

E.R.

① Mr Bell
② POL 286/10
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Ref: PAB/SS/DE

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L and B) - M
PS/Lord Gowrie (L and B) - M
PS/PUS (L and B) - M
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Mr Marshall (L) - M
Mr Blelloch
Mr Chesterton (L) - M
Mr Davenport
Mr Harrington (L) - M
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Mr Wyatt

SHIFTS IN UNIONIST OPINION

of Unionist opinion

1. The main drift/over the last few months has of course been towards the hardliners. As distrust of HMG and the Catholic community has deepened, most unionist politicians have looked increasingly over their shoulders; Mr Fitzgerald's constitutional initiative, for example, was met largely with the easy slogan of "no surrender". However, there have been several hints of incipient changes in the attitudes of middle-class unionists, especially in the UUP.

2. The signs for this (which are based mainly on our contacts) are as follows:

- (i) there is a sense of unease among Official Unionists, in various parts of the Province, about the Party's lack of activity over recent months, and a feeling that some sort of political movement should take place. What this movement should be is not yet defined, but the feeling is there and is partly responsible for a renewed wave of criticism of Mr Molyneaux's leadership.
- (ii) UUP party members are starting to express this feeling in public. Roy Bradford, a member of the powersharing Executive, and his wife Hazel, an influential Councillor, have stated that the UUP should not allow themselves to be branded as negative and as seeing no merit in the Anglo-Irish talks. Bill Craig, the former Vanguard leader, complained on 28 September that the UUP was too complacent. On 25 September John Taylor, the MEP, spoke of the need for a devolved legislature which would involve both communities in the institutions of government, though not necessarily on a permanent basis.

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- (iv) six middle-class unionists visited Dublin last week to deliver a response to the Taoiseach's proposals, on the line that North and South should accept each other's differences and sort out a modus vivendi. Our soundings among middle-class non-party unionists suggest that this view has considerable support in private.
- (v) ordinary working class Protestants are increasingly convinced that the two main Unionist parties ignore the real issues, such as unemployment and housing. Many paramilitary groups have long wanted to do away with the sectarian divide and come to terms with the Republic, eg in an independent Ulster. They have no hang-ups about links with the South, so long as each neighbour keeps on his own side of the garden fence.
- (vi) more unionists seem ready to question the negative aspects of Dr Paisley's line. It would be wrong to overstate this, but his recent pronouncements on eg the prisons package and the Anglo-Irish talks appears to have aroused less concern than usual.

3. It is difficult to decide whether the above straws are enough to make bricks, let alone what sort of bricks these are. But my guess is that a shift of opinion is taking place, mainly but not entirely among the Protestant middle-class, as a result of increasing doubts about the future. Unionists have long had a deep mistrust of Westminster's commitment to the union, to the fight against terrorism and to the well-being of Ulster's economy. That mistrust has been increased over the

summer by the continued uncertainty over the Anglo-Irish talks, by Dr Fitzgerald's initiative, by the Government's handling of the hunger strike, by the Province's continued economic decline (regarded here as the result of the application of policies which may be right for the mainland but are patently wrong for the North) and by the declarations of the Labour Party and the SDP/Liberals on Irish unity. At the same time, as a result of the hunger strike Protestants have had cause further to question the attitude of the Catholic community towards them. They feel resentful and unloved. The majority reaction (and this should be emphasised) has been a retreat into the Paisleyite stance of "no surrender" (and at the most extreme, a decision to go out and kill a Catholic in order to demonstrate that Protestant feeling cannot be ignored). But a number of middle-class ^{Unionists} are dissatisfied with this line and a few are drawing a more constructive conclusion: that if the Protestant way of life in the North is to be preserved (ie if they are to stay top dogs), they may need to face the possibility of an honourable settlement between unionist and nationalist.

4. Similar movements have emerged on several occasions in the past, and have died either for lack of real interest on the part of the Government in the South, or as a result of events in the North. The present movement, even if it achieves momentum, may similarly die. That would be a pity. We should encourage tendencies among middle-class Protestants to self-help: the absence of an active Official Unionist Party is one of the main reasons for the extremist politics in the Province today. And we should encourage those who are prepared to deal realistically with Dublin. However if we were to try to take the movement over, or channel it, we would expose it to Paisleyite attacks (as a tool of Westminster) and kill it. Again, if the movement is to grow it will need time; a new Government "initiative" which cut across it would send everyone scurrying back to their rabbit-holes. What new thinking is taking place is occurring because the unionist community is worried and off-balance. Our best hope of encouraging the process is to try to keep this so, for example by:

- (a) pressing ahead with the Anglo-Irish talks;
- (b) developing cross-border economic co-operation, on the lines set out by the Secretary of State in his speech to the

Conservative Party Conference: we should revive the cross-border studies, and consider favourably such schemes as Kinsale Gas;

- (c) continuing to assert that the return of a simple majority rule system of devolved Government is not on;
- (d) telling unionists firmly that a continuation of the present situation is intolerable.

5. There are obvious risks in this line. It would probably increase DUP influence at least in the medium term, and could even incite further sectarian violence. But provided Unionists are assured that there is no intention to hand them over to Dublin, and provided the campaign against the Provisionals is pursued vigorously and the present position in the prisons is held, unionist opinion would be unlikely to get out of hand.



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