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**Title:** Copy letter from Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain D O'Sullivan to R McDonagh of the Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting a meeting with Secretary of State for Northern Ireland William Whitelaw, mainly discussing the Northern Ireland Assembly and also relations within the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the unionist parties

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*10.7.73*

17 Grosvenor Place  
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Personal and Confidential

July 9th, 1973.

*S. J. ...*  
*10.7.73*  
*R. ...*  
*11.7.73*

Dear Assistant Secretary

I made a call on Friday afternoon on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and had about 45 minutes with him. He was accompanied by his Principal Private Secretary, Mr. Philip Woodfield, and Mr. Kelvin White. The essential purpose of my call was to hear from the Secretary of State about his contacts so far with the leaders of the political parties in the North.

Mr. Whitelaw started off by asking me to convey to the Taoiseach his warmest thanks for the very helpful speeches which the Taoiseach has recently made. These, he said, have made a deep impact in the North. He also asked that his thanks be conveyed for our efforts on the security front. He referred, in particular, to the arrests at Lifford and said they were a great help as it is a sensitive area which has been causing them a great deal of concern.

Mr. Whitelaw's talks so far with the leaders of the political parties in the North have centred on the arrangements for the first meeting of the Assembly and on the question of where the Assembly is to meet. It is now almost certain that the Assembly will meet at the end of July or in the first week in August and that this meeting will be held in the Great Hall at Stormont.

Mr. Whitelaw hopes that the first meeting of the Assembly will be confined to two matters, namely, the appointment

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of a Chief Officer and the arrangements for the settlement and approval of the rules of procedure. There is a possibility that some in the Assembly will press for a debate on a motion of censure on the Secretary of State arising out of the security situation. Such a debate could last a couple of days. It could hardly do much harm but it would be just as well if it did not take place.

The Secretary of State is hopeful that it will not be too difficult to get agreement on the Chief Officer. Mr. Bleakley was a possibility but he has now indicated that he does not wish to be considered. The indications are that the SDLP will be prepared to offer a candidate and in Mr. Whitelaw's view it would be very encouraging if their ~~man~~ were accepted. The person they have in mind seems to be Mr. MacGrady.

Once the Chief Officer is agreed, the next step will be to form a committee to consider the rules of procedure. Another meeting of the Assembly to approve the rules could take place in the second half of August.

Mr. Whitelaw said there is pressure on him from colleagues to get the Executive established by the end of July. He thinks this is unrealistic. It is almost certain that an Executive could not be formed before the end of August at the earliest.

Both the SDLP and the Faulkner Unionists have a number of internal problems. On the SDLP side it is known that there are strong antagonisms within the Party. Relations between Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin are far from good and it appears that John Hume and Gerry Fitt have not

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been getting on very well of late. There are suggestions that Gerry Fitt may be replaced as leader. From Mr. Whitelaw's remarks this would not necessarily cause heartache here but Austin Currie would be more welcome to London as a successor than John Hume.

Mr. Whitelaw went on to say that the SDLP are "extraordinarily cocky" about their success in the elections. They are likely in the circumstances to start off with quite unreasonable demands. If they want to get on the Executive, they will have to drop any idea about the early ending of detention. They will also have to withdraw from the rent and rates strike. It will take some time to get the SDLP to see sense and they are unlikely to be in a mood to be talked seriously to for some time. Mr. Whitelaw will, however, do his best to coax them along and he hoped that we may be able to exert some mild influence over them.

Not much is known about some of the new members of the SDLP. According to Mr. Whitelaw, Messrs. MacGrady and O'Donoghue are valuable additions but he has been told that the new recruits from Fermanagh Tyrone may be "too close for comfort to the Provisionals". The Secretary of State sees no possibility of a link-up of the Faulkner and Taylor Unionists. If there is to be an Executive comprising the Faulkner Unionists, the SDLP and Alliance, this will almost certainly lead to a few defections from Faulkner's group. If Mr. Faulkner is not chosen to lead the Executive the number of defections will be much greater. This is a fact which Mr. Whitelaw hopes the SDLP will take fully into account. Even if an Executive is formed with Mr. Faulkner leading, there could be serious personality

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clashes between him and John Hume as they dislike one another intensely.

The Alliance Party is the only one about which Mr. Whitelaw is confident at present. Their attitude is entirely reasonable and they see themselves as having an important bridge-building function.

Relations between Mr. Paisley and Mr. Craig are very strained, all the more so because the former fared better in the elections. Paisley has told the Secretary of State that he will do his best to be cooperative in the Assembly but he will certainly want to change the Constitution. So far he has given no indication as to the changes which he will press for.

Mr. Whitelaw summed up the position as being one of considerable confusion at present. He is, however, not unhopeful that a satisfactory solution will eventually emerge. There will have to be a lot of talking before an Executive is formed and it is clear now that this is something which cannot be rushed.

His meetings with the parties this week will be concerned mainly with the tying up of arrangements for the first meeting of the Assembly. He doubts very much whether the question of the composition of the Executive can be broached at all at these meetings. Mr. Whitelaw undertook to keep me in the picture about developments.

Yours sincerely

DONAL O'SULLIVAN

Ambassador

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