

PAB/4697/DP

FROM: J E McCONNELL, PAB  
27 JANUARY 1989

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PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

I attach the latest analysis by PAB of political developments in Northern Ireland since the end of December. This period has seen very little political activity of any substance.

Unionists

2. In a recent interview the UUP leader, Jim Molyneaux, said that the proposals which he and Ian Paisley had put to the Secretary of State a year ago had "run into the sands" and he added that "if there had been a constructive and positive approach to them, we would be in a different position today". He suggested that HMG wanted the unionist proposals to fail and that they did not seem prepared to talk realistically about the future.

3. The Charter Group, which is critical of the Party leadership's attitude on devolution, have argued that the European Elections in June could be used as a referendum on devolution. Charter Group leader, David McNarry, said that a Unionist candidate who rejected the Agreement but had workable proposals for devolved government "would be endorsed by a sizeable cross-section of the community".

Nationalists

4. SDLP Councillor Mrs Mary McSorley, who is Chairwoman of Magherafelt District Council, came under criticism from Party colleagues for accepting the MBE in the new year's honour list. The threat of disciplinary action against Mrs McSorley appears to have receded but Seamus Mallon said that "news of her acceptance was received with great surprise and anger". As a Party the SDLP have a

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policy of not nominating people for honours and their General Secretary explained that "as an Irish nationalist party we wouldn't accept an honour of the British Empire" and that "as a socialist party we don't believe in the honours system". Whilst this all may be something of a storm in a teacup the SDLP are concerned that Sinn Fein may use this as an example of the SDLP having pro-British tendencies. On the other hand the unionist community see this as confirmation of the SDLP's unwillingness to play a full and proper role in internal Northern Ireland affairs.

5. In a recent interview in the Irish Times John Hume referred to "a new fluidity" as having been created and went on to say that "if it is taken advantage of and developed, then we will move towards a political solution". In reiterating his view that the main problem is "the relationship between the unionist people and the rest of the people of the island" Hume returned to his argument that future progress would come about by "the representatives of the divided people of this island reaching an agreement on how they share the island". He argued that such discussions could take place outside the framework of the Agreement and thus, in his words, "there would be no sacrifice of principle by any of the parties involved in their attitudes to the Agreement" and that the aim of such a gathering would be to seek "an agreement that would transcend in importance any previous agreeing ever made". Reaction to Hume's comments was largely predictable; Paisley described the idea that talks could take place outside the framework of the Agreement as unrealistic and referred to the fact that the SDLP leader's comments were made "in the context of a united Ireland".

General

6. At a Press Conference held in Belfast on 17 January three former UUP councillors from North Down announced that they were joining the ranks of the North Down Conservative Association. The three councillors are Bruce Mulligan, George Green and Jack Preston and, for all intents and purposes, they have been sitting as Independents following their expulsion from the UUP for having defied the party on its policy of adjourning local government business in protest

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against the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Chairman of the North Down Conservatives, Dr Lawrence Kennedy, welcomed the councillors' decision to join the Conservative group and said that this move was further evidence that their campaign was gathering momentum. He went on to say that the North Down group intended to re-submit its application for affiliation to the Conservative Party later this year.

7. In recent interview the Sinn Fein leader, Gerry Adams, said that their vote would hold in the forthcoming local council election but that the Party has never had the ability to maximise its electoral potential. He alleged that this was because Sinn Fein workers, candidates, and their families were harassed and victimised. He indicated that Sinn Fein would take a "pragmatic" attitude to the "anti-violence oath" for candidates in the local government elections and pointed out that the IRA had accepted that Sinn Fein's role was to represent its supporters and not be disenfranchised. Whilst giving support to the IRA's campaign he was more critical of some of their actions and "mistakes".

Comment

8. Once again there are no obvious public signs that any early progress is likely to be made in political development. Attention will focus increasingly on the forthcoming local government elections and the North Down Conservative Association will be pleased that the acquisition of the three sitting Independent unionist councillors will enable them to field candidates who have local government experience. As for the main political arena it appears that Hume's view that differences will have to be resolved in an all-Ireland discussion forum has still failed to excite much enthusiasm among unionists.

(signed J R Alford for)

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