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NORTHERN IRELAND

Taoiseach

As arranged, Seán Donlon and I visited Northern Ireland recently. While I was there, we had discussions with Mr. Gerry Fitt and Mr. Brian Faulkner.

Mr. Fitt was pessimistic as to the future for Northern Ireland. He was inspired particularly, I think, by the dangers which he saw of a split in the SDLP as between those who would favour a policy of asking the British for a declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland, and those who would oppose any such move. He counted seven members of the party who might possibly go for the declaration of intent idea. He said that he himself would never do so and he thought that he would have the complete backing of John Hume in this attitude.

His reading of the attitude which would be adopted by the British to the Report of the Northern Ireland Convention in the Westminster Debate on Monday was that the British would reject the Report and refer it to a further meeting or series of meetings between the parties principally concerned. He felt that the British would follow this line rather than attempt to recall the Convention because it would have less dangers for them of abstention by Paisley and his group or a refusal by the Paisleyites to participate in a recalled Convention. (When we put this point of view to Mr. Faulkner later in the day, he said that his view was that the British would recall the Convention but, so far as he was concerned, there would not be much difference between recalling the Convention and referring the Report for further consideration to meetings between the parties. He accepted that the latter course could well save face for the British in the event of a refusal by the Paisleyites to attend a recalled Convention.)

On the form of the rejection, Mr. Fitt said that he thought that the British would take parts of the Report and say that they were acceptable, take other parts and reject them and finally ask whatever group of people were called together - whether Convention or series of meetings - to consider further their proposals under the headings of finance, security and other functions.

Whatever happened, Mr. Fitt was not very hopeful about the outcome, whether of a recalled Convention or of a series of meetings. We asked whether he would regard a referendum or an election as a possible way out - perhaps to get parties who had been committed by earlier manifestoes off the hook, if they really saw power-sharing as the only possibility in Northern Ireland. Mr. Fitt gave the impression that he had not really considered this alternative sufficiently to enable him to give a worthwhile reply.

In the conversation, reference was made to the extent to which the Provisional IRA seemed to have gained control of important services in Belfast - for example the taxi service along the Falls Road is almost completely controlled by them and similarly, the work of repairing and maintaining housing executive houses is subject to Provisional control. Mr. Fitt said that the way in which they had been able to operate in these areas serve to confirm his impression of a continuing deal between the Provisionals and the British.

He regarded it as significant that during the recent killings not a single British soldier had died. (Mr. Faulkner in a similar reference later in the day confirmed this impression of a deal between the Provisionals and the British, one result of which was the ability of the Provos to build up their power and influence in business in Northern Ireland.)

Mr. Fitt said that in his contribution to the debate on Monday he would support any proposals for the rejection of the Report - on the grounds that it did not propose a power-sharing administration. His description of his speech, at this stage, was that it would be "waffle". He also had interesting comments on Mr. Airey Neave and his relationship with Mr. Craig, in Westminster.

When we met Mr. Faulkner later in the day he stressed his view that if the British Government rejected the Report of the Convention with sufficient vigour there was considerable hope that a power-sharing administration could be formed in Northern Ireland within a reasonable time. He thought that to sweeten the rejection it would be desirable for the British either to -

- (1) concede more seats to Northern Ireland in Westminster - possibly proportionate to Scottish representation; or
- (2) appoint a Governor General or Queen's representative - he did not appear to care very much which - to Northern Ireland as a guarantee of good faith.

He said that it would similarly be desirable for the Government here to make a gesture. For his part he would suggest -

- (1) an indication of readiness to consider constitutional change or
- (2) open police co-operation.

We pointed out certain considerations in relation to the Dáil Committee on the Constitution and also stressed that police co-operation, on an official and ministerial level, was excellent and had been openly stated to be such by the Secretary of State. We said that the question of giving this type of co-operation greater prominence was obviously a matter for decision at the highest level - having regard particularly to the need to maintain confidence between police and the community in which they operated. Mr. Faulkner went back again to his point that, so long as both Dublin and London indicated firmly that any form of Government which did not involve power-sharing would be unacceptable to them, there would be a strong chance that a power-sharing administration could be formed in Northern Ireland comparatively soon. He said that it was important for the British to say that if power-sharing was not accepted in Northern Ireland then that there would be no devolved Government.

We raised the question with him of whether certain parties - particularly Mr. Paisley and the Northern MPs in Westminster - might not argue that this suited their books. They could say that what they wanted was that Northern Ireland should be part of the United Kingdom. If it did not have devolved Government then it was closer to full integration than if it did have a devolved Government. Mr. Faulkner said that, in his view, this argument simply would not stand up in Northern Ireland.

1. The vast majority of the people, if offered the choice, would say that they wanted devolved Government - and if power-sharing was an inseparable part of the arrangement, then they would accept that. We followed this up with some discussion of the relative merits, so far as acceptance of power-sharing was concerned, of a referendum or a new election. A referendum asking the question "Do you want a devolved Government in Northern Ireland, with power-sharing?" would be a fairly obvious, if biased, form of query for a ballot paper.

2. Mr. Faulkner then went on to say that people in Northern Ireland were convinced that the policy followed by the Government here over the past year had been "absolutely right". They were particularly impressed by operations in the security field. He said that so far as the meeting with Mr. Rees on Thursday was concerned he would urge us -

3. (1) to exert as much pressure as possible on the British to clear up the South Armagh area which was an obvious breeding ground for murder and discontent and
4. (2) to institute in Northern Ireland some system similar to the Special Criminal Courts operating in the Republic.

He said that it would be important also to ease off the reliance of the British on the Army and to get the police, who were growing soft, to take on more of the responsibility for policing. He said that with the Army in Northern Ireland, the police were, in some areas, inclined simply to refer difficult matters to the Army and to lie back, letting them do the difficult work.

We said that we would bear his points in mind - indicating that the matter of special criminal courts, South Armagh, and attitudes to the RUC had been conveyed to the British on numerous occasions and at different levels over the past few years.

I had opened our meeting by conveying to Mr. Faulkner your regards. He concluded with an expression of his highest regard for you. He said that he would be more than willing at any time in the future when you saw a use for this type of meeting to co-operate. He said that he had jotted down some notes for the meeting, which he gave me. The attached is a copy.

[As a matter which does not immediately concern our meeting, but which may be of interest, it is worth recording that Mr. Faulkner showed very considerable interest in contacts with Foreign Affairs staff in Brussels who he said had been extremely helpful to him in some work he was doing. He also mentioned meeting with Dr. Hillery while there.]

Towards the end of our meeting, Mr. Faulkner came out quite strongly about the meetings between Mr. Rees and the Ulster Workers Central Co-ordinating Committee - an umbrella group for para-militaries in Northern Ireland. He said that we, in the South, should hit the British hard on this subject. If the British wanted politics to survive in Northern Ireland they would have to stop these meetings with para-military groups - whether they were IRA, UDA, or anything else.

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8th January 1976.