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VISIT TO NORTHERN IRELAND : SAT 23RD - TUES 26TH FEB '85.

During his recent visit to Belfast, on which I accompanied him, the Minister met a cross section of SDLP representatives (senior members and party activists) drawn mainly but by no means exclusively from the Belfast area (out of town SDLP participants included Paddy O'Donoghue and Fergus Mc Quillan). About sixty party members attended a reception hosted by the Minister in the Forum Hotel. The Minister was introduced by the new party Chairman Alban Maginnis who used the occasion to commend the Minister and the Government for the support they had given to the SDLP in recent years and in particular for the strong interest now being taken in the human rights issues facing the northern minority community. The Minister's remarks on the occasion were well received and strongly welcomed in a very personal concluding intervention by Paddy O'Donoghue. Following the reception, the Minister hosted a private dinner to which senior representatives of the party were invited. Those attending were

Alban Maginnis
Pascal O'Hare
Brian Feeney
Mary Muldoon
Tom Connolly
Ben Caraher
Jim Fulton

Paddy O'Donoghue excused himself because of a prior commitment. Dr. Joe Hendron was unable to attend due to the unexpected hospitalization of his brother Jim.

The Minister for State at the Department of environment, Mr. Fergus O'Brien, was present at both the reception and the dinner. The text of the Minister's remarks to the SDLP was circulated to the Irish media, North and South.

While in Northern Ireland, I used the occasion for discussion of current issues of interest with Michael Canavan (formerly SDLP spokesman on security issues) Derry Mayor John Tierney, Denis Haughey (international secretary of the SDLP). Sean Farren, (North Antrim SDLP representative and former party Chairman) Austin Currie (SDLP representative for South Tyrone) as well as Brian Feeney, Pascal O'Hare and Dr. Joe Hendron of Belfast.

I also attended on 26 th March the meeting which the Minister for Labour, Mr. Rory Quinn, had with Bob Cooper of the Fair Employment Agency and the dinner which the Minister hosted for a group of Northern Ireland Trust Nationalists. Earlier in the day Minister Quinn addressed a Rotary group in East Belfast.

A point which emerged clearly both at dinner conversation with the Minister and in my subsequent private discussions was the confidence of SDLP members that they can hold their ground at the May Local Government Elections against the challenge of Provisional Sinn Fein and indeed their belief that the party is now moving to a position of organisational and electoral recovery. Several reasons were adduced for this but the dominant one was undoubtedly a feeling that the contradictions within the ballot box and armalite strategy of Sinn Fein were at last becoming clear to the northern nationalist electorate. Having made a decision to engage in the cut and thrust of inter-party ^{debate} and competition, Sinn Fein were now being judged on the same criteria of deliverability and plausibility applied by the electorate to the SDLP. A further point which emerged was the reluctance of SDLP members to engage in internalised inter-party discussions before the successful conclusion of the on-going Anglo-Irish discussions. In this context those met saw the recent controversy involving SDLP leader John Hume and the IRA and the subsequent unionist reaction as ensuring that the party held the high ground in facing the issue of inter-party talks in the immediate future.

There was fairly unanimous support for the initiative taken by Mr. Hume. Those whom I met also tended to feel that the rhythm of Anglo-Irish discussions and the timing of an Anglo-Irish substantive summit should not be subordinate to local electoral considerations in Northern Ireland.

Michael Canavan: Mr. Canavan has withdrawn from public political debate but remains an important figure in SDLP politics in the Derry area and has deeply involved himself in the University issue. He maintains a strong interest in the overall politics of Northern Ireland and in particular in human rights and security-related issues. Among the points he made were: -

- (i) the human rights issue is not only of moral importance. It has a strategic political significance in obliging the British Government and British opinion to confront the contradictions between the high values to which the nation subscribes and the inevitable departures from civilized standards which arise in the management of Northern Ireland. What he envisaged was the intensification of policies aimed at shaming the British in their involvement in Northern Ireland.
- (ii) As an individual through persistence he had accomplished some little redress in the human rights field; (e.g. in relation to the Bennett Report). The sovereign Irish Government could accomplish much more, particularly if it chose to internationalise the human rights issue.
- (iii) Nothing short of the disbandment of the UDR should be accepted. It should be replaced by a mixed force which would have Irish (not necessarily Irish army) and British Army participation.

- (iv) The problems with the RUC would rectify themselves if a framework for joint responsibility were established between Britain and Ireland. In this context (although there were uncertainties) he felt Catholics could be persuaded to join the RUC and to resist IRA intimidation.
- (v) The final content rather than the timing of any Anglo-Irish package was what was most important. The SDLP could confront the challenge of Provisional Sinn Fein on their over terms in the May elections. They would be assisted in this by the recent initiative of Mr. Hume. Sinn Fein was peaked electorally and could not sustain its current strategy.
- (vi) A purely consultative role in Northern Ireland for the Irish Government would be intolerable. He had taken the stand he had on the Prior initiative because it offered only consultative rights for Northern nationalists. Thus they were being asked to underwrite an unacceptable system of administration without being given the capability of transforming it. An executive role for the Irish Government should mean an open and equal say in the running of Northern Ireland and this was required above all in relation to security policy.
- (vii) The Forum process had helped integrate northern nationalists into Irish nationalism as a whole and thus end its long isolation. The British (and unionists) still hoped to split off northern nationalism from this larger association by maintaining pressure for an internal settlement. An executive role for the Irish Government would strengthen the integrative tendency of Irish Nationalism.

- (viii) Inter-party talks on devolution should follow a successful Anglo-Irish package.

John Tierney, Mayor of Derry:

Mr. Tierney is young, articulate, working class; influential with the SDLP in Derry and close to the party leader.

- (i) He was confident that the SDLP could maintain and even improve on their position in the May elections. Sinn Fein would make their gains at the expense of the IIP and, of existing IIP members, only Fergus McAteer had a chance of remaining.
- (ii) The IIP, and particularly the current deputy mayor, continued to play a negative role in Derry politics. Their objective was to embarrass the SDLP by challenging their nationalist and populist credentials. The "Derry/Londonderry" debate had been part of this strategy.
- (iii) Local SDLP representatives could not allow the IIP to hold the high ground of nationalism and populism. They felt obliged, therefore, to co-opt, where possible, contentious inter-community issues which arose, frame them in the most reasonable terms available and seek to limit any counter-productive impact on unionist opinion.
- (iv) One recent issue was the IIP demand to have removed from the Guildhall in Derry a statue of Queen Victoria. The SDLP were able to defuse the issue somewhat by eventually accepting the emplacement of a nationalist memorial in the Guildhall viz a plaque to the dead of Bloody Sunday (1972) which also marked some commemoration of all innocent victims of the current violence.

- (v) The recent initiative of Mr. Hume reflected popular nationalist feeling in the Derry area. Mr. Hume's subsequent management of the affair (the video controversy) has been correctly judged and would be viewed sympathetically by all reasonable nationalists.

Denis Haughey: Mr. Haughey was strongly supportive of the Hume initiative viz a viz the IRA. The unionist reaction was predictable; they had not been sincere in their offer of talks. Furthermore, they were in no position to argue a case against the SDLP leaders meeting the IRA in an effort to end the campaign of violence since both DUP and OUP representatives had in his view a record of contact and in instances of collusion with paramilitaries. The SDLP had photographic evidence showing this. The other points made were:-

- (1) The SDLP was recovering electorally and Sinn Fein was losing credibility through its inability to cope with real politics and was losing control of the issues. Their constituency activism has been largely a PR ploy, now perceived in the media as such.
- (ii) An authoritarian fascist party such as Sinn Fein, depends on a myth of invincibility. This had led to an over-inflation of prospects for a decisive result in the European election. That election had checked their momentum and was a bad set-back.
- (iii) The pan-nationalist emphasis had had a certain plausibility with sections of the minority electorate; however the Hume initiative had derailed that particular strategy. Sinn Fein would, of course, continue to draw support in particularly depressed urban areas, in very small Republican Catholic townships and in adjoining farming areas.
- (iv) The Anglo-Irish dialogue need not be subject to any particular time pressure. While an agreement was

important in the near future, content and not timing was what was really important.

- (v) Haughey saw no need for northern nationalists to be over specific on the precise terms of any Anglo-Irish package. The imperative was to obtain the best deal possible, above all in relation to the Irish dimension. However, an important measure of nationalist reaction would be the manner in which the package was received by unionists. An arrangement which unionists could accept without protest or resentment would almost automatically be one that was unconvincing for the minority. Obviously, also all arrangements must be carefully judged so as to exclude an excessive and dangerous unionist reaction.
- (vi) Haughey hoped that in addition to an Irish dimension, an Anglo-Irish arrangement would promote institutions for North-South cooperation and show progress on security-related issues. The SDLP had called for the disbandment of the UDR and he fully supported this call. However, it could not be achieved in ~~one~~ bold stroke. In the early seventies the role of the UDR had been that of protection of vital installations and support for a limited range of army activities. The UDR could again be confined to this role.
- (vi) Short-term pressure for interparty talks had clearly abated as a result of the Hume initiative and the unionist response. These pressures had risked the SDLP being drawn again into the exclusively Northern Ireland framework from which the Forum had released them. An Irish dimension (viz a role for the Dublin Government) would give them the confidence to pursue talks on devolution with the other parties. In the meantime, it was up to Douglas Hurd to live up to his promise of pressing the unionists into greater flexibility.

Sean Farren: Mr. Farren felt that the SDLP were improving their position with the nationalist electorate. In his own area the chief problem was the availability of suitable candidates. He had, however, been working hard with local organisations and thought that prospects were now better for the SDLP in Coleraine, Ballymoney and even Ballymena. He was happy also with the interest the SDLP sought to generate among university students. There was a strong SDLP branch in Coleraine University and in Queens the party had attracted high quality members. Sinn Fein's support in the Coleraine - North Antrim area was largely confined to a few traditional republican areas.

Other points made were:-

- (1) Farren had once felt that pre-talks between the SDLP and other parties in parallel with the Anglo-Irish dialogue should be pursued. Now he saw the merit of awaiting the outcome of the Anglo-Irish dialogue. More than ever, given the reaction of the unionists to the Hume initiative, he felt the spotlight was on the London-Dublin arrangements.
- (ii) The Anglo-Irish dialogue must produce "something tangible and visible". The Irish Government role had to be much more than an Irish official presence in Belfast
- (iii) The reaction of his constituents, were a package to be agreed, would be in part instinctive and in part based on the response of the press and others. The overall Irish dimension would, however, be important for them. There was signs of a growing interest in the Irish language among nationalists in his area (in part a response to the troubles) and the GAA continued to be important for the minority in N. Antrim.
- (iv) The practical problems that arose for constituents

tended to be other than security related eg. housing and other social issues. There was little or no violence and few enough reports of harassment by security forces. The UDR was not a major concern.

Austin Curry: Mr. Curry shared the view of other SDLP representatives that Sinn Fein had peaked. Certainly, the SDLP had difficulty in finding suitable candidates but these were no greater than four years ago. For its part, of course, Sinn Fein also had difficulty in getting good candidates. Furthermore, the SDLP had been successful in taking a number of the issues (eg. the UDR) away from Sinn Fein.

John Hume's initiative would be properly perceived by the minority electorate and that was the important point. It was now up to Douglas Hurd to review his tactics following the abandonment by Paisley and Molyneux of their overtures on inter-party talks.

The two track approach was for Mr. Currie the right way to go. He saw the wisdom nonetheless of awaiting the outcome of the Anglo-Irish talks. If things went according to plan (and he was not necessarily confident they would) the unionists would have to confront the fact that there were new political arrangements over which they had no veto and which they could not bring down. Furthermore, in so far as devolution was concerned, the British should impose a powersharing or partnership executive, if unionists were not prepared to concede this in their own right.

What was crucial was the will of the British Government to stand-by whatever decisions or agreements it made. He was confident that Mrs. Thatcher had the determination to support and sustain any new arrangements she entered into and felt this was an important new factor.

Mr. Currie said that there was considerable uncertainty about

what was implied by the concept of an executive role for the Irish Government which had been mentioned from time. I got the impression that for his own part he did not have a very rigid position as to what should be achieved in any new Anglo-Irish arrangements. However, he did have a preference to see that arrangement developing in parallel with a partnership - based devolution system to which he continues to attach considerable importance.

He agreed with the view of other SDLP representatives that the party could confront the local Government elections on its own terms. The timing of any Anglo-Irish package should not be determined by electoral considerations in Northern Ireland but should develop at its own pace.

On security-related issues, he was concerned at the tendency of Fr. Faul to seek redress directly through the Dublin Channel rather than using the good offices of the SDLP leader. He accepted that Fr. Faul had become somewhat more cautious in his political approach but hinted that there was obviously still a major question about his attitude to the SDLP.

Brian Feeney: Mr. Feeney believed like other SDLP members and for similar reasons, that Sinn Fein were losing momentum. They would make gains at the expense of Peoples Democracy in the local Belfast elections but would not take seats from the SDLP.

A good outcome to the Anglo-Irish talks would be important for Belfast nationalists who felt particularly vulnerable and isolated and for whom the electoral process traditionally afforded little or no redress. Unlike their colleagues in Derry and Newry, the SDLP in Belfast always faced the problem that they could never offer their constituents the promise of real power through local elections since nationalists are massively outnumbered on the city council (the current ratio is 52-10).

That was not to say, however, that the party in Belfast

required a sound Anglo-Irish package before the May elections. The results locally were fairly predictable and should leave the SDLP with 7 and Sinn Fein with 5. John Hume's initiative was important and had been well received by Belfast nationalists.

Feeney supported the call for disbandment of the UDR but preferred gradualism in the pursuit of this objective. His concern was again the vulnerability of the minority in Belfast. He feared that immediate disbandment would provoke a violent unionist reaction and recalled that the death of Constable Arbuckle (the first RUC man to be killed in the present troubles) was as a result of Protestant rioting following the disbandment of the B specials.

The UDR were not engaged in patrols or provocative activity within west Belfast itself. There had been some subsidence of their check-point activity along the boundary roads bordering west Belfast immediately following the shooting dead of the joy-riders. However, the UDR still operates checkpoints on PERIPHERAL roadways, albeit on a random and mobile basis. They had abandoned their provocative checkpoint at the Castle Street entry point into the City centre from West Belfast and seemed to have reduced their role at other down-town checkpoints (though this remains to be fully confirmed).

Of the three security forces (RUC, British Army and UDR), Mr. Feeney felt that the RUC were the most sensitive to community concerns and the most open to political persuasion of all three. Nationalists would probably prefer to be stopped at night-time by the British army. However, in general the army little understood the nationalist community and their day-time foot patrols through nationalist streets were greatly resented.

Pascal O'Hare: Mr. O'Hare confirmed his intentions not to go forward as a candidate for the local Government elections, in

part because he is "fed up with the nonsense and bigotry of City Hall", in part because he wants to concentrate on developing his role as an elected (Assembly) representative, in part because he is confident he has a good replacement in Alban Maginnis who needs electoral exposure.

An "executive role" for the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland is of great importance for him. Like Michael Canavan, he tended to be maximalist in the role he envisaged. Consultative rights would not suffice.

He hoped that a substantive Anglo-Irish summit with an agreed package would be held soon. He had a preference for such a Summit being held before May, not because the SDLP requires it, but simply because the minority have already been waiting too long for a major change in their political environment.

Devolution was not a major priority. He was happy that the unionists had lifted the pressure for inter-party talks, though he regarded their anti-Hume protestations as hypocritical and was glad that he had been able to provide what he thought was a 1974 photograph of Molyneux inspecting a platoon of masked men. The "Irish dimension" established by the forum was "the way to go"; there could be no returning by the nationalists to the isolation of a purely internal Northern Ireland arrangement.

Like others he also argued that the minority were coming to see the hypocrisy of Sinn Fein and he was confident about SDLP prospects in the May elections.

Joe Hendron: Dr. Hendron, whom I met only briefly on this occasion because of other commitments, shared the general confidence about the recovery of the SDLP. For whatever reasons, moreover, his undersanding was that Sinn Fein were now short of money and this would cause them problems.

He hoped that good progress would be made in Anglo-Irish

discussions; he did not seem too preoccupied about the precise nature of the role to be afforded to the Irish Government in the event of the successful conclusion of an Anglo-Irish package.

He would like an opportunity to give up local politics and concentrate on his larger political responsibilities. Unlike Pascal O'Hare, however, he has not been able to identify a suitable successor.

He welcomed the initiative of John Hume and commended his subsequent management of the affairs. He stressed the importance of the initiative for nationalists in Belfast who would regret that it had not succeeded. He felt, however, John Hume would not be blamed since he had made a courageous try.

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1 March 1985

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