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AIRLIE HOUSE CONFERENCE, VIRGINIA, JANUARY 1985

Received at 15-32
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1. It may be useful to record a few comments on the above conference which Mr Lyon and I attended in support of Mr Patten between and 6 and 9 January. A full account would merely be tedious and repetitive, and in that sense fail to do justice to what was in certain respects an interesting occasion.
2. Having attended a rather large number of such conferences since the early 1970s I came to this one with little expectation that the pattern of re-playing old disharmonies would not be repeated. This was frequently the case at Airlie House, but not always. Small cracks could be identified here and there in the previously monolithic positions of important interests. Whether these were simply in the process of settlement into virtually the same position, or precursors of some significant movement, only time will tell. Distance from NI itself encourages at least a less strident tone, and late at night relaxation can be (and was) facilitated by liberal hospitality of the liquid kind.
3. One must, however, begin this account with the players, and here there were both presences and absences of some significance. The DUP, having dipped its toe into the water of conference-going under the aegis of the British-Irish association, decided to repeat the experience. This willingness to engage in open debate on such occasions has not so far extended to Dr Paisley himself, and in his absence one inevitably has reservations as to whether pronouncements by the DUP are, or are not, ex cathedra. However, 3 days exposure to Peter Robinson amply demonstrated what a forceful articulate and crafty politician he is, and it is not therefore likely that in anything he said he was departing markedly from the party line - a developing party line, as far as one could see.
4. The make-up of the UUP team was significant. We had Ken Maginness reflecting largely an understandable concern about security, Harold McCusker characteristically mixing the testy with the generous, but above all Messrs McCartney and Peter Smith.

was in his element, showing skills of advocacy and forensic analysis which were formidable.

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5. On virtually all previous occasions at similar conferences, I have felt that the SDLP at worst shared the spoils of the argument, not always because of the inherent weight of their case, but because it was agreeably and convincingly deployed. On this occasion, and treating the conference simply as an extended debate, the unionist parties - and in particular Messrs Robinson and McCartney - won hands down. This was clearly the view of, amongst others, a number of the American observers who, like most Americans drawn to the Irish cause, approach the problems essentially from a nationalist point of view. It would be going much too far to suggest that such people were persuaded by the unionist arguments, but impressed they certainly were, and I would see this as a small plus in terms of developing a better balanced understanding of these complex problems.
6. However, it will be seen from this account that the strong integrationist wing of the UUP was not represented at the conference, and it is depressing to reflect that the intellectual credibility of the arguments of Bob McCartney may simply have been an illustration of how far he is from his party's current centre of gravity. Robinson may, or may not, have been speaking for Paisley; McCartney was most certainly not speaking for Molyneux or Enoch Powell.
7. SDLP had a strong representation in the sense that those present vividly illustrated the awful dilemma in which that party now finds itself, and the divisions of emphasis within what has always been a loose and ill-organised coalition of nationalist interests. The main protagonists on this occasion were Messrs Hume, Mallon and Currie, with Mr Frank Feely in the role of spear carrier. John Hume is normally in his element in the United States, where he is widely regarded as occupying a position somewhere between Charles Stewart Parnell and Mother Theresa. On this occasion he gave a chilling impression of political bankruptcy, rather like a man who has lost a fortune by backing a particular number consistently at the roulette table and continues to stare at that number even though he no longer has a stake to play. The unionists put him under very skilful and sustained pressure to engage in talk about arrangements for internal government, even to the extent of throwing out the lifeline of willingness to recognise some kind of relevant interest on the part of the Irish Republic. In the face of this pressure, Hume took refuge in unconvincing ambiguity. He continued to rely on texts from the Forum Report as if they had been handed down on tablets of stone. He played the familiar record about the need to widen the context.

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He notably side-stepped an invitation to go as far as the Toaiseach had gone at the last Summit conference in acknowledging that there could not be constitutional change without majority consent. Seamus Mallon spoke in an almost constant state of white heat particularly on matters of security. Austin Currie made some interesting and thoughtful contributions on issues such as "identity". But the overall impression was of a depondent party of tired men not knowing quite where to turn.

8. There were various references to the absence of spokesmen for Sinn Fein. The more constitutional arm of ardent republicanism, as represented by official Fianna Fail, was not there either. It was noteworthy that one or two brave souls chose to attend in their individual capacities and thereby risked the displeasure of Mr Haughey, alongside Desmond O'Malley who had already been cast into outer darkness. ("Thrown out of my party", as he drily observed "within a fortnight of the Forum Report being signed, for having agreed with it") Both parties in the Irish Government were represented at Ministerial level (by Michael Noonan for Fianna Gael and Rory Quinn for Labour), and there were a number of younger members of the Dail who struck one as having heavy baggage of preconceived notions but reasonably open minds. Even these more liberal-minded politicians found great difficulty with the famous "constitutional guarantee" or "unionist veto". Since they found it hard to argue that Northern Ireland could or should be admitted to a "New Ireland" in face of the outright opposition of nearly a million people, some at least illustrated a hankering for a process in which the outer structure of the guarantee would be left standing but everything within it progressively eaten away. This struck me as being rather like saying: "I promise not to dispossess you of your house, but that is without prejudice to my right to remove in the course of time all furniture, fittings, internal structures, load-bearing walls etc." In private chat Mr Noonan in particular was gloomy about the consequences for Dr FitzGerald of a failure to deliver something substantial from the Summit process. This is, in the current circumstances, a pretty obvious card for the Republic to play, since they have relatively few others.
9. The core theme of the conference might be described in Lewis Carroll's words

"Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, join the dance?"

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Unionists spoke repeatedly of a window of opportunity, of a need and a willingness to make concessions, of the status of their own various policy documents as a contribution to dialogue rather than a "take it or leave it" affair. Neither UUP nor DUP sought to argue that the Irish Republic was totally without a valid role. But they argued very strongly indeed that the core of any settlement would have to be agreement on some internal arrangements for governing Northern Ireland in the foreseeable future. They refused to be specific about what precise concessions they would be prepared to make to the SDLP, making the wholly understandable point that if they were about to be involved in serious negotiations they would be crazy to reveal their hands in detail in advance. They appealed to the SDLP to join in talks in virtually any setting, and with an entirely open agenda. John Hume and the SDLP side-stepped these invitations. Hume came back again and again to his well-known theme that talks would be fruitless without prior agreement on the context, that an internal settlement would never work, and that nothing in their experience of unionism over the years or more recently encouraged them to believe that anything substantial or enduring would be offered.

10. Around this central theme, numerous subordinate themes were touched upon. There was a considerable emphasis on the unionist side on the bad effects of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution as a kind of "Certificate of respectability" for militant republicanism, and a good deal of evidence that there is some sympathy for this argument amongst some members of the Dail. When Irish politicians went on to speak of the desirability of changes towards a more pluralist society, the general unionist view was that such changes should be introduced, if at all, because they were fair, just and desirable in the existing Irish State. They would have no impact at all on the determination of the Northern majority to remain British. Bob McCartney alone took a somewhat wider view, to the effect that the introduction of pluralism in the Republic would be bound in time to soften relationships between protestant and catholic in the whole of Ireland, and perhaps in the next century lead on to more significant changes in the relationship.
11. We heard, of course, a good deal about "alienation", the symbolism of issues such as Flags and Emblems, and so on. But far and away the most chilling session was that dealing with security. Here we had people speaking with passionate conviction, and out of their own direct experience, but almost as

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if they inhabited different planets. Ken Maginess reflected a harsh reality of exposed Border farms, the shotgun behind the door, the near-genocidal character of attacks on isolated protestant families. Seamus Mallon reflected another harsh reality of widespread stopping, questioning, detaining, house-searching and other activities fending a very high proportion of the catholic working class. He went so far as to suggest that no process of political dialogue could prosper while the temperature on such issues remained so high, and then made (in the Swiftian sense) "modest proposals" for standing down the UDR and bringing forward the release of a large number of those currently held in prison.

12. There were, of course, a number of attempts by delegates from the SDLP and the Irish Republic to put HMG on the spot. That government was, after all, the sovereign authority in the Northern Ireland situation. Irish nationalism put its analysis and proposals on the table in the report of the New Ireland Forum; so had various of the other parties. But HMG, it was alleged, had neither declared a firm policy nor responded in any appropriate way to the historic initiative represented by the Forum process. Mr Patten skilfully avoided attempts to pin him to the wall. HMG had responded to the Forum Report, and in some detail, in Mr Prior's House of Commons speech of 2 July 1984. Perhaps people did not like that response, but that was quite a different thing from saying that there had been no response. And while HMG wished to facilitate and encourage both Anglo-Irish dialogue and dialogue internal to Northern Ireland, of course it acknowledged and would live up to its ultimate responsibility, and would not maintain a patient position on the sidelines indefinitely in the absence of movement. My impression from conversations in the margin was that this subtle nudge was welcomed rather than resented, at least on the unionist side.

13. So where did the conference leave us? Clearly it was not fully representative of all the interests with a role to play or even of all the nuances within those interests. But I would not discount the willingness of the DUP in particular to engage in dialogue in a way which is new for them, and although there was a certain satisfaction on their part of the way the debate was felt to have gone, there was also a realisation that unionism as well as nationalism would suffer from a disintegration of the SDLP. Such disintegration is not, I fear, a wholly remote possibility. The limb upon which the SDLP has placed itself by its utter reliance on the Forum process is largely sawn through. The party is disunited and disorganised and its

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morale is low. John Hume continues to resist any thought of an internal settlement, and said privately that he did not believe devolution was workable. Yet if the SDLP remain in lonely isolation, I would fear that those small tendencies towards generosity amongst unionist parties will be choked off, leaving us with limited and unattractive options.

KPB

K P BLOOMFIELD

16 January 1985

cc PS/SOS (B & L) - M
PS/Ministers (B & L) - M
PS/PUS (B & L) - M
Mr Brennan - M
Mr Stephens
Mr Merifield
Mr Carvill
Mr Gilliland
Mr Reeve
Mr Lyon - M
Mr Abbott - M
Mr Clark, FCO, RID - M



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