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PS/Sir Ewart Bell

POLITICAL CLIMATE : MEETING WITH SECRETARY OF STATE

1. Sir Ewart asked for briefing notes for his forthcoming meeting with Secretary of State.

2. Background papers to which he may wish to refer are:

(a) Mr Patten's note of his visit to Boston, and my minute of 23 March.

(b) Mr Bickham's note of 23 March of his meeting with Mr Molyneaux.

(c) Mr Lyon's note of 1 March on the response to the Forum Report, and Mr Angel's submission of 22 February.

(d) Mr Merifield's minutes of 16 and 23 March on the Forum and on Political Developments respectively.

3. The discussion will no doubt cover:

(a) The Assembly.

(b) The Forum.

(c) Post-Forum developments.

Assembly

4. There is no reason to doubt that the Assembly could continue to operate in its present form until the summer. Rumours of pressure from further OUP members wishing to return seem unlikely to lead to a split : Assemblymen might well hesitate to commit themselves to an Assembly which they may see as liable to collapse whether or not they return to it. There are indications that the OUP may be coming to think that a presence in the Assembly would be helpful as a platform on which to respond to the Forum, but at present it still seems unlikely that the OUP will return to the Assembly.

5. Even if the OUP did return, if the SDLP remain absent (as

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must be expected) the longer-term prospects are not good. It is hard to see any acceptable devolution scheme emerging from a unionist dominated Assembly. Could the cost and style of the Assembly be justified simply for its scrutiny role?

Forum

6. Work on the possible terms of the initial government response to the Forum continues. One point to put over from the Belfast perspective is that there are more signs of genuine worries on the unionist side (that the Forum will lead to back-door deals with ROI) than of genuine hope on the nationalist side (John Hume and his immediate entourage excepted) that it will lead to any significant changes. Our response may have to be geared accordingly to these two different audiences, to show that on the one hand nothing drastic is going to happen (ie on the Border) but that on the other hand there is still room for positive and useful developments (ie on Anglo-Irish co-operation). A

Q. Unionist fears centre on the specific models which the Report is expected to discuss. The SDLP seems to be putting increasing stress on the report as the beginning of a dialogue on issues and principles rather than on the models. This SDLP approach is helpful to us (in that it makes it possible to give a welcome to the realistic aspects) and should also be helpful to Unionists (if they wish to be helped!). Part of our problem is how to get the unrealistic constitutional models - none of which can be regarded as starters - firmly off the agenda, without also sweeping aside the discussion of issues (in which we will be seeking to induce a greater sense of realism among both unionists and nationalists). B

10. ^{shy} The best tactic seems to be to allow the models to sink under their own weight - ie allow the calmer and more rational arguments of Alliance etc to demonstrate their lack of realism as well as the more strident unionist voices to demonstrate their unacceptability - and then to recognise these points (rather than seek to make them ourselves) and the inescapable conclusion. Then we would aim to move the debate back to principles.

9. One danger is that the reception of the Report will be such an anti-climax for the SDLP that they will be thoroughly demoralised :

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they have no other planks in their platform. We need to do what we can to help them to adjust : but not at the expense of reinforcing unionist fears.

10. ~~The real lesson (and value) of the Forum experience may be to show the SDLP that no matter how flexible constitutional nationalists may be prepared to be, there is simply no prospect of any constitutional developments in the direction of nationalist thought for the rest of this century and beyond. We may sugar this pill with Anglo-Irish machinery and other cosmetic devices, but it will still be difficult for them to swallow. Can the SDLP survive this experience? What future role is there for a constitutional nationalist party in NI given that power-sharing looks unattainable?~~

Post-Forum

11. After the Forum Report and the predictable responses to it we will be accused (with some justice!) of having only a policy of drift. If we regard the Forum as a cul-de-sac, and if the Assembly is plainly not going anywhere, what constructive developments are we to pursue?

12. Questions to address include:

- (a) At what stage do we formally write off the search for power-sharing and devolution?
Could we credibly persist in this beyond the Autumn?
- (b) What takes its place? Is a more permanent form of Direct Rule the only option that is both acceptable and deliverable? Should we be starting now to consider what modifications would have to be made in the present Parliamentary etc machinery?
- (c) If we switch tack away from devolution, should we promote a local political debate on what takes its place? If so, how do we do this?

13. There is a recurring dilemma in our attempts to balance reassurance to unionists and encouragement to constitutional nationalists:

- (a) Government does not want to destroy

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constitutional nationalism, therefore seeks
 to appear to keep the door open for ~~eventual~~
~~with ROI~~ a move which can be interpreted as being in the
 direction of unity.

- (b) Unionists perceive this as ambivalence, which
 militates against the development of more
 constructive unionist attitudes - which frustrates
 the purpose of having a constitutional nationalist
 party.

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Can this vicious circle be broken unless the ambivalence is removed? What then can be offered to the nationalists? If government becomes - in this sense - more unionist, how can this be reconciled with what remains of the bilateral approach at Westminster, and with opinion and perceptions abroad (ROI and USA)? Is there any way of taking ROI even part-way with us - as Haagerup and others have advocated ROI should do?

Other topics

14. Can we again question the basis for the oft-repeated claims of minority alienation? What exactly does this mean? The rise in the Sinn Fein vote is partly the result of community politics, but is perhaps more significantly due to the failure of the SDLP to devise credible policies : nationalists who are disillusioned with the SDLP as a talking shop have nowhere else to turn. This does not necessarily mean that opinion is greatly changing : there has always been a republican element which could be attracted to the support of whatever party (SDLP or Sinn Fein) seemed most likely to deliver results, but the same people (with much the same basic views) may now be switching their voting patterns. The rise in Sinn Fein votes is very unwelcome, but its significance may not be as great as it appears.

15. In the AI context joint efforts on security still seem the most fruitful area for co-operation and the possible development of joint structures. ROI continue to run away from this : how can we best pursue it?

Sir E. H. Beech

JL

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29 March 1984

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