to remove the suspicions of the past, but if the hon. Gentleman and the House believe that there is a simple solution to an age-old problem, I have to say that it simply is not there.

Sir John Biggs-Davison: Must not such co-operation be based, as my right hon. Friend has suggested, on the viability of a union that is the people's will and conducted by the two sovereign Governments in these islands? Instead of Dr. Garret Fitzgerald All-Ireland Forum, what about a British Isles Forum?

Mr. Prior: I agree with my hon. Friend that discussions between the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic are a better way forward. If some questions could be asked within the forum about the real attitude of the Republican Government towards unity, we could make more progress.

Mr. Fitt: Does the Secretary of State agree that a Catholic forum in Dublin and a Protestant forum or assembly at Stormont is a recipe for further alienation and polarisation between the communities? Will he use all his endeavours to get elected representatives, of whatever persuasion, to attend the forum? As a quid pro quo, should not the SDLP attend the place to which they were elected at Stormont? That is one way of getting people together to talk to one another.

Mr. Prior: If both would agree to attend the other, there would be no need for the forum.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does the Minister admit that the so-called Unionists as they have been described in the House, are Unionists who would welcome any forum that would lead the Republic back into the United Kingdom? Is he aware that the suggested cross-border police force, mooted

in the Dimpleby lecture and during the election campaign, has now been disowned by the responsible Minister in the South?

Mr. Prior: We are trying to deal with realities, not with the impractical."

15. The statement of 11 March evoked negative reactions from the Unionist parties and from the Alliance Party. Dr. Paisley described it as "part of an international conspiracy against the Ulster people" and said "it amounts to the absolute submission by Dr. Garret FitzGerald to Mr. John Humes proposal for a Council for a New Ireland. The aims of the Irish Government and the men of violence are now absolutely the same." Comments by spokesmen for the Official Unionists and the Alliance Party were less extreme but no more favourable. ⁱⁿ ~~their~~ ^T ~~comments~~ ^{which} included indications that expectations they had entertained that the Taoiseach would promote an atmosphere conducive to improved understanding in Ireland had been disappointed by the Forum announcement; and suggestions that it would be preferable to encourage the SDLP to take their seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

16 The initial comments of spokesmen for Northern political parties opposed to the Forum initiative were followed up by strong expressions of rejection of the Forum in a special debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 15 March.