



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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INTERNAL POLICY REVIEW

CONTENTS

1. Dialogue with Unionists.
2. Political Situation - Unionists.
3. Talks about talks.
4. Political Situation - Nationalists.
5. Irish Language.
6. *Devolution.*

Notes for Meeting of 8th January

1. Political

Unionists

The immediate reaction of the unionist political leadership to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was one of outright rejection. The campaign of "Ulster says No" was characterised by a "withdrawal of consent" to be governed by the British Government because of the perfidy, in unionists eyes, of allowing an Irish Government input into the running of Northern Ireland. The leadership stressed that it would not engage in political dialogue until both the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Secretariat were suspended. The campaign took the form of a withdrawal from Westminster, resignations and by-elections (which resulted in the loss of one seat), abstention from Westminster, a refusal to meet British Ministers, an adjournment policy on local councils with the intention of bringing local government to a halt, an abortive attempt to effect mass resignations from the public bodies, a petition to Buckingham Palace and a series of marches and rallies.

This first phase of unionist opposition, though greater than anticipated largely because it was not expected that the unionists would dismiss the guarantee expressed in Article 1, failed to generate sufficient political momentum to affect either the British or Irish Governments' support for the Agreement. Public support for the campaign faltered, the adjournment policy was brought to a grudging halt by the Alliance Party's legal action, the petition became a non-event, and dissatisfaction grew within the unionist community at the abstention from Westminster of their elected representatives and the increasingly obvious failure of the anti-Agreement campaign. The sight of the RUC under attack from loyalist demonstrators during the marching season of 1986 made a deep impact, particularly within the OUP. It also severely damaged unionist standing with the British establishment.

The second phase of the anti-Agreement campaign was a recognition that within the unionist population antipathy to the Agreement was not such as to yield widespread and enduring support for the various boycotts, protests and rallies.

In an attempt to regroup politically, the Task Force Report of Frank Millar, Harold McCusker and Peter Robinson was commissioned by the OUP/DUP to determine the views of the unionist public about alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Paisley and Molyneux took it as an endorsement of their policy despite the fact that the report contained severe criticism of the leadership. These criticisms were expunged from the published report. The shelving of the report's recommendations compounded the dissatisfaction of the authors at the "masterly inactivity" of the leadership; two resigned from their party positions - Frank Millar as General Secretary of the OUP and Peter Robinson as deputy leader of the DUP.

Nonetheless, the change in direction was confirmed. It was characterised by the dictum of "seeking consultation not confrontation" and the British General Election was used by the unionist political leadership to secure a mandate for this course. There was, in the wake of the election, a return by unionist MPs to Westminster and the re-establishment of contact with British Ministers, most significantly in the talks about talks. The unionist demand that the working of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Secretariat be suspended before political dialogue can be considered remains undiminished, though it may be said that the emphasis has shifted from antipathy to the workings of the Conference to the symbolism of the Agreement and, particularly, the siting of the Secretariat in the North.

At the present time, there seems to be little possibility of serious political movement in the unionist camp. Paisley is a politician of protest and rancour who has never displayed any enthusiasm for political initiatives. His party has retained its hardline opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and to any concept of power-sharing which is the sine qua non of political

progress for nationalists. It does not seem likely that he will be amenable to anything other than suspension of the Agreement and the Secretariat in advance of any negotiations in which, even then, he would simply reiterate his own uncompromising loyalism. There does not seem to be any immediate successor capable of leading the DUP into an internal Northern Ireland political structure acceptable to nationalists. Indeed, in the absence of Paisley, it is difficult to envisage a leader who would be able to retain the unity of the DUP's urban (Robinson's base) and rural (William McCrea's stomping ground) wings.

As for the OUP, Molyneaux has little incentive to undertake the arduous task of contributing to a workable political solution to the North. He has been able to return to the cosy environs of Westminster while retaining his unionist credentials and, at this stage in his career, is content to avoid being the man who sold the unionist pass. Possible successors such as McCusker and Millar might have the capacity for brave political initiatives; Molyneaux's position as leader, however, remained unchallenged at the most recent OUP conference. He may propose some form of administrative devolution and/or a grand committee in Westminster to deal with Northern Ireland legislation.

Anglo-Irish Political Section,
January 1988.

Talks about Talks

The talks about talks between Molyneaux, Paisley and the NIO (joined for the last three meetings by Secretary of State King) began in July last and, to date, there have been six such meetings. There has been little or no indication from the British side as to the matters under discussion, save the assurance that nothing has arisen of relevance to our concerns. Molyneaux and Paisley characterise the meetings as a series of exploratory discussions to probe the British willingness to entertain alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They continue to insist that no negotiations will be undertaken while the Anglo-Irish Agreement remains in place and the work of the Secretariat continues.

On the eve of the fifth meeting, held on 1 December, there had been speculation that it was to be a make or break one, given remarks by Molyneaux and Paisley to the effect that the "talks about talks" were reaching a climax, but the announcement of another meeting disappointed such expectations. It is understood from departmental contacts that Secretary of State King had exerted considerable pressure on the unionist leadership to present an alternative to the Anglo-Irish Agreement while the Agreement and the secretariat remained in place, possibly with an eye to the review in November 1988. In the wake of the sixth and last meeting to date, held on 17 December last, the unionist leaders indicated they will present an "outline" of their proposals on alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement when they meet this month.

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Current Attitude of Nationalists to the
Anglo-Irish Agreement

The initial and unexpected launch of the Agreement in November 1985 precipitated expectations among nationalists which ran very high. Those expectations were not discouraged by the Irish Government of the time or indeed by the SDLP. Since then nationalists have become somewhat disappointed given what they see as a lack of improvement in their position over the two years. The only perceived effect of the Agreement has been the obvious discomfiture which it has caused the unionists. However that was neither a positive nor an enduring feature of nationalist satisfaction and questions are being asked about the rate of delivery on the promised reforms.

SDLP

The SDLP, who welcomed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement with enthusiasm, hoped that the Agreement would lift their flagging support by showing that constitutional politics could secure concessions for nationalists and would thus win over to the SDLP erstwhile Sinn Fein voters. The SDLP believe they did in fact gain from the Agreement; it immediately precipitated the January 1986 Westminster by-elections which gained them the Newry/Armagh seat and showed that South Down could be taken. On the other hand, it has not been as effective vis a vis reform as they had originally hoped and during the past year they have not been able to make as much use of it as they had anticipated. Indeed they point out that their election material during the June 1987 Westminster election eschewed mention of the Agreement because it might have raised more questions than it resolved. While they are jubilant about winning South Down and increasing their Newry/Armagh vote, many of them believe that if the Agreement had won greater benefits for West Belfast they could also have taken Gerry Adams's seat. Most acknowledge, however, that the result of the election which has given the SDLP a stronger

position with nationalist voters than they have had since the 1970's, could not have been achieved without something like the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The absence of any motions directly relating to the Anglo-Irish Agreement at this year's SDLP Conference in November last arose because of a desire to avoid controversy on the Agreement's performance. Notwithstanding this, the SDLP regard the Intergovernmental Conference and the Secretariat as a major step forward for nationalists representing as it does the Irish Government's involvement in Northern Ireland affairs. While they believe they will come under pressure from their community on the rate of delivery under the Agreement, in the final analysis they will defend the Agreement against any attempt to interfere with either it or the Secretariat.

Sinn Fein

From the outset Sinn Fein have viewed the Agreement as an instrument to boost the SDLP at their expense. They realise that it has and will cause problems for them on both sides of the border. As shown in general elections both here and in Northern Ireland, their support has dropped.

The Agreement's continued existence threatens them by offering nationalists not only an avenue for the expression of their concerns but the possibility of reform. Publicly, the Agreement is problematic for Sinn Fein; it is difficult for them to dismiss it both because of the level of unionist hostility and the possibility that nationalists will benefit from it.

Political Section,
January, 1988.

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POSSIBLE POLICY ISSUES FOR 1988

Devolution

There is little prospect of serious movement on the issue of devolution. Unionists have consistently stated that they would not enter into dialogue while the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Secretariat remain in place, claiming that the AIIC gives an unbalanced advantage to the SDLP and allows the Irish Government to influence the shape of any devolved structure. The DUP, though committed to the idea of devolution, see it in terms of a return to a Stormont-type administration and rule out any consideration of power-sharing at executive level. The OUP reluctantly recognise that devolution is the next most logical step; it is under some pressure from supporters in the unionist community to negotiate with the British Government, or at least engage in dialogue with it as to future political structures. The Task Force Report and the talks about talks are a recognition of this desire. Molyneaux and Paisley have said they will put forward an "outline" of their ideas on alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the next meeting with Secretary of State King and this may give some indication of their opening position, if not of the form of devolution they envisage.

Publicly the SDLP have reiterated their willingness to engage in political dialogue without preconditions and with everything on the table. Privately, they concede that the unionists will first have to demonstrate a fundamental change of heart before any meaningful negotiations can commence. Should it be evident that unionists and political leaders would be prepared to accept the premise of cross-community support for a devolved structure, the SDLP would seek, at a minimum, the conditions established at Sunningdale, coupled with an effective all-Ireland dimension, as recently stressed by Eddie McGrady

at the SDLP Annual Conference. Furthermore, the fact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the involvement of that Irish Government it represents, will affect their receptiveness to any unionist initiatives. The SDLP established a committee (of John Hume, Austin Currie, Seamus Mallon and Sean Farren) in September 1987 to prepare an agenda for inter-party political negotiations "should the occasion arise". It is understood that it will not issue any documents and will await a move from the unionists before responding. This remains the broad position of the SDLP. It would appear, therefore, that little purpose would be served by the Irish Government attempting to make the running on devolution at this stage.

Role of Conference and Secretariat

The British are clearly intent to maintain the Anglo-Irish Agreement both because of the immunity it bestows on Britain from criticism of its policy in the North (particularly from the U.S.) and because of P.M. Thatcher's commitment to it. Furthermore, the Anglo-Irish Agreement represents Britain's response to the historic and unprecedented address by constitutional politicians in Ireland to the problem of the North.

Nonetheless, the British have sought to operate the Agreement in such a way as to ensure that its practical impact has been somewhat limited with the result that a credibility gap has emerged. The reasons behind this move were several; there was a desire to minimise Unionist anxieties by operating the Agreement "sensitively", the NIO is inherently averse to upsetting the status quo, there was a fear that the British were about to swap an alienated minority for an alienated majority.

The strategic value of this decision has to be seriously questioned; it has tended to undermine nationalist confidence in the Agreement without appreciably affecting unionist antipathy to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Indeed it could be argued that the limited impact of the Agreement has lulled

unionism into its present unwillingness to engage politically. A more vigorous pursuit of reform might have compelled the unionists to meet the challenge politically rather than engaging in a two-year sulk.

There is a possible inherent danger that the price of broadening and strengthening the role of the Conference and Secretariat would be the establishment of aspects of security cooperation which might prove to be unacceptable.

Insofar as a new focus for the Conference and Secretariat is concerned, the present administration indicated that its primary concerns included fair employment, cross-border economic cooperation and reforms of the administration of justice. Given the moves underway in the NIO to supplant the FEA, fair employment becomes an urgent issue. The gathering momentum of public attention on the continuing demise of West Belfast points to this as another issue warranting priority. The lack of success under Article 6 (public bodies) could also be addressed. Such issues, if something concrete can be gained from their pursuit, might prove a counter-balance to the attention paid to security cooperation by the British side.

Political Section,
Anglo-Irish Division,
January 1988.

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