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Background Note for Taoiseach's Information

On 22nd June (i.e. 50th Anniversary of opening of Stormont) Mr. Brian Faulkner made a major speech which was probably the most conciliatory he has ever made; it was certainly the most conciliatory since he became Prime Minister three months ago. On the following day (23rd June) Mr. John Hume matched Mr. Faulkner's contribution by a very fine speech of his own in the course of which he described Mr. Faulkner's speech as "very good". At the same time Mr. Hume tempered his remarks with words of caution about Mr. Faulkner's proposals for participation of the Opposition in governing the North, stating that fine words were not matched by fine actions in the past. Mr. Faulkner's "participation" proposals and Mr. Hume's reaction to them are summarised hereunder:

Mr. Faulkner's proposals

Before outlining his proposals Mr. Faulkner referred to "our duty to give a real lead" and "to be ready to propose quite exceptional measures to break out of the mould of fear and mutual suspicion". He emphasised the need to summon up new reserves of generosity and imagination "on all sides" and acknowledged "the special responsibility of my colleagues and myself as the majority here to give a lead in that direction". The main proposals were the creation of three new functional committees of the House of Commons alongside the Public Accounts Committee covering the fields of social services, environmental services and industrial services. These committees would not be involved in carrying out executive functions or the management of services but would be "a means of expressing legitimate parliamentary interest in the overall quality of Government proposals and performance". Each committee would have not more than nine Members "broadly representative of party strengths in the House" and at least two of the four Chairmen would be provided by the Opposition. It was envisaged that the three functional committees would consider major policy proposals, review performance of executive functions by the Government and its agencies and consider certain legislation, possibly at Committee stage.

Mr. Faulkner said that his proposals constituted "a very radical departure" and that they were designed to (i) allow the House "as a whole" to perform its functions of scrutiny and control more effectively; (ii) permit "genuine and constructive participation in the work of Parliament by all its Members" and (iii) encourage the development of greater specialisation and expertise. He said that time will be provided immediately after the Summer Recess to debate his proposals, adding that the implementation of the Macrory recommendations (advocating the centralisation of most of existing local government services) and the introduction of a system of functional committees would make it necessary to consider whether either or both Houses at Stormont needs to be strengthened numerically. He went on to make the interesting remark "....we must aim to govern with the consent and the acceptance of a far wider majority than is constituted by those who elect the governing party", and spoke of "failures of vision and imagination on both sides". Real solutions must come", he said, "not from Dublin or even from London but from ourselves".

Mr. Faulkner said he was proposing inter-Party discussions and in this connection mentioned five conditions or ground rules:

(i) the discussions would have to be broadly based and representative of the full spectrum of views in both Houses;

(ii) they would be open-ended as to time but the Recess was suggested in this connection;

(iii) the discussions could not be expected to make headway unless conducted in terms of the existing constitutional framework; (see Mr. Hume's comments below on this point)

(iv) any statements made about the discussions would have to be agreed statements;

(v) the purpose of the discussions would be to seek some measure of common ground in restoring peace and stability.

Other proposals by Mr. Faulkner

Apart from the "participation" proposals, Mr. Faulkner mentioned that it was intended to bring in other measures; these would include:

(a) majority verdicts in jury trials of criminal cases;

(b) the appointment of a Director of Public Prosecutions;

(c) measures to combat discrimination practices by those tendering for any Government contract or where the Government meets the full cost of a contract where another body acts as agent. (The Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration - Ombudsman - will police this undertaking and this is something we have been urging the British to do);

(d) an enquiry team under Sir Alec Cairncross is to review the prospects for economic and social development in the North;

(e) North/South cooperation (Mr. Faulkner said in this connection: "...as I have already stressed, we will be glad to discuss further with the Irish Republic on a basis of mutual respect any realistic measures of cooperation which would be of benefit to both economies".

Mr. Hume's reaction to Mr. Faulkner's "participation" proposals

The reaction of the SDLP was positive but cautious. Mr. Hume gave the proposals a guarded and cautious reception. He said that the letter of the law was not the reality of reform and that reform was meaningless unless accompanied by a change in heart. They should be discussing the whole system in Northern Ireland "rather than tinkering with it any further". If Mr. Faulkner's speech and "its contents were implemented in the spirit as well as the letter we would have a better society in Northern Ireland". He went on to say that "we would want to see fine actions following those words and then we will equally match the actions of the Prime Minister and his Government with our actions"; fine words had not produced fine actions in the past. Only on the previous week the Government found itself unable "to break the links with a body /Orange Order/ which is in no way in favour of civil and religious liberty, or freedom and equality in this society". He went on

to say that some of the proposals were "pitched as major concessions" to the Opposition whereas from his side of the House a set of proposals were sent to the Macrory Committee on local government reorganisation which included the setting up of such committees. Thus the proposals on functional committees should not be presented as a major concession but as an essential completion of the package to reform local government. The new proposals required examination. There would still be a majority on each committee representing the Government side and, knowing their form, they would "effectively, perhaps, negative the workings of the committees". He said his party would be putting down an Amendment which would spell out their attitude to the proposed committees. (This was done by his colleague, Mr. Austin Currie, when he moved an Opposition amendment - it was not accepted - to the Queen's speech which, while welcoming the Prime Minister's statement on participation, regretted that the proposals represented only a "tinkering with the system" and called for a select committee of the House for the purpose of recommending the necessary institutional and procedural changes. He said that the suggested changes did not go far enough but added that they were prepared to give them "guarded approval").

Mr. Hume disagreed with the proposal that salaries be paid to Committee Chairmen. He repeated earlier calls for proportional representation (in its multi-seat, single transferable vote form) and said that as regards the Prime Minister's call for inter-party discussions "I do not think there is going to be any objection to meeting to talk". In this connection, however, he questioned condition No.(iii) mentioned by Mr. Faulkner stating that the discussions could not be expected to make headway unless conducted in terms of the existing constitutional framework. "Is the Prime Minister saying", he enquired, "that hon. Members of his party would in some way lose their political faith by talking or discussing the concept of a united Ireland with someone?". He felt that Mr. Faulkner was being over-sensitive and over-careful.

Mr. Hume was very forthright in his condemnation of violence but made the important point that violence "hides and masks the real problems in the community and one of the real problems is what has been described as the right wing of Unionism". He said that Mr. Craig and people like him "need violence for political survival". They were threatening to bring down a third Prime Minister and there would be no solution until such people were confronted by the only people to do so - the British Government.

Closing his speech, Mr. Hume said that the proposals mentioned might never come to fruition. "The parade season threatens the peace and overshadows all discussion", he said, and finished by saying that "any proposals which will help lessen sectarianism and promote meaningful justice in this part of the world will have my full support."

28/6/71