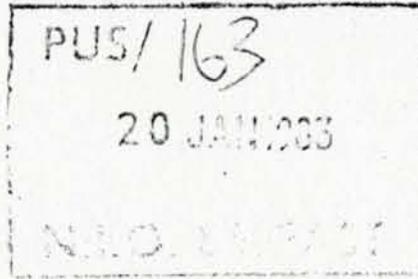


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Mr Merifield

cc: PS/S of S (L&B)
PS/Lord Gowrie (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
Mr Brennan
Mr Bourn
Mr Angel
Miss Davies, Mr Palmer
Mr Abbott
Mr Boys Smith
Mr Edis
Mr Coulson



CATHOLIC OPINION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. I attach a note on the above topic, which draws on PAB's political and other contacts in the Catholic/nationalist community since about the time of the Assembly. It is inevitably broad-brush.

W. S.
D E S BLATHERWICK
Political Affairs Division

19 January 1983

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CATHOLIC OPINION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Our contacts with the Catholic community indicate that in many respects the minority is retreating into its shell.
2. In part this is a consequence of the years of political sterility in the Province and the trauma of the hunger strike, when Catholics blamed the Government for not solving painlessly an issue that presented them with difficult moral and social choices. But more recently their feeling of frustration and helplessness has been accentuated by the establishment of an Assembly boycotted by the SDLP (and Sinn Fein), together with renewed indications that unionist attitudes are inflexible, and by transient but deeply felt issues such as Seamus Mallon's disqualification and a succession of controversial security incidents in Co Armagh and Belfast. Moreover, Catholics see in London a Government which they believe to be dominated by chauvinistic and anti-Irish attitudes.
3. Most Catholics appear to regard the Assembly as irrelevant to their needs and lives, and doomed to failure. Their politicians told them so in advance, and most see few reasons yet to review their prejudices (though there are one or two indications of incipient change). More significantly, perhaps, an increasing number of Catholics claim to oppose any resumption of devolved government, partly because they believe no local administration could have an impact on their day to day problems and, more important, because in the absence of any guarantee by the British Government, or commitment by unionists, on minority participation in such an administration, they fear that it would inevitably be dominated by unionists and operated to the minority's disadvantage.
4. Like the SDLP, many ordinary Catholics appear to have concluded that the unionist leopard will not change his spots, that British Governments will not grasp the nettle of unionist intransigence, as they see it, and that no "internal" solution is therefore possible. More and more Catholics now profess that only a united Ireland offers any long-term hope of solving their problems, and many are coming to believe that a united Ireland is inevitable. For most, this is not so much a reasoned decision to opt for Irish unity -

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many see the problems and dangers of unity and question the social norms of the Republic - but a reflection of their frustration over their inability to get what they want inside Northern Ireland. These feelings probably played a considerable part in securing the Sinn Fein vote last October.

5. Inevitably, such broad generalisations skate over the wide differences of opinion inside the Catholic community. In urban working-class areas such as parts of west Belfast and Londonderry, unemployment and inadequate social provision remain the day to day problems. In such areas direct rule has made little material impact. People find it easy to believe that they would be no worse off, and maybe even better, in a united Ireland. Certainly, they can have little reason to believe that a resumption of devolved government, even on a powersharing basis, would lead to a dramatic improvement in their standard of living. Moreover, people who have become inured to the atmosphere of violence and intimidation over the past decade or more view with comparative equanimity the prospect that getting the 'Brits' out of Ireland may mean more bloodshed, especially if it might solve the problem once and for all. This does not mean that more people are prepared actively to support the Provisionals or INLA (though the paramilitaries remain for many the saviours of the Catholic community in the last resort, if the British pull out and the Loyalist mobs go on the rampage); merely that they are content to stay indoors and let historical processes take their course.

6. Middle class attitudes are more complicated. Many middle class Catholics have remained unaffected by rising unemployment and have managed to maintain their standard of living. Direct rule has largely removed from them the stigma of second-class citizen and opened the doors of eg the Civil Service. Like working-class Catholics, however, they remain deeply suspicious of British and Ulster unionist attitudes, and conscious of possible threats to their community's interests (witness their reactions to the Assembly, for example, or to the Chilver proposals or the controversial security incidents in Co Armagh). Ideally they would support power-sharing, were it available, as giving them a political share in the community in which they have an economic and social stake. But

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they do not believe unionists will concede powersharing, and distrust fancy arrangements for devolution which, they fear, bigoted unionists and unheeding British Governments could transform back into Stormont rule. The middle-class too show signs of conversion to a belief that a united Ireland is, sooner or later, inevitable, but perhaps because of their greater stake in the community they are far more disturbed than their working class counterparts about the implications of continued violence. For them, therefore, a continuation of direct rule, equal treatment with unionists by an alien authority, is the best option, and they are willing to deal openly and enthusiastically with Government on this basis. They look forward to the failure of the Assembly, which would ensure the continuation of this arrangement. However, there is also pressure for further recognition of the equal status of their community in Northern Ireland, for example by carrying the "two identities" commitment of the White Paper into practice.

7. It is not easy to assess whether, and if so to what extent, these attitudes will persist. If the Catholic community can be brought back into the political process, essentially through some arrangement under which the SDLP, as their primary spokesman, is assured of a part in running the Province, the present stand-offish attitude of the middle class, and most others, will probably change fairly rapidly. If not, the danger is that the Catholic community will lose interest in ordinary, constitutional politics; and even that the SDLP will lose heart and disintegrate. Quite apart from the implications of such a development for Sinn Fein and Government's attitude towards it, this would leave a large part of the Catholic community, probably the greater, with no effective political representation with whom the Government could do business.

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