

Confidential

MEMORANDUM ON NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE CONVENTION

I have been visiting Belfast from time to time over the last two years pursuing two academic interests: (i) to extend the work of a Hansard Society programme for political education in schools into Northern Ireland; (ii) to establish an Northern Irish top-level working party on another Hansard-Ford-funded programme, a committee to inquiry into the effects on British Representative institutions of joining E.E.C.

During the summer I was invited by the secretary to the U.U.U.C. Convention Party to advise them on committee systems. At first I took no notice of this, since the invitation was short, vague, hand-written and eccentric. But at the beginning of September David Trimble wrote to me sensibly and at some length and William Craig phoned me and explained the situation. I agreed to go out to discuss with them the document on minority participation, to offer a technical appraisal of its suggestions on committee procedure. I was offered a fee and my fare, I made clear that I would accept no fee and reserved by personal and political position to talk also to people I knew in the S.D.L.P. Far from this being an obstacle, when I first met Craig and his colleagues in the week of the 8th September, it became clear that Craig was anxious that I should talk to S.D.L.P. leaders and others. And I returned for the week of Monday September 22nd and again had long talks with Craig, Trimble, Fitt, Hume, Devlin and others. On both occasions I was able to talk at length to the chairman of the Convention and his advisors.

It is not true, however, as was reported in the Belfast Telegraph or as Paisley said on B.B.C., that I was acting as constitutional adviser to the U.U.U.C. I was never offered this "post", if it exists, nor could I have accepted it. I talked to West and Paisley only during the week before Craig's coalition motion was voted down; subsequently I have stayed in touch with Craig--being convinced of his sincerity--and seen more of the S.D.L.P. and have been, I may fairly say, welcomed by them precisely because I have been talking to Craig.

I have formed four strong impressions:

- (i) that the Convention is worthwhile, that even now an agreement may emerge (given more time and the right tactics);
- (ii) that the failure to report the Convention in the British Press (particularly the informal talks of the party leaders), presumably as too complicated and because constitutional speculations are not newsworthy, together with constant reiteration of daily security and disaster stories (allowing the I.R.A. to pre-empt discussion), is creating a mood of hopelessness in British opinion which is unwarranted.
- (iii) that the Convention will have to go into a second phase, for bound by their manifestos, both U.U.U.C. and S.D.L.P. will inevitably report schemes or principles unacceptable either to each other or to H.M.G. But having, the phrase is gaining currency, "discharged their manifesto", they would come together in a second round. The fear of a coup will draw the Official Unionists into Vanguard's camp which would either bring round or isolate Paisley.
- (iv) That threats, rumours or fears of British withdrawal are working against an agreed settlement, not speeding it.

Showing that it was policy (?)

It follows, I think, that Convention needs more support--both from the Press and H.M.G. They will come up with unacceptable proposals, but this does not mean, in fact, a hopeless situation, only that they have to have tried it on in the eyes of their constituents. Constitutional speculation is to be encouraged, not written off as unrealistic or second to security.

So I argue that it is important for the Secretary of State to consider neither rejecting nor accepting anything that comes out of the first round, but rather to consider recalling Convention to tell them that while they have failed to reach agreement on the lines of the White Paper, yet he is considering what could emerge from their reports, that might prove acceptable, and to that end he wishes for their advice on certain "precise" questions which he will put to them. In other words, not to allow them to debate the whole ground, which with so many members (including many wholly new, raw and unused to parliamentary conventions) can be very divisive, but only to debate specific questions. (These are better considered later, but I could make hypothetical suggestions and so could the Chairman's advisors.) However, at the same time to build up the self-esteem of Members of Convention a little. I recognise the dangers of creating a situation in which they could act like a Parliament and claim to be one (a constitutional coup), but far short of that is some sense of importance which would come from, for instance, a message from the Queen urging them to consider carefully etc., etc. that this may well be the last chance for peace in Northern Ireland; letting them form delegations to discuss urgent constituency matters, even security; and giving some support to their constituency advice and welfare work, or to respond to certain alternatives which should be fully drafted by the Chairman's office and put before them.

for it is extraordinarily important to support the politicians' esteem in the eyes of their electorate and the welfare orientation of the new kind of unionist politician. (I form the definite and unexpected impression that nothing had disheartened them more than the constitutionally proper, but perhaps politically unnecessary, separation of the Secretary of State from the concerns of Convention, specifically his unwillingness to receive delegations from the Convention.) If they are recalled without a clear task, they will just see it as playing for time and the militants will be strengthened. If given some minor tasks and a second chance, I am convinced that there is a basis of trust between Vanguard and S.D.L.P. that could broaden.

So much on the Unionists' position, basically what they need to hold off their own extremists. The S.D.L.P. leaders are, I am convinced, able to trust Craig and would accept even the "for the duration of the emergency" coalition formula. And they have gone very far in allaying old unionist fears about Irish unity and the border--Craig appreciated this. ("Power-sharing" does stick in the Unionist gullet, "coalition", not: the S.D.L.P. are getting wise to this, Devlin and Fitt certainly, but Hume still a bit mystical about power-sharing; so one hopes that a few British politicians could echo this.) Their great difficulties are (a) to carry home to their people a prize big enough to cut away tolerance of the I.R.A. (b) internal disorganisation.

They have committed themselves utterly to "power-sharing" as the prize. I spent a lot of time arguing with them, probing really, that a Bill of Rights, a minority dominated committee structure,

NB "minority dominated"

veto powers in London, etc., in other words rigid constitutional protection, might be a better prize than the risks and uncertainties of joint responsibility, better to control the government than to be of it; or at least as a fall-back position to urge on the Secretary

of State if, at the end of the second round, the Unionists are still intransigent. "What do you really want, surely protection;

surely power sharing is only one possible device?" But only

~~X~~ Paddy Devlin seemed anywhere near open minded on this argument: the others said that "power-sharing" was the only thing their people understood. I'm a bit sceptical. I still think there might be a fall-back position in fact, but mostly I think that it is worth

exploring publicly in order to scare the Paisley and West Unionists, to strengthen Craig's hand. I urged them at least to bring in a

minority report not on a level of general principles, but as amendments to the majority document to include statutory power-sharing and every possible strengthening of minority rights--the U.U.U.C. document has several hostages to fortune in this respect

in it, or negotiating positions: deliberately in my opinion: powers of a Governor-General, Bill of Rights, and the Committee system.

(Unhappily the S.D.L.P. seem ill organised, without staff and permanent advisors and oddly reluctant to ask the Chairman's staff to draft things for them: they need persuading to offer a real alternative, not just denunciation of the U.U.U.C. document.)

For instance, I suggested to an S.D.L.P. leader that he include in a speech soon a "devil's choice" scenario. To say to the U.U.U.C., what if failure to agree to a coalition leads the British Government

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to seek only for what is acceptable to most people in the province rather than agreeable to the political leaders, to give you a government, but one so bound hand and foot by constitutional restraints as not be worth having or only workable by coalition?

Perhaps this is the fundamental point: that opinion is shifting towards self-government for Ulster in the Unionist ranks, something like mid 19th century dominion status, and that to get something in that direction is now more important than excluding Catholics from the Government. And that S.D.L.P. also want as high degree of devolution as possible - in that they are both agreed.

I share their general view that there is no settling the security question outside a political settlement, and an anxiety that security has got out of proportion, terrible though it is, in reporting, possibly in policy too.

Everywhere I was asked, "does the British Government intend to pull out?" I replied that I thought most people in Britain wished that the whole of Ireland would sink under the waves, but that a pull-out before an acceptable government had been created was inconceivable; that no British Government could stand up to the shame, humiliation and public horror if great violence followed a skuttle. I saw no positive evidence of any strong public opinion for withdrawal, even after Birmingham; that most people did crudely see that the I.R.A. stood for no one politically but themselves, and that even if the campaign spread massively to England, the public would support security measures and not want to give in.

I say this because I was astonished at how many perhaps well-meaning MPs and journalists have been trying to scare Northern Irish

politicians into agreement quickly by such opinions. All the  
politicians at Convention I spoke to thought that this was playing  
into the hands of the extremists on both sides. They desperately  
need some grim, perhaps even reluctant and grudging, but nonetheless  
clear public statement that we know we are stuck with it until they  
sort it out themselves by agreement. Such a speech would give heart  
and momentum to a second round of the Convention. A second round  
will probably find Craig in a stronger position and the new members  
will have discharged their manifesto.

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• Bernard Crick

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