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On 23/8/71 the Taoiseach and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Labour, Finance and Education met a delegation of Northern Ireland M.Ps and Senators in the Council Chamber. The delegation consisted of

Messrs. G. Fitt, M.P., J. Carron, M.P.,
I. Cooper, M.P., J.A. Currie, M.P.,
P.J. Devlin, M.P., T.C. Gormley, M.P.,
J. Hume, M.P., M.J. Keogh, M.P.,
R.H. O'Connor, M.P., P.M. O'Hanlon, M.P.,
J. O'Reilly, M.P., and Senators J.G.
Lennon, P.F. McGill, P.F. Mallon,
P.J. O'Hare and P.G. Wilson.

After allowing photographers to take a photo-call the Taoiseach opened the proceedings with a short general statement in which he stated that the Government recognized the delegation as representative of the Anti-Unionist community in the North, that the short-term objective of the discussion was to further the achievement of equality of treatment for all in the North on the basis that there would be no departure from the intention of the great majority of the Irish people to achieve the unification of Ireland and that the short-term objective was to be attained by non-violent means. At the end of the discussion a press release would be agreed and he would be glad if none of the participants went outside the release in response to press, etc., inquiries afterwards. This would, he hoped, enable those present to have a full and frank discussion. He also wanted the delegation to remember that he and his four Ministerial colleagues present were members of an elected Government and would be inhibited by national and international considerations from giving public support to some aspects of the civil disobedience campaign in the North.

On behalf of the delegation Mr. Fitt thanked the Taoiseach for inviting them to this meeting. He felt that the delegation was a fair representation of the different views of the non-unionist one-third of Northern Ireland and averred that they were unanimous that the present system in the North was no longer tenable. They were fed up of the regular alternation of jackboot and olive branch. The present offer by the Administration to involve the non-unionist community was not on. Any powers the minority now desired they wanted to have as a right. They felt there was a chance they could involve some of the Protestant community in their suggested alternative system.

A number of the delegation spoke on internment in the North. They were against it in principle. It was a regression to the totalitarian system of pre-1968. The brutality which accompanied its operation had alienated the whole non-unionist community. It had been the catalyst which had done most to define people's attitudes to the regime. Many individual

instances of brutality were described, including the psychological tortures at Birdwood camp. Mr. ^{hemmon} stated that as internees arrived on the "Maidstone" they were photographed to record their injuries. Mr. Devlin mentioned the local Army handbook for the troops which included an extract from Paisley propaganda describing Catholics as "wallowing in Protestant blood" modified by the substitution of "Saxon" for Protestant".

The Taoiseach asked the delegation to assist in having evidence of brutality supplied to the Government - where possible by way of affidavit. He also reminded them of the difficulties in bringing cases to the International Court unless all local legal remedies were first exhausted.

Mr. Cooper mentioned difficulties which internees' dependants were experiencing in obtaining supplementary benefits and, where the internees were farmers, the danger of loss of crops. There was some discussion of the financial implications but the delegation were of the view that this discussion should be summed up by saying that financial aid was not offered by the Government to the Northern Group, nor was it sought by the Group.

Messrs. ^uCorrie and Hume described the present civil disobedience campaign as having good backing from N.I.C.R.A. and the "official" I.R.A. There was in general much more support than ever before for bringing down the present system. There was a problem in involving as many people as possible in the actual campaign and the rent withholding and the rates withholding were calculated to bring about active participation by the working class and the farmer/professional classes respectively. They might proceed to non-payment of TV licence fees, car-tax and income tax. Organisationally, apart from their own withdrawal from Stormont, there was a campaign for the withdrawal of councillors from the system and a start had been made of promoting resignations from the UDR. In general they wanted to harness the energy of all who were in favour of opting out of the system, to involve them and to create an active loyalty in the movement away from the system. They proposed to set up an alternative assembly to Stormont to provide a forum so that the opposition voice would be better heard. They emphasised that the whole campaign was a last effort to obtain a political solution by peaceful means and they felt they had only one or two months within which to work - if the campaign had no success in that period the non-unionist population would go over to violence. They wished the Government to impress on the British that the campaign of civil disobedience was the only acceptable alternative to violence and that it would only be acceptable to the non-unionist population for one or two months. There was some Nationalist disagreement, expressed by Mr. ^{Mc}~~Reilly~~, over the alternative assembly idea and its possible extension to an underground administration.

A number of speakers felt that the British Government and the British Army were underestimating the strength of the UDF. They were well-armed. On the other hand it was generally felt that the "Protestant backlash" would better be faced now - it

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has been the excuse for failure to implement reforms and will continue to be used as an excuse by the Stormont Government and the British Government for not moving towards a political solution in the North.

(At the request of the Department of Foreign Affairs Mr. Roderick O'Connor wrote a note on the Appeal Tribunal which operated ~~when~~^{on the} last occasion internment was in force in the North).

It was suggested, inter alia, that the following actions be taken by the 26-County Government:-

renounce its intention to introduce internment;

call for end of internment in the North and demand facilities for the early medical examination of internees and for facilities for obtaining legal advice;

^{call} for the removal of the British Army as a peace-keeping force as it was not now acceptable to the minority community;

impress on the British authorities that the civil disobedience campaign was the only alternative to violence and that it would only survive for two months if results were not achieved;

examine the "international waters" position in regard to the "Maidstone" prison ship.

(Owing to interrupted attendance at the meeting this note is not exhaustive.)


24/8/71