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INTER-DEPARTMENTAL UNIT ON NORTHERN IRELAND

Draft report of meeting on 20th April, 1977.

1. A meeting of the Inter-Departmental Unit on Northern Ireland was held in Government Buildings at 3 p.m. on 20th April, 1977. Members present were:-

Mr. D. Nally, Department of the Taoiseach (Chairman)

Mr. S. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs

Mr. T. McHugh, Department of Finance

Mr. M. Donnelly, Department of Justice and

Mr. L. Fletcher, Department of Defence (Alternate Member)

Also present were Mr. W. Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach, Mr. S. Ó hUiginn, Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. ^LC. Murphy, Department of Finance. The purpose of the meeting was to have a general exchange of views on the present position and likely developments in Northern Ireland and on the appropriate policy position here. (A)

2. It was indicated that the discussions between the British Government and the UUUC before the vote of confidence in the House of Commons some time previously had led some Unionists to think that they would secure their objectives if they only waited long enough. On the other hand, the SDLP were happy with assurances they had received from Secretary of State Mason and with the whole tone of their meetings with him. There was some reason to believe that Mr. Foot and Mr. Rees may have given the Loyalists a somewhat different impression from Mason and might have suggested that the SDLP would not necessarily have a veto on political developments. It was reasonably clear that Mason intended to take a political initiative after the local elections due in May. It was hard to see any initiative working although the Rev. Martin Smyth had said the Unionists might be prepared to consider some minority participation in governing the area. Despite the developments before and at their last annual conference, the SDLP was holding together as a party and adhering to the overall policy it had followed up to the present.

3. ^X On the Loyalist side, a power struggle was in progress between Paisley and Baird, on the one hand and the Official Unionists on the other. The latter were prepared to tolerate continued direct rule with additional representation of Northern Ireland at Westminster and the restoration to local government of the powers taken away in the early 1970s. Paisley had a grievance in that he considered his party underrepresented in Westminster. He was trying to seize on Loyalist exasperation at the security situation. The Official Unionists were following a strategy of disassociation from Paisley. They hoped that if the Labour/Liberal arrangement in Britain collapsed or exhausted its utility to the British Government, the wheel would come back around to them again. For the present, the

UUUC coalition was likely to continue as a theoretical structure. Differences between its components would probably grow but Paisley would still have a veto on power-sharing. Much would depend on the nature of a British initiative. If it included power-sharing it would tend to unite the Coalition but if it proposed a "talk-shop" it could be divisive within the UUUC.

4. It was agreed that public support for the Provisional IRA within the State was at a very low ebb. It was felt that in the North, while generally low, it varied in response to various aspects of the security situation while was also the major pre-occupation of the minority. It was reported that the capacity of the Garda to combat the IRA had probably declined since the enactment of the emergency legislation. The Courts were interpreting the Emergency Powers Act in a very strict manner to the disadvantage of Garda efforts while a change of policy by the IRA was nullifying the effectiveness of the provision relating to the belief of a Chief Superintendent in respect of IRA membership.
5. An assessment by Army Intelligence of IRA effectiveness referred to as depletion of stocks of material for bombs and a consequential switch to smaller bombs and use of commercial explosives: some of the latter was unfortunately getting through despite some large seizures and the assistance provided by the new marking system. It was considered by the Unit that it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the ability of the Provisionals to cause death and destruction. In further discussion on the flow of commercial explosives it was pointed out that the quantities claimed by the British to originate in the State represented less than 1% of the output of the Clonagh factory. While the Gardaí had been successful in blocking a number of sources of leakages, they were unable to supervise fully effectively the use of explosives in underground mining.
6. It was noted that cross-border police co-operation was close and becoming closer. There had been no complaints from the British on the subject in recent times - rather the contrary.
7. On the flow of guns to Northern Ireland, reference was made to the embarrassment of U.S. officials not on the security side there about the publicity given to the matter. These officials had expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the existing contacts between security authorities. It was felt that the source of any problems lay in poor co-ordination between the numerous agencies involved in the U.S.
8. It was indicated that the Minister for Foreign Affairs was concerned about the unsatisfactory state of cross-border economic co-operation. There had been insufficient follow-up to the Mason visit by way of exchanges of visits by Departmental Ministers. In discussion of this subject reference was made to the practical reasons influencing Departments in their cautious attitude to the scope for such co-operation and to the desirability on political grounds of giving a positive response to approaches from local authorities enjoying support from both sides of the border and of the community divide in the North.
9. There was general agreement with the Chairman's conclusion that

three main points emerging from the discussion were:-

- (1) that the policies presently being followed by the Irish and British Governments seemed unlikely to lead to any significant progress in the near future towards a political settlement in Northern Ireland;
- (2) that among both sections of the community there, acute concern existed about security; and
- (3) that the Government should consider carefully its attitude towards another political initiative by the British Government at this stage.

It was also necessary that the Government consider its attitude towards increased representation of Northern Ireland at Westminster even if this could not come about for some years and whether it should seek to have proportional representation introduced for Westminster elections in Northern Ireland, following the precedent established in respect of the direct elections to the European Parliament. It was considered that these matters should be dealt with in a fresh Memorandum for the Government to be prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Memorandum might also deal with the possible attitude of alternative governments of the U.K. and incorporate material from the Department of Justice amplifying the security problems discussed at the Unit's meeting.

10. The meeting concluded at 4.50 p.m.