

Mi Elliott - M

- cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - M
- PS/Dr Boyson (L&B) - M
- PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M
- PS/Mr Patten (L&B) - M
- PS/Lord Lyell (L&B) - M
- PS/PUS (L&B) - M
- PS/Mr Bloomfield
- Mr Brennan - M
- Mr Gilliland
- Mr Merifield
- Mr Carvill
- Mr Abbott - M
- Mr Lyon - M
- Mr G Hewitt
- Mr Bickham - M

PC45/11

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS GROUP: 11 JANUARY 1985

1. As a contribution to the PDG consideration of Political Developments in 1985, I attach a paper on the current NI political scene as viewed from Belfast. The paper represents an updating of the analysis set out in the PAB paper of 10 September 1984 and is intended as a background aid for the discussion.
2. Mr Merifield has seen and approved the paper and, at his request, I am copying it to Private Offices for the information of Ministers in advance of the Secretary of State's meeting on 14 January.

R. Reeve

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Political Affairs Division
8 January 1985

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INTRODUCTION

1) The faint air of optimism regarding progress towards a political solution in NI had largely disappeared by the end of 1984. During last summer, with the publication of the Forum Report and the various Unionist party documents, there appeared to be at least a developing consensus on the problems which needed to be addressed even if disagreements remained on the possible solutions. On the nationalist side the atmosphere was helped by the SDLP's success at the European elections and the high expectations (greatly raised by Dublin and fostered by the SDLP), that the Anglo-Irish summit would produce major beneficial results. On the unionist side, there was a growing hope that, in the absence of the SDLP from the Assembly, the Government might be prepared to modify the criterion of widespread acceptance if the SDLP continued to dismiss all suggestions for a purely internal settlement, no matter how generous these might be in attempting to accommodate the concerns and aspirations of the minority community.

2) The outcome of the summit, particularly in its public manifestations, had a major impact on both sides of the community. To the UUP it came as a vindication of the policies they had been urging on successive British governments. They professed to believe that the statements concerning the constitutional position of NI were more binding and far-reaching than anything said before by the Government. Despite the attempts of the 'devolutionist group' to play down these aspects, the party as a whole received the summit outcome with a measure of triumphalism. Although more measured in their response, the DUP also expressed a belief that the constitutional guarantee had been strengthened. Both parties saw the outcome as in effect telling the SDLP that they must either agree terms for an internal NI settlement or face an indefinite exclusion from power or influence.

3) For much the same reasons for the SDLP the summit outcome came as a body blow. The party's supporters had been expecting the British Government to be far more forthcoming in involving Dublin in the internal regime of NI. Though leaders like John Hume recognised the inherent problems of the 3 Forum options, they nevertheless hoped that some formal expression of the Irish identity (joint authority with a small j/a) would be forthcoming. The manner of the rejection of the Forum models

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With the apparent dismissal of the Irish identity was seen as a calculated insult to the minority community in the Province as well as a rebuff to the attempts of the Irish Coalition to help solve the 'Northern Ireland problem'. The effect was to drive the SDLP into a corner from which they have yet to emerge. Initial reactions were to propose a boycott of all public bodies and the establishment of a separate, nationalist assembly. The frustration felt by many in the minority community was not restricted to those active in political life and was all the greater because of the sharpness of the realisation that the hopes which had been fostered had been unrealistic. This disappointment persists. It remains to be seen whether it will develop into a despairing rejection of the political process, or whether it will induce an acceptance that the boundaries of realism are narrower than they had imagined and thus encourage a more co-operative approach to political development.

PRESENT POSITION

4) Against this background, the present position of the political parties in the Province is as follows.

UUP

5) For Mr Molyneaux and his Westminster colleagues, the focus of attention remains the House of Commons. The UUP leadership have never approved of the NI Assembly and have put little effort into safeguarding its future. They have allowed the lesser lights of the party, in particular Frank Millar Jnr, to be active in the Assembly and have not particularly discouraged the devolutionist group (Millar, McCartney and Smyth) from making encouraging noises towards minority aspirations. The leadership have yet, however, to endorse 'The Way Forward' as official policy.

6) Instead Mr Molyneaux still seems to believe that the solution to the NI political problem is to restore powers to local government as a step towards full integration. To him the value of the Assembly seems to be that it provides full-time paid employment for the party faithful and a forum for the new generation to make their mark. He feels under no pressure to make major moves either to accommodate the SDLP in a structure of government or to involve them in serious discussions with his party as to possible ways forward. Instead he believes that in the absence of progress on devolution some steps towards integration will

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Continually be inevitable, and he is content to wait for this to happen. In the absence of any serious challenge to his leadership, it is unlikely that the policies of the 'devolutionist group' will secure widespread support in the party. The UUP's stance in the Local Government Elections, when historically they do well with a traditional programme, could play into the leadership's hands. Token gestures may be made towards the Assembly in an attempt not to upset backbench and constituency elements but the leadership is unlikely to surrender its integrationist aspirations and the party will go along with this in the interests of party unity.

DUP

7) The Assembly remains the central plank to the party's platform. They continue to see a Stormont administration as the best guarantee of the Union. Although the DUP remain committed to a system of majority rule (based on the 'democratic' argument) they are prepared to work up models of devolved government involving SDLP participation on a proportional basis. But though the minority safeguards are in some ways generous, they fall far short of the 1974 power sharing precedent which (especially without its Council of Ireland component) provides a yardstick for Catholic voters. The DUP have, however, publicly offered party-to-party talks with the SDLP to explore possible developments. There seems to be some confusion as to the basis on which these talks will take place and the offer may represent little more than gamemanship and image boosting for the DUP.

8) Although Dr Paisley professes to be satisfied with the summit outcome (and is still resting comfortably on the results of the European election), he appears to have been somewhat dismayed by the Secretary of State's remarks concerning the life expectancy of the Assembly in the absence of a scheme for devolved government. He and his leadership team are also concerned that at the next summit meeting, the Prime Minister may feel obliged to concede some ground to Dr Fitzgerald in order to preserve Anglo-Irish relations. These fears make it unlikely that the party will make any move of significance until both the summit and May elections are out of the way. In particular, the DUP's vulnerability in the local elections, where the undoubted appeal of their leader provides less pull than a full compliment of good local candidates able to attract the less extreme unionist vote, will inhibit their initiating anything smacking of concession.

ALLIANCE

9) Under John Cushnahan's leadership there is a suspicion that the party may be prepared to make concessions on the issue of power sharing. Hitherto, the Alliance Party has set its face firmly against any model of devolved government which did not include the power sharing ingredient. This principle provided a bed rock of Alliance policy. There are now indications that the Alliance party leadership would consider this ingredient in a watered-down form and interest has been expressed in some of the DUP ideas about proportional balancing. This may reflect a growing exasperation with the arms length approach of the SDLP. It is notable that the party has made no obvious overtures to the SDLP in recent months, and this may presage an attempt by the Alliance to win over that part of the constitutional nationalist vote which would accept some internal solution. If so it is hard to see how a further split of the nationalist vote could serve to provide long term political stability in the Province.

SDLP

10) The effects of the summit remain. Publicly, the party is becoming more strident in its criticism of Government policies in all areas of life in the Province. Privately there is a sense of frustration and despair that the Forum process appears to have come to an abrupt halt. In the absence of any form of Dublin involvement in the affairs of the Province, elements of the Party have been speaking with increasing frequency about the need for their own nationalist forum and a complete boycott of all state institutions in order to demonstrate the existence of their feeling of alienation. There is also pointed criticism of their party's leadership. However, the Party's leadership have managed to contain, to date, these demands and criticisms. Indeed, one side effect of the summit has been to create support/sympathy for the party from a wide spectrum of the minority community. Such support may be imprecisely articulated - as evidenced in the discussion of alienation - but it represents a deep feeling of dissatisfaction that the political process in Northern Ireland is still predominantly British/Unionist, and provides little real power or influence for the nationalist community. In such circumstances it has proved too easy to lay economic and social problems at the door of unionist influence.

11) In these circumstances, the forthcoming Party Conference assumes great importance. Over the next three weeks, Mr Hume will have to evolve

and carry support for future SDLP policy at that gathering. To date, he has continued to set his party's face against any form of internal settlement which does not involve Dublin and has shown himself reluctant to engage in discussions with unionist parties. Privately he has shown interest in ways of developing Anglo-Irish relations in the 'grey area' between consultative procedures and joint authority. He seems prepared to take a longterm view in developing a relationship which makes a reality of an 'island view' on such topics as energy, tourism and agriculture and provides more status for the nationalist community. There remains an influential lobby within the SDLP which would be reluctant to continue an abstentionist approach to political machinery in NI but which needs a realistic share in any Provincial structures. None of the unionist proposals so far offer this, and even The Way Forward, with some leaning towards participation by the minority, is undermined by the narrowness of the powers being considered for devolution and the lukewarm commitment in the UUP at large - and at its leadership level.

12) How these strains will be brought together will not be apparent until after the conference. The SDLP leadership will also face problems at its conference and in the aftermath of the May district council elections on relations with Sinn Fein. While the leadership has set its face against any formal pact or inter party co-operation, the policy is unlikely to be implemented in full at local level when councillors are invited to vote on individual issues which affect their community and its standing against the unionists.

SINN FEIN

13) Sinn Fein declared publicly that the Summit was irrelevant to its own political aspirations and to those of the nationalist community. The rejection of the options in the Forum Report at the summit and press conferences was seen as a predictable humiliation for the SDLP and the parties in the Dail, and as a vindication of the stance taken by Sinn Fein with the expectation of gaining electorally. Nevertheless, there was genuine relief that the summit had produced no new initiatives damaging to Sinn Fein's electoral prospects, since there is an acceptance among the Sinn Fein leadership that the party is in need of general reorganisation. This would primarily be in preparation for local elections both in the Republic and in the North for which the party is experiencing some difficulty in finding candidates of the right calibre. The immediate effect of the Summit, however, has been to confirm the

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leadership's belief that the right strategy is being pursued for the May local elections, in which they intend to concentrate their efforts with the hope of winning around 50-60 seats in key constituencies with a strong nationalist electorate. Sinn Fein also expects the SDLP at local level to co-operate with them, in defiance of official SDLP policy, in those areas when non-co-operation would leave the way clear for the unionists to take control. There is no prospect of a formal SDLP-Sinn Fein alliance but the likelihood of SDLP and Sinn Fein members voting on the same side on particular resolutions is very strong indeed.

14) For Gerry Adams the May election will be critical. If he does not succeed in winning, and then exploiting, a balance of seats on many councils his dual political/military strategy will come under sharp attack from the militants who want to shed the constraints imposed by political activity. Either way the political temperature in the Province stands to rise.

IMMEDIATE PROSPECTS

15) The security situation and minority perceptions of the security forces will continue to affect the prospects for political development as will the warmth and effectiveness of Anglo-Irish security co-operation. A major security incident or a gradual deterioration in the overall situation would make it difficult for unionists to adopt a generous approach towards the SDLP and would be exploited by the more extreme loyalist politicians who have no interest in securing progress. At the same time, the SDLP's already limited room for manoeuvre would undoubtedly be curtailed if there were any serious incidents involving members of the security forces and the minority community. The death of Sean Downes and the earlier Norah McCabe incident continue to send ripples through the nationalist community.

16) The imminence of a further Summit and the approach of the May District Council elections (with the inevitable constitutional overtones) make it unlikely that any of the parties will wish to move from their present entrenched positions. The DUP/SDLP talks may take place, but with little sense of urgency or commitment from either side. For the DUP (and probably Alliance), the main priority is to keep the Assembly in being. For Sinn Fein, continued political stalemate and SDLP isolation suits their needs well, as it does in a different sense the UUP leadership's aims. The SDLP must face the choice of strategies. There are increasing signs that they lack confidence in the unionist parties to such an extent that a sharing of power would be viewed with apprehension even if

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was "forced" out of the unionists by British government pressure. If this is so, SDLP policy could develop a longer term element aimed at developing Irish involvement and (Mr Hume's latest ideas) some stronger nationalist representation at Westminster.

17) To this end the Report Committee will assume a greater public importance - in part as a symbol of unionist reasonableness and SDLP intransigence. But, again, there is little impression of urgency. It is unlikely that the UUP will want to 'rock the boat' this side of the council elections.

18) On the Government side, all parties in NI looking for signs of any departure from declared principles. Hints that "widespread support in the community" does not mean what it said, that a unionist direction of events may prevail over nationalist concern at the recognition of the two national identities, and that straight majority rule could suffice in a deeply divided society, would make it that much more difficult for constitutional nationalists to retain their position against the more extreme counsel of Sinn Fein. In the meantime until May, paliatives (dealing with Flags and Emblems, voting rights etc) which do not deal with the substance of the problem would probably cause more trouble than they are worth. This does not mean, however, that in applying policies Government Departments, the RUC etc should not be aware of the importance of discussions which are seen to recognise and respect "the identities of both the majority and minority communities".

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