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Title: Comments by Conor Cruise O'Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, on proposals made by the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] for an institutionalised Irish dimension to any constitutional arrangement for Northern Ireland, and on the potential impact of a repartition of Northern Ireland. Includes covering letter from Conor Cruise O'Brien to the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave.

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OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR POSTS AND TELEGRAPHS
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH I
DUBLIN I

5 September 1974

Mr. L. Cosgrave, TD
Taoiseach

Dear Taoiseach

I should be very grateful if you could look over the attached comments before the meeting tomorrow. I am extremely apprehensive about the possibility that the SDLP leaders are trying to take us into a repartition effort which could destroy this State.

Yours sincerely

Conor Cruise O'Brien

Handwritten signature
6/19

Comments By The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs on the
Minister for Foreign Affairs Draft.

There is nothing in the purposes of discussion that calls for much comment except for paragraph 6 - the paragraph that suggests we urge upon the British "the need for an Irish dimension that will reflect adequately the unique North - South relationship in Ireland". This does raise extremely serious issues, at which I think we should take a careful look before proceeding along these lines.

First of all the formula, as it stands, is so ambiguous that it is incapable of being urged in its present form on anybody. If we said something like this to the British, they would very naturally ask us what we meant, and it is on that, that we are called upon to make up our minds. If the formula is to be given any definite meaning it would appear to be the "institutionalised Irish dimension" now being so strongly urged by the SDLP. The meaning of that, in turn has to be the revival in some form or other of the Council of Ireland. I am not sure whether this is intended as a realistic proposition to which we are to obtain the consent of the British and to which they in turn are to secure the assent of a majority in Northern Ireland.

Let us assume that it is so intended.

As far as the first part of the proposition is concerned - getting British agreement - the thing is not altogether impossible. The "Irish dimension" is in the latest white paper although in a rather ghostly form. We and the SDLP between us might succeed in inducing the British to beef it up a bit. We did have a success of that kind with the Council of Ireland in the Sunningdale period, though it proved to be a hollow success because of the hostility which it evoked in the Protestant population as a whole.

It is quite certain that the "institutionalised Irish dimension" evokes the same hostility, including now the hostility of those Protestants, including Faulkner who were prepared to accept the old Council of Ireland concept. That is to say that the new formula stands less chance of success, than did the old one which was a failure.....

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The rebuilding of power-sharing stands a fairly slim, but real chance of success if the British put enough economic pressure on, and make unequivocally clear that the alternative to power-sharing is not a revival of the old Stormont, and not UDI, but simply direct rule. If we insist on adding "institutionalised Irish dimension" to the package we simply wreck all chances of restoring power-sharing. In short, we repeat the key mistake of Sunningdale and refuse to learn any lessons from that failure. There are however two alternative possibilities about what our intent might be in attempting to resurrect the Council of Ireland at this stage. The first possibility is that we would be conciliating the SDLP by doing what they tell us to do, and thus making a relatively trouble-free political option for ourselves, as well as helping the SDLP to calm their followers. It would be possible to take the view that if we ask for it and the British turn it down we are on good political ground vis:a:vis the SDLP, Fianna Fáil and majority opinion in Ireland generally. That would be a tenable enough point of view in normal times. Unfortunately times are not normal. One of the risks involved - and quite a serious one - is that the British may not really want to work out an acceptable package, but are preparing a way of retreat: "as it's impossible to get the Irish to agree on anything we have to go". From that point of view it might suit them quite well to have so obviously unacceptable an item as a revived Council of Ireland "forced on them" by the Irish Government, which would thus carry its share of the blame for the dreadful consequences which would follow on a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland in present circumstances.

The second possibility - which seems to underlie a lot of current SDLP thinking on the matter - is that if we can get the British to include in their package an element known to be utterly unacceptable to Protestant opinion generally we thereby precipitate a confrontation between the British Army and the Loyalists at the end of which the majority in Northern Ireland would have to accept the minorities formula. Quite apart from the fact that seeking "Irish dimension" by the use of British bayonets is an odd conception, this whole line of thinking is utterly unrealistic. No British Government would or could get the British Army to beat the Protestants into submission for us.

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If we ~~can have~~ this element we shall, in my opinion, be going for it on no other ground than that it is what the SDLP want us to do. "Cheer when the SDLP cheers" is always a tempting policy, but I suggest that there are reasons why we should not yield to that temptation in the present instance.

The SDLP leaders are quite realistic enough to know where the "non-negotiable Irish dimension" really points. They know it will never be willingly accepted by a majority in the present Northern Ireland; they know that the British cannot impose it, and if they purport to try imposing it this will be just a phase in the road to their withdrawal from the ungovernable province. They know also that it is not within the capacity of the Dublin Government and Army to impose this in Northern Ireland - east of the Bann...

I believe that the real underlying logic of the present SDLP line is in the direction of repartition. Repartition is not a viable objective for a party which draws some of its support from the Belfast region, and the SDLP have formally ruled it out. A policy which is disallowed may however be pursued at the same time, and it is clear from the Bunbeg briefing that some of the SDLP leaders have given it serious thought. It would be surprising if they had not. Most of the SDLP leaders - and all the ablest ones - are from areas which might reasonably be expected to be included in the Republic under a repartition arrangement. The argument "half a loaf is better than no bread" is always a forceful one, and it must seem particularly attractive in present circumstances now that the Loyalist strength has clearly emerged, now that the actual Loyalist rule is a serious threat, and now that it has become so plainly illusory to think of incorporating all of Northern Ireland in some kind of united Ireland. In these conditions repartition may well have its appeal to a number of people in the border areas. There are however special reasons why it should appeal to the political leaders of the people in the border areas. As long as the areas in question remain in Northern Ireland their very brightest prospect is that of a minority role/power-sharing arrangements which are themselves subordinate (a la Sunningdale); their next best hope is to be allowed to leave the people under direct rule with no political role at all (except Gerry Fitt or whoever may succeed him in West Belfast); at the worst they face a very real threat of being ground out of existence in a Loyalist

take-over/...

take-over. On the other hand in the event of the incorporation of a wide ~~swath~~th of Northern Catholic territory in the Republic, the politicians concerned would have wide scope for their energies. It would I think be wrong to suppose that they have not considered that possibility, or that it is not a factor in their thinking. It may be asked why not? I would agree that if repartition could be ~~briefly~~^{peacefully} negotiated it might be one of the less undesirable outcomes of the present situation. Unfortunately it cannot be ~~briefly~~^{peacefully} negotiated. The SDLP cannot negotiate on it, since they formally rejected it and no Dublin Government could negotiate it in the teeth of that formal rejection. The Loyalists would use force rather than accept it, and no British Government would impose it in these conditions. The only way in which repartition is possible is by British withdrawal and a bloody and untidy process of 'sorting out' after such a withdrawal - in short by a civil war into which the forces of this state would be drawn.

For some people in the North even that terrible process may appear a lesser evil, if it ends in "the liberation of a part of the national territory" and is seen as a step towards the eventual liberation of the remainder. The repercussions of this process on the lives of the people North and South would however be disastrous both in terms of lives and in economic and social terms, and the acquisition of tracts of ruined territory and an embittered population would be a very poor compensation indeed.

I suggest that the most responsible option for our Government at the present time, is to continue with the low key approach of working towards the rebuilding of power-sharing if possible, but if not then for the continuance of direct rule. We should be very wary indeed of where the present momentum of the SDLP - which is getting closer and closer to the position of the Provisionals - may take us. The concept of the "institutionalised Irish dimension" has a very important symbolical function in relation to all this and I think if we commit ourselves to it at the present stage we may be taking on more than we bargained for, and more than those whom we represent would wish us to take on, if they understood the position, which is of course very far from the case.