

1968/33

CONCLUSIONS OF A MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD AT
STORMONT CASTLE ON THURSDAY, 7TH NOVEMBER, 1968, AT 11.15 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 Development
The Minister in the Senate

ALSO The Attorney-General
PRESENT: The Chief Whip

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

1. DOWNING STREET DISCUSSIONS

Ministers had before them the Secretary to the Cabinet's Note of the discussions at 10 Downing Street on 4th November between the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Commerce and Home Affairs for the Government of Northern Ireland, and the Prime Minister, Home Secretary and Miss Alice Bacon for the Government of the United Kingdom.

Ministers generally accepted that these discussions had brought about a most serious situation, in which clearly there would have to be some concessions on the part of Northern Ireland if a dangerous and damaging confrontation with the United Kingdom Government was to be avoided.

The Prime Minister reminded his colleagues that the pressures voiced behind closed doors on 4th November had also been given public expression by Mr. Wilson in House of Commons exchanges next day. The possibility that the United Kingdom Government were bluffing could be discounted.

The Minister of Finance outlined to his colleagues in detail the numerous possibilities open for the exertion of financial and economic pressure. Whether under statutory agreements, or through discretionary payments, or by a helpful approach towards borrowing demands, Northern Ireland had up to now been most generously treated. Any reversal of this attitude would have the most grave and immediate consequences.

The Cabinet proceeded to examine areas in which changes might be made to remove the danger of a confrontation. There was general agreement that the question of

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the local government franchise was the crucial issue, and that it would be pointless to yield on subsidiary issues while leaving this major question unresolved. In the course of this discussion, different views were expressed on the timing of any change to universal adult suffrage, should the Cabinet agree that such a change must be made. On the one hand it was argued that, from the tone of the Downing Street discussions, really early action on this front was expected. On the other, it was urged that franchise reform and local government re-structuring must proceed together; but those who took this view accepted that a considerable speed-up of the work of re-structuring would be involved in this case. It was also suggested that a major franchise reform ought not to be put into effect without a clear electoral mandate.

In the context of the franchise, there was discussion of the desirable shape of local government in the future. The Minister of Home Affairs suggested that, to avoid the very difficult issue of dealing with District Electoral Division boundaries, they might opt for a broad County basis of (say) seven authorities, within which the existing Stormont constituencies would serve as wards. Although there was some support for the proposition that a solution on these lines should be examined, the Minister of Development pointed out that, by its Statement of Aims, the Government had committed itself to a pattern of 12-18 authorities, and that a change of course in the context of a change in the franchise would certainly be criticised as a gerrymander. There was also discussion of the functions of new local government areas. It was argued on the one hand that it would be wise to centralise the responsibility for major services, leaving the authorities with what might be described as ratepayers' or environmental services; but on the other that the Government had declared its objective in the re-structuring process to be the creation of strong, viable and responsible authorities with a really worthwhile role.

Ministers also discussed other areas of possible action as follows:-

(a) Housing. The point was made that in pressing for a mandatory points system in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom Ministers did not seem to be aware that such a system was not mandatory upon local authorities in Great Britain. The Prime Minister made the point that further insupportable allocations - and he understood another very bad case was likely to arise - would create great embarrassment. Some attempt must be made to prevail upon local authorities to avoid creating such situations. The Minister of Health and Social Services recalled that, as Minister of Health and Local Government, he had attempted to intervene in this way. It was unfortunate that there had not been continuing, gradual reform in this and other aspects of local government. The Chief Whip again suggested that special action should be taken in the

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Londonderry area, through a Commission or otherwise.

(b) The Ombudsman. The Minister of Finance expressed the view that, since the operation of an Ombudsman would have little practical effect, this was a concession which could be made without undue concern. The United Kingdom Ombudsman, Sir Edmund Compton, might be asked to deal with "transferred services" on an agency basis, reporting to the Northern Ireland Parliament. The Minister of Home Affairs, however, recalled that such an appointment had twice been resisted. A change of view on it now would clearly be seen as dictation to the Northern Ireland Parliament. Moreover, if they accepted Sir Edmund Compton and later found local authorities in Great Britain being brought within his ambit, the position could be difficult. The issue was in any case a marginal one. The Chief Whip, however, felt that to appoint a local Ombudsman would be a harmless gesture, while the Attorney-General also favoured a local appointment, rather than using the services of Sir Edmund Compton.

(c) Mater Hospital. The Prime Minister cited this as an example of a concession which would be well received, without prejudicing any basic political position, and the Chief Whip also felt that progress on this issue would be most acceptable to moderate Roman Catholic opinion. The Minister of Health and Social Services said that at any time the Mater could have had precisely the same treatment as all other hospitals, and now, under the 1967 Act, could enjoy a privileged position. There had been no delay on his part in seeking to make a satisfactory arrangement under that Act.

(d) An Inquiry into police conduct in Londonderry. The Attorney-General informed his colleagues that he had directed a number of prosecutions of persons involved in the disturbances, and that there was also a possibility of a number of cross-summonses against the police. In these circumstances he hoped that the facts would be established in Court, thus satisfactorily disposing of this issue.

After these issues had been discussed, the Prime Minister said that a further meeting of the Cabinet would clearly be necessary, to consolidate the helpful progress made at this meeting. All his colleagues clearly appreciated the gravity of the situation, and it was now their duty - with a Party Meeting imminent - to bring the situation home with equal clarity to back-benchers. In particular they should point out that various prognostications of Mr. Wilson's early disappearance from the political scene had been proved false; that the adage "he who pays the piper calls the tune" could not in logic be used to justify a ratepayers' franchise while defying the United Kingdom Government which financially supported Northern Ireland as a whole; that the Ireland Act of 1949 guaranteed Northern

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Ireland's territorial integrity but not its continuing subsidisation; that Northern Ireland was in fact in a position of utter financial and economic dependence and thus any talk of U.D.I. was utter folly; and that the maintenance of the overall constitutional position depended upon control at Stormont and not upon the control of certain local authorities in ways which were often difficult to justify.

The Ministers of Commerce and of Home Affairs made the point that, while they would support changes which they believed to be justifiable in themselves, they were unwilling to accept dictation as to how Northern Ireland should be governed. The Minister of Commerce added that he was not prepared to yield to financial or economic duress. If, for example, Mr. Wilson were to refuse any further support for Short's, the responsibility for the unemployment which would result would clearly rest with him. The Prime Minister remarked that the logic of this attitude was to face up to the possibility of severe sanctions. In his view it was vain to imagine that the disastrous consequences of such a course could be evaded. If Ulster people lost their prosperity and the benefits of British citizenship, and if thousands - at Short's or elsewhere - suffered as a result, they would lay their indignation at the door of their own Government, which had allowed such a situation to develop. The Attorney-General commented that there were internal as well as external pressures. Was it desirable to contemplate continuing riots and demonstrations? The Chief Whip agreed, and added that the alternatives were clear. Either they agreed to accept the position gracefully, or they decided to defy Her Majesty's Government. The Unionist Party existed to defend the Union, not to defy the British Government. If the Party was to be persuaded to adopt a responsible attitude in the present situation, that attitude must first be adopted by the Cabinet collectively.

Discussion was adjourned at this point.

2. RADIOLOGICAL PROTECTION.

The Cabinet agreed that the impending Westminster legislation should be extended to Northern Ireland, as proposed in the Minister of Health and Social Services' Memorandum of 18th October, 1968.

3. PENSIONS (INCREASE) BILL

The Cabinet agreed to the preparation of legislation as proposed in the Minister of Finance's Memorandum of 30th October, 1968.

4. TEACHERS (SUPERANNUATION) BILL

The Cabinet agreed to the preparation of legislation as proposed in the Minister of Education's Memorandum of 4th November, 1968.

5. VISITS ABROAD

There being no comments by Ministers, the visits notified by the Secretary to the Cabinet's Memoranda of 24th and 28th October, 1968, were approved.

Terence O'Neill