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Discussion Paper

Northern Ireland Policy: Question of Bipartisanship and Consensus

It is argued that it is necessary, in the national interest, to preserve the maximum area of consensus between the Government and the Fianna Fáil Party, and also with the SDLP.

We all agree that such consensus is desirable. We would also all agree that it is highly desirable to bring about effective dialogue with leaders of Protestant opinion in Northern Ireland, to reduce tensions between the communities there and increase possibilities of peaceful co-operation between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

What is not usually noted in public discussions of these questions is that there is a conflict between the two sets of objectives. Maximum consensus in the Republic (and with the SDLP) tends to preclude effective dialogue and co-operation with representative Protestants of any shade in Northern Ireland.

This conflict should be clear to us at least in retrospect as we look back at the history of Sunningdale. As Fianna Fáil and the SDLP demanded "a Council of Ireland with teeth", consensus politics (in the sense of consensus limited to Catholics) thrust us in the direction of maximising the Council of Ireland and so re-se the concept of a Council of Ireland with two tiers and executive powers. The Faulkner Unionists and Alliance - the indispensable partners in Sunningdale - protested that so conspicuous a Council would weaken their basis of support. They asked that the Council be limited to joint sessions of members of the two Governments, without executive powers. We ignored their arguments about their base of support and pressed for, and in a large degree got, the kind of Council of Ireland which was attractive to the kind of consensus described above. That is in effect we preferred the

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best consensus available between Catholics and Protestants. In terms of the consensus we preferred we won a victory. In terms of the other kind of consensus, without which the Sunningdale arrangements could not be sustained, we helped to break the political back of our partners.

These partners, in their desperate attempt to hold their base of support - all of which was Unionist support - claimed insistently that the Sunningdale Council of Ireland didn't represent any kind of step towards unity, but SDLP speakers and the press of the Republic proclaimed with hardly less insistence that it did in fact inevitably mean the coming of unity. Except for one or two individual speeches and interviews, we as a Government did not explicitly corroborate this view, but our efforts to maintain the consensus we preferred made it impossible for us to give effective help in this area to our foundering partners. The nature of the Council of Ireland that had been built up, and the claims being made for it were such that the Taoiseach's declaration in the Dáil did not have nearly the impact in Northern Ireland that it deserved to have. By the time the obviously impending collapse of the Faulknerites compelled the 'cutting down of the Council of Ireland to a size it never should have exceeded, it was too late.

One kind of consensus had killed the other.

The history of Sunningdale is not reviewed here just for the pleasure of digging up the past. It is reviewed because the same forces are still at work. Pressure towards consensus with Fianna Fáil tends, and will tend at every stage, to militate against effective dialogue with Northern Protestants and will tend to weaken our credibility with them.

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This is a very important consideration, not only because such dialogue and such credibility are desirable in themselves but also because in the last analysis they are the only levers we possess which can be used to help protect the imperiled Catholic minority in the North. The kind of language that pleases that minority in the short run is what does least to help it in reality.

This point is particularly important because, in spite of the mistakes which in the opinion of the writer of this memorandum were made in pursuit of 26 county consensus, we have a considerably higher credibility with the majority in Northern Ireland than any Government here has had since this State became a Republic. This is due to the Taoiseach's position and reputation in relation to law and order and to peace, to his statements since taking Office, to the Government's activity in relation to security and to other similar factors.

Fianna Fáil on the other hand has no such credibility and marked effects to achieve bipartisanship with Fianna Fáil do not enhance anyone else's credibility in that quarter. Mr Jack Lynch is esteemed by people in the Republic and in Britain as a man of peace, but among the majority in Northern Ireland he and his party are deeply distrusted and are seen as having veiled with the language of peace policies first of active collusion with the IRA and later of turning a blind eye. It is felt there that, while Mr Lynch disclaimed the IRA, he in fact relied on it to pull the chestnut of unity out of the fire for him. His insistence that violence was a byproduct of partition was felt as legitimising the violence which he appeared to condemn; implying that such violence was inevitable and therefore justified as long as the majority in Northern Ireland sought to remain within the United Kingdom.

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It will be understood therefore that assertions or implications that the Government and Fianna Fáil are at one in working for unity are not helpful, when understood in this way, to credibility in dialogue with Northern Protestants.

It is not argued that we can do without the widest possible support in the Republic. It is not denied that the need for such support and for good relations with the SDLP necessarily imposes some constraints on our dialogue with Northern Protestants. The purpose that this memorandum is intended to serve is to show that an effort to mark out our policy as distinguished from, rather than identical with, that of Fianna Fáil would tend to give our voice more weight with the majority in the North, and to reduce that majority's apprehensions about our intentions. As these apprehensions are among the factors which threaten the minority in the North, it is important that we do what we can to reduce these apprehensions, and that we pursue that policy now.

In the event of British withdrawal - a possibility not to be excluded within the next two years - it is essential that the maximum degree of effective communication that can be built should exist between this Government and representatives of the majority in Northern Ireland. Unless such communications can be established the results of withdrawal would be almost certainly disastrous.