

① Mr Bell
 ② POL
 489/11
 20/11

3/2017/RE

Mr Wyatt

cc: PS/PUS (L&B)
 PS/Mr Bell ✓
 Mr Gilliland
 Miss MacGlashan

OFFICIAL UNIONIST PARTY

1. The events of the last few days have almost certainly put the final nail in Mr Molyneaux's coffin as leader of the Official Unionist Party. He performed abysmally at Belfast City Hall yesterday. He has been unable to take the fight to Mr Paisley. His Party is fragmenting, with McCusker and Carson going towards the paramilitaries, Taylor towards Dr Paisley and the Devolutionist Group acting as a time bomb in the rump. I do not believe we can do anything to prop up Mr Molyneaux. His continued leadership is not just an embarrassment but a grave disadvantage to everyone, because while he is there no alternative can emerge to focus "moderate" unionist support and present the alternative to Paisleyism. The problem of course is finding an alternative leader. The obvious choice would be Mr McCusker, who has in the past refused to mount a challenge because of illness and out of loyalty to Mr Molyneaux. However, Mr McCusker's views have changed radically over the past 10 days and his address at Harland and Wolff yesterday was able. Apart from him, the only real contender is Mr John Taylor. Like most members of the Party, I doubt whether he is capable, or willing, to present an alternative to Mr Paisley.
2. In the past we have carefully refrained from interfering in the affairs of political parties here. However, I wonder whether in these circumstances we should not break our rule and urge Mr McCusker to unseat Mr Molyneaux. Such an approach would presumably have to be made by the Secretary of State, on the basis that in current circumstances Northern Ireland could not afford Mr Molyneaux.
3. If he felt able to do this, The Secretary of State might also urge Mr McCusker to put a basic point across to Ulster Protestants: that the democratic Government of the UK lies in Westminster, that there is no room for people who try to usurp Government's functions and that all citizens in NI must choose - not to choose is to make a choice against the Government.