

E.R.

Secretary of State (L+B) M

1. I said I would put up a short paper on the future of the Assembly and include ideas for a way out of the impasse created by the refusal of the SDLP to take their seats. We agreed that the time frame for any developments would have to be post-General Election.

2. The prospects for the Assembly are not good. Conditions for devolving even partial powers simply are not there. This was always the carrot to dangle before most unionists. Some useful work is taking place (in my own field the DFP committee was ably chaired by Jim Allister as acting chairman) and unexpected and interesting political arrangements are being made (the DUP/Alliance partnership). But sooner or later the likelihood that the carrot will remain out of reach will strengthen the wreckers' case. This is likely to be sooner, because unionists will need something to campaign on in respect of the Assembly at the General Election. I would not be surprised if they went on a "powers or else" ticket. And even if they are more circumspect, electoral promises are liable to box them into attitudes which will impede the present very limited progress after the election. The additional Westminster seats will also create a short-lived interest in affairs in Westminster - short lived because Parliament's overall indifference and irritation with Ulster will soon reassert themselves. For a time, though, the new seats will weaken the prospects for the Assembly.

3. The SDLP's hostility to the Assembly is deeply entrenched now, even among moderates. My own view is that even an offer of power-sharing would not coax them in. This is despite the fact that the logic of their own arguments demands an assembly of some kind for Northern Ireland in any future settlement. The political consequences of the hunger strike reach further than most people in GB realize. Gerry Fittery is over. We now have two nationalist parties: SDLP and Sinn Fein. Competition (and hatred) between them is intense but the effect of competition has been to draw their positions together. If we want the SDLP to participate in the Assembly we will have to agree to some all-

Ireland framework within which they can do so. In effect, this would mean pressure from Dublin for them to participate. Involvement in Northern Ireland affairs is fraught with difficulty for Dublin Governments, which is why they usually content themselves with vague and generalised requests for political solutions. They prefer to be guided by John Hume rather than seek to guide him. To get anywhere, therefore, we would effectively need to plant in Dublin's mind, or John Hume's, or both, a set of all-Ireland procedures which would not merely be acceptable to them but which could be presented as a great prize. The prize would also have to be one which unionists hard and soft could wear; and which a new Conservative Government could sell to the Conservative Party.

4. Dublin would need a prize rather than a merely acceptable gift because of Haughey's survival. Having survived, he has consolidated and strengthened his position. In his own view, and it is shared by most commentators, both the survival and the strengthening are due to his stance on the North, because of Fianna Fail's guardianship of the Republican tabernacle. FitzGerald can be much less Republican and do well; he cannot be a Free Stater pure and simple, or only in a context in which overwhelming SDLP support for his position meant that Fianna Fail would effectively be joining hands with Sinn Fein.

5. Unionists, hard and soft, would be unlikely to co-operate unless there were prizes for them too. A guarantee from Dublin of the permanence of their position within the UK would be a great prize. The question is: would they insist that nationalists also have to operate within so uncompromising a context? Enoch would answer in the affirmative. I am of the view that with luck and skill Paisley, Napier and the devolutionary unionists might be brought round. Quite apart from the benefits of constitutional stability, the way would then be clear for SDLP participation in the Assembly and consent to devolution. Westminster is an unsatisfactory place for most Unionist politicians and they are well aware of it. Their tradition is to operate

both in Westminster and in Stormont and that is what they want back. Again the question is: would all of them be dog-in-the-manger about Stormont nationalists also participating in a pan-Irish or pan-these-islands (ie, confederal) institution? Tactically, the best way to get such ideas off the ground would be for unionists to believe that they have thought of them. (McCartney and Ferguson, like me, find the 1973 guarantee unsatisfactory).

6. Conservatives would be unlikely to make trouble or make it effectively, if unionist consent were given. They too would see a "Dublin guarantee" as a prize. And there would be great national and international prestige accruing to their Government if a permanent settlement could be achieved.

7. In spite of the almost ludicrous difficulty of the undertaking I have outlined I believe we should attempt it. The reason is simple. A settlement is needed in the interests of security, the economy and political life in Britain and Ireland. The FCO might add the interests of political relations with Europe* and America and I would agree with them. Stasis and stalemate helps Sinn Fein. Nor can we nationally afford to go on indefinitely as we are - not just my view but that of the sober-minded and very Ulster DFP. We also have an urgent short term need to help the SDLP electorally.

8. The aim of policy, therefore, would be to try to compose a shopping list of items which would allow the SDLP to participate in a devolved NI Assembly/Executive. The items would not come cheap but they would change the political landscape of Northern Ireland less drastically than might casually appear because a de facto difference exists and has always existed between unionist and nationalist politics. I have long argued that in the main we need to legitimize (ie affirm in legislation and/or treaty) that which already operates in practical ways on the /...

* At a meeting on 21 February, Geoffrey Martin told me in confidence that Dublin, at John Hume's request, had been lobbying the EC Committee and Commissioners to have nothing to do with the Assembly.

E.R.

ground. Of course this is not easy to do because symbols are more important than facts in Ireland. But it can be done if the prizes are good enough.

10. As to the shopping list itself, I append a useful paper from David Blatherwick. You will note that the difficulties in respect of elections disappear if the position of unionists within the union, like the position of nationalists within the confederation, is effectively permanent. David's other items are well known and achievable, again in the right context. Security is more difficult. I attach considerable importance to "Mallonry"; it doesn't hurt a unionist if a nationalist sits in a "foreign" parliament that makes no claim on him. (I also append a long interview I have given to the Irish Independent which argues the case for these pluralist solutions at greater length). Others will be able to suggest other items.

11. The tactics. Northern Ireland affairs cannot be handled by the Northern Ireland Secretary alone. No 10, the FCO and the NIO have to get together and push. You need a political heavy weight in Dublin as Ambassador or someone very close to the throne, a Parsons. The thing is, and always will be, a triangle: London, Dublin, Belfast. You need, as I said earlier, as many ideas as possible coming from the participants themselves in the belief that they have thought of them. (Even Haughey's ideas when we met him at your flat were a lot more pluralist than his present "Declare an intention to withdraw" line; a line that would be acceptable to Gerry Adams.)

12. In the shorter term, you also need to see that the Assembly survives. That means (i) a coherent Tory manifesto (ii) strong unionist pressure for it to survive. Your danger at present seems to me to be (ii). How can we beef up the credibility of the Assembly, even to those participating in it? What about inviting a Council composed of two or three members from each constitutional party (including SDLP but not worrying if they won't come), to advise you and your ministers at the moment of decision taking. We might not take the advice but this would, for a bit longer,

E.R.

be less of a talking shop role or scrutiny of decisions already made. With the close co-operation of George Quigley I am trying to build up the DFP Committee into taking up a quasi-departmental role: arguing the toss as next year's PES starts to emerge.

13. To conclude, we have succeeded in a fearful climate (hunger strike, deep recession, Falklands, Dublin instability) in initiating elections and opening a local assembly. That it is a unionist assembly may or may not be our fault. In the longer scheme of things this does not much matter because no settlement is possible without unionist participation and because without elections and an assembly unionist politics become totally reactive and moribund. The DUP/Alliance connection is at least something more than inertia. It is also certain that if there is not some kind of settlement the Assembly is liable to collapse altogether due to the frustrations of being denied powers.

14. In order to avoid ending this note with an unlucky number I might just add that regardless of what happens over the next year or so I believe that in future it should be the convention for Northern Ireland Secretaries to be reappointed for a period of at least 6 months after a general election in which their party is returned to power. British electoral cycles bedevil progress in Northern Ireland and are a shot in the arm for integrationists.



28 February 1983