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*Mr M. Campbell on reviewing M. K. Keenan
13-5-87*
Note: This is a revised assessment in the light of the reaction of the Unionist leaders to the Task Force Report. P. Collins 9/7/87

10/7/87

Report of the Unionist Task Force

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An Assessment

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Introduction

The Joint Official Unionist/Democratic Unionist Task Force was established by the respective party leaders, Mr. Molyneaux and Dr. Paisley, on 23 February 1987. Its remit was to consult the Unionist Community to secure support for the campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement and to ascertain what consensus existed about alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The members of the Task Force were Harold McCusker, M.P. (OUP Deputy Leader) Peter Robinson, M.P. (DUP Deputy leader) and Frank Millar (General Secretary of the OUP). Their report was submitted to the Unionist leaders on 16 June.

The report published on 2 July 1987, it should be noted, is an abridged version of the main report. It is entitled "An End to Drift".

The two party leaders, Messrs. Paisley and Molyneaux, waited some time before commenting on the Report. They made a long but cautious statement on 8 July. The net effect of the statement was to indicate Unionist agreement to "probing talks" (or "talks about talks", as distinct from negotiations). While some commentators (including the DUP's Sammy Wilson) interpreted the Paisley/Molyneaux statement as an "endorsement" of the Task Force Report, this remains far from certain. The statement still maintains a certain "distancing" by Paisley and Molyneaux from the Task Force Report. The Task Force Report is, accordingly, a document of uncertain status and should still be seen, in some sense, as an "internal" document, given that the Unionist leadership has not adopted it formally.

The Political Context

There is a case, despite the ambiguous status of the document and despite some worrying points from the Nationalist perspective, for seeing the Task Force report as an attempt by Unionists to come to terms with political realities. The document is geared to establishing a tenable interpretation of the change in the Unionist approach to the Anglo-Irish Agreement from outright opposition to the need to initiate talks at some level.

The title of the document itself - "An End to Drift" - is, clearly, an indictment of the anti-Agreement campaign. The introduction to the document states that "a major finding" of the report was that "protest can be no substitute for politics". The introduction also noted that, while the Task Force was to report on two matters, namely, securing support for the anti-Agreement campaign and an alternative to the Agreement, "the burden of our discussions focussed on the search for an alternative to the Agreement". The Task Force, obviously, considered the revamping of the anti-Agreement campaign to be a secondary matter. The Conclusions Section of the Report, while noting that there is no lessening in support for the anti-Agreement campaign, states that at the same time "our investigations have unearthed deep disquiet about the current protest campaign and a simple disbelief that on its own it can or will persuade Mrs. Thatcher to change course". There was a need, the Report said, to arrest "a widely perceived drift in our affairs". It is clear, therefore, that the message from the Unionist community is that the anti-Agreement campaign has failed and that, henceforth, the priority is the need to re-engage in dialogue.

Information obtained from contacts, subsequent to the publication of the Report, indicate that the section of the Report not made public was highly critical of the anti-Agreement campaign and, by implication, of Paisley's and Molyneaux's leadership of the campaign.

While the Report moots the possibility of new constitutional arrangements (there is, for example, much talk of negotiated independence) outside the Union, this remains a backdrop to the immediate task of initiating talks on the future of Northern Ireland.

The Report, in several instances, broaches the need to redefine Unionism. While it would be an exaggeration to describe the Task Force Report as the beginning of a Unionist New Ireland Forum, it is evidence of what the SDLP leader called "a wide-ranging debate" within Unionism. The Report accepts, for example, that Unionism has lost what it calls "a series of vital rounds" in the battle to preserve the Union since the 1960s. It notes that the Anglo-Irish Agreement marked, as Mr. Molyneux put it on 15 November 1985, "the beginning of the end of the Union as we have known it".

There is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, acceptance that the "not an inch" brand of Unionism is outdated. The import of the discussions held by the members of the Task Force is that Unionists would have to "contemplate variations of political structures for Northern Ireland which they, and we, have previously rejected". The Report bemoans the fact that Sunningdale "fell without any understanding or agreement as to what should take its place". The clear implication here is that the kind of "negative" Unionism which brought down Sunningdale was a mistake which Unionists cannot afford to make now.

An important point in the overall political context is that, as the Report recommends, "no matter could or should be precluded from any negotiations". Subsequent media interviews underlined this point. When asked whether power-sharing could be included, Peter Robinson said that "well, if the SDLP bring power-sharing to the table then it is included in any discussion". He added that the outcome of negotiations was a matter of "barter". The report itself stated that "barter" and "compromise" were part of the process, but had to be matched by the other side. It is

also noteworthy that the Task Force members interviewed by the media, especially Peter Robinson, made strenuous efforts to avoid putting themselves on further "hooks".

While its significance should not be overstated, it is worth noting that the Report states that "Unionists would be foolhardy to reveal their hand ahead of negotiation". This might suggest that some of the more hardline positions adopted in the Report (e.g. negotiated independence), are starting positions. Such tough positions can also be viewed as a means of establishing the necessary political credentials to speak on behalf of the Unionist community and to bring along the hardliners.

There is a case, therefore, for viewing the Report of the Task Force in the overall political context, as stated at the outset, as indicative of the beginning of a new departure in Unionist thinking. That being said, a note of caution needs to be sounded. The Report clearly represents the thinking of a new generation of Unionists and it remains to be seen if they can deliver on their "new departure". In that context, it may not be without significance that the respective party leaders, Mr. Molyneaux (a committed integrationist) and Dr Paisley (who had ruled out power-sharing in the past few weeks) were absent for the publication of the Report. They allowed their deputies to make the running on the Report and were clearly preserving their "distance" pending the reaction of the Unionist grass-roots. Their reaction came in a statement on 8 July when it was clear that the Report had gained some measure of acceptance amongst the Unionist community at large. The statement, nonetheless, maintained a certain distance between the Unionist leadership and the Report.

The Proposals

The Conclusions Section of the Report contain the Task Force's specific and procedural proposals and what might be termed the conceptual framework for these proposals. These are analysed in the paragraphs under.

The Conceptual Framework

The Report states that the objective is devolution. It concedes that while there is support among Unionists for integration, "devolution is the more attainable objective" and then states "devolved government therefore is our objective". The Report insists that such a devolved government would have to have control over "internal security matters".

A willingness to consider power-sharing is evident in several places in the Report. The Report notes that the UDA document, "Common Sense" (published in February 1987), which advocated a form of power-sharing, had attracted "considerable interest and some support". It goes on to say that "many in addition to the UDA would clearly be prepared to contemplate SDLP participation in the Government of Northern Ireland. The Report attaches an important proviso, however. It states that such SDLP participation could be envisaged "provided the SDLP agree to forfeit the role of the Government of the Irish Republic as custodians of the Nationalist interest" (the word "provided" was in bold type).

Peter Robinson, interviewed on Radio Ulster, endeavoured to avoid becoming entangled in what the proviso might mean in relation to negotiations with the SDLP. Asked if the proviso would not make it impossible for the SDLP to negotiate, Robinson stressed that the point represented the "view of the people who met us". Pressed on what would happen if the SDLP insisted on the Irish Government's role, Robinson said it would "make it very difficult to get agreement" in negotiations. Pressed on whether it would make it impossible, Robinson pulled back somewhat and said "you're seeking to take me to the stage of negotiations when we haven't even got into them".

The other major conceptual consideration is "negotiated independence". It is referred to in several sections of the Task Force Report and the media paid some attention to the

point. Peter Robinson was asked on Radio Ulster if the real import of the point was that he wanted "your own arrangement with Dublin....., in effect, a new Ireland?" Robinson replied that "we should negotiate with the British Government to have devolved government in Northern Ireland." At this stage, it is not possible to say how serious the talk about independence is. There is, at least, a case for regarding it as "tough talk" and one of the few bargaining points/threats Unionists have available.

Specific and Procedural Proposals

The Task Force Report proposes the establishment of three bodies:

(i) A Unionist Convention. It would be called "to construct and lead a renewed campaign" against the Anglo-Irish Agreement. More significantly, however, the Convention would "be invited to endorse the demand for an alternative to and a replacement of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the commencement of "without prejudice" discussions with Her Majesty's Government". Since the Task Force Report has clearly indicated that the protest campaign has failed, the Convention's primary concern would appear to lie with the proposed "discussions". The remit to lead a new campaign is probably not to be taken as meaning that a major new protest campaign would be undertaken, given the emphasis in the Report on politics rather than protest.

(ii) A Panel. The Task Force requested that a panel be appointed to establish "whether a base for formal negotiations exists or can be established". While it is unclear, at present, what authority this panel would have, the Report recommends "that the said panel be appointed only to consult and report".

(iii) A Special Commission. The Task Force Report proposes "the appointment of a Special Commission to consider and advise upon those alternative constitutional models, their implication vis-a-vis future relationships with Britain and the Irish Republic, and the steps by which an alternative constitutional

arrangement might be secured and sustained". It is difficult, at this early stage, to assess the significance of this proposed Commission. It could, perhaps, become the forum for a fuller consideration of the nature of Unionism in the 1980s. However, it may just be a necessary proposal given the speculation in the Report about alternative constitutional arrangements.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement

The Task Force Report stated that, in all discussions about possible alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the three members made clear their view as follows:

- "1. The early suggestion by Mrs. Thatcher that the Agreement could be "devolved away" does not accord with the terms of the Agreement itself;
2. The Agreement establishes clear, and in our view unrealistic, limits on the powers which might be devolved;
3. Unionists could not contemplate participation in any form of devolved government whose work and functions would be supervised and overseen by an Anglo-Irish Conference."

The members of the Task Force noted that they "encountered little disagreement in regard to these matters".

The Unionist leaders confirmed this stance on 8 July in their statement on the Task Force Report, namely, that in relation to "negotiations" (as distinct from "talks") the Unionists are insisting on the "suspension of the Agreement and of the Maryfield Secretariat".

Unionist Reaction

The Unionist leadership waited a week (until 8 July) to respond to the Task Force Report. Indications in the media, and information from contacts in the meantime, gave the impression

that the OUP leader, Mr. Molyneaux, was under pressure to make some positive comment on the Report. Dr. Paisley may also have been under such pressure. The joint statement by Molyneaux and Paisley on 8 July was general in tone but agreed to engage in "probing talks", pointing out that such "talks" were not "negotiations". The purpose of the "probing talks" would be to see if the Government is prepared to enter into negotiations to seek an alternative to, and a replacement of, the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

The statement described the Anglo-Irish Agreement as representing a "fundamental and unacceptable change in the Constitutional relationship between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It added "we have no doubt that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is tantamount to joint authority and that its early demise is vital if we are to arrest a quickening process leading to our inevitable absorption in an Irish unitary state". The two leaders then made it clear that they wanted a suspension of the working of the Agreement and of the Secretariat before they would engage in "negotiations".

The statement also noted that the Unionist leadership would be giving "careful consideration to the order in which the various recommendations of the Task Force Report are implemented in the context of the developing situation". While some commentators (including the DUP's Sammy Wilson) see the statement as an endorsement of the Task Force Report, it can be deduced from the statement that this is not so. The Unionist leaders want to keep the door to dialogue open, but are keeping a certain distance from the Task Force Report. At the very least, they are keeping their options open and putting the implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force Report on the long finger. The only clear cut procedural decision made is to keep the Task Force in existence to assist the leadership with the "probing talks".

Nationalist Reaction

There has been little reaction from the nationalist community. Until now the SDLP leader, Mr. Hume, has taken the line that, since the Task Force Report has not been endorsed by the Unionist leadership, it is an internal document. At the same time, he indicated a cautious welcome for the Report in so far as it represented the beginning of an "internal debate" in Unionism.

The SDLP is known to be concerned that Unionists may be attempting to take the high moral ground and to wrong-foot them (the SDLP). Mr. Hume feels that Unionists are most anxious to appear reasonable and open to dialogue and to portray the SDLP as recalcitrant and "sitting back" under the protective shade of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Equally, the SDLP, while not willing to go into detail at this stage, would be concerned about various aspects of the Task Force Report, namely:

- The insistence that SDLP participation in a devolved government would be contingent on the Irish Government giving up its role as custodians of the Nationalist interest.
- The insistence on control of internal security. The SDLP is unlikely to be able to accept such a proviso at least in the early days of any agreed power-sharing executive.

The above, however, are matters for the future. In the interim, the SDLP position is one of caution, a wariness about the real intentions of Unionists and a desire to avoid being "wrong-footed".

Conclusion

The statement by the Unionist leaders indicates that nothing much will happen in relation to the Task Force Report recommendations in the short-term. The "probing talks" will

obviously go ahead. It seems (given the decision to keep the Task Force in existence) that the members of the Task Force will carry out the "talks" on the Unionist side. Public comments by OUP leader Molyneaux and by the DUP's Sammy Wilson seem to indicate that such talks would be with "officials" in the NIO rather than with Ministers.

P. Collins
Anglo-Irish Minister

9 July, 1987.