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1968/32

CONCLUSIONS OF A MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD
AT STORMONT CASTLE ON THURSDAY, 31ST OCTOBER, 1968, AT 11.00 A.M.

PRESENT:- The Prime Minister
The Minister of Commerce
The Minister of Finance
The Minister of Home Affairs
The Minister of Health and Social Services
The Minister of Education
The Minister of Agriculture
The Minister of Development
The Minister in the Senate

ALSO PRESENT:- The Attorney-General
The Chief Whip

The Secretary to the Cabinet
The Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

1. Company Vote at Local Government Elections

Resuming consideration of the Prime Minister's Memorandum of 28th October, 1968, the Minister of Home Affairs said the choice as regards this particular matter lay between abolishing the vote by an amendment to the current Electoral Law Bill or, as he would prefer, deferring abolition until, in, say, six months' time, the White Paper on Local Government finance and functions appeared. The Minister in the Senate thought it would be better from the Prime Minister's point of view that the Government should not appear to be in breach of the undertakings recently given to Unionist backbenchers about no change taking place in the franchise in advance of Local Government reform. On the other hand, the Minister of Finance, recalling Mr. Wilson's comments on 30th October about the British Government discharging their responsibilities in relation to Northern Ireland, felt it would be prudent, in agreement if necessary with the Unionist back-bench, to make this small and politically insignificant concession.

The Chief Whip said that most backbenchers would accept the change and of those who would oppose it not all would object to it taking place later on.

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The Minister of Commerce suggested that the timing of the change was all-important. To make it now would give the appearance of a concession wrung out of the Government by violence; it would be greeted with suspicion by Unionists and with derision by the opposition. In this situation it would be better not to enter into any definite commitment at the Downing Street talks. The Attorney-General supported this line of argument and suggested that the matter should be reconsidered after the Downing Street meeting - a proposal with which the Prime Minister expressed agreement.

2. Local Government Reform

The Minister of Commerce said the Government's position would be greatly strengthened at the Downing Street talks if a definite date could be given for the completion of the re-structuring process. He suggested that a reasonable date would be three years from now and this was strongly supported by the Prime Minister, who pointed out that by 1971 the next Parliament would probably be entering its second year.

The Minister of Development expressed serious doubts about the wisdom of setting any definite date, particularly one as close as three years; more time might well be needed and he pointed out that the Welsh reform scheme had been under consideration for seven or eight years. The Minister of Agriculture suggested that it would be more prudent to declare a target date and went on to urge early submission of the Minister's detailed proposals.

It was agreed that at Downing Street the Minister of Home Affairs, in dealing with Local Government Reform, would indicate that it was the Government's intention to have the re-structuring process completed in about three years' time. It was also agreed that the Minister of Development should bring his detailed proposals to the Cabinet soon.

3. Constitutional Commission

The Prime Minister referred to the announcement at Westminster on 30th October of the proposal to appoint a Commission on the constitutional and economic relationships between the various parts of the United Kingdom. The terms of reference were still tentative according to the "Times" and it was obviously quite possible that some particular reference to Northern Ireland could still be imported; it would, for example, be feasible to include a phrase about guarantees for the minority - a possibility which he hoped would not arise but which was not made less likely by a continuance of the recent disorders.

4. Rebuttal of Allegations of Discrimination

The Minister of Health and Social Services detailed a number of points on supplementary benefits, industrial training and hospital employment which he suggested would be useful in rebutting charges of discrimination including any that might arise at the Downing Street talks. The Minister of Finance thought these points would also be invaluable to the Ulster Members to make in debate at Westminster.

5. Londonderry situation on Saturday, 2nd November, 1968.

The Minister of Home Affairs outlined the situation which was developing out of counter-action by those opposed to the march of the 15 members of the Civil Rights Committee over much the same route as that selected by the banned procession of 5th October. There were obvious difficulties in attempting to ban a walk by just 15 people. With a Protestant procession planned for the following Saturday it now looked as if a blanket ban covering all processions in the neighbourhood of Londonderry for the next few weeks might have to be imposed.

A general ban extending over the whole of Northern Ireland would be desirable but unfortunately impractical because of enforcement problems which could become acute if a number of parades were arranged to take place simultaneously at widely separated points. A general ban in the Londonderry area might have to be followed by one also for Belfast.

6. Additional briefing information

The Minister of Development produced further notes on the matters mentioned at the last meeting and the Minister of Education indicated that material on education was being prepared.

7. Effect of Londonderry disturbances on industrial development

The Minister of Commerce informed his colleagues that an American firm in the automobile components industry had been interested in the Londonderry area and financial terms had been agreed three weeks ago. Now, however, before proceeding further a full report on the disturbances had been called for by the firm. It was clear that a continuation of disorder could have a very adverse effect on development plans.

Terrance O'Neill