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Withdrawal from Northern Ireland - British intentions.

1. Speculation about the possibility of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland has been a recurring feature since the violence in Northern Ireland commenced. Such speculation has mounted in recent months. The entry into office of a British Government headed by Mr. Harold Wilson made people recall the proposals for settlement of the Irish Question which he made on 25th November, 1971, speaking in the House of Commons, as leader of the Opposition. These involved progress towards a united Ireland over a period of 15 years. Various subsequent statements by leaders of both the main British Parties (e.g. Mr. Wilson speaking on the 1973 White Paper on 16th April, 1973, his "spongers" televised address) have indicated that a rejection by people in Northern Ireland of British provisions for settlement of the Northern Ireland problem must inevitably lead to a reappraisal of the whole Great Britain-Northern Ireland relationship. Also worthy of mention is the speech, earlier this year, by Mr. Roy Mason, British Defence Secretary, which was subsequently repudiated by a British Government statement.

2. Other factors responsible for increasing speculation about the possibility of withdrawal are the, apparently, interminable character of the violence and the elusiveness of a political settlement, as highlighted by the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement, following on the U.W.C. strike; the sort of antipathy towards Westminster rule and Westminster standards demonstrated by the strike; the extent, and the increasing appreciation of this by the British electorate, of the British subsidisation of Northern Ireland, now running at over £400 million a year; the

continuing loss of life and injuries being suffered by British soldiers serving in the North (over 220 regular soldiers killed since 1969) and the campaigns, sponsored by certain M.Ps to "bring the troops home". The speculation is also related to the combined effect of all these factors on a minority Government in the United Kingdom, which must continually match the way in which the electorate is moving.

3. Impressions from the meeting between the Taoiseach and Mr. Wilson in April this year, and views expressed by some elected representatives from Northern Ireland in July, bore out the view that feeling at constituency level in Britain in favour of withdrawal is a great deal stronger than it has been expressed to be, in public by British Ministers. More recently, Mr. John Hume stated, at the meeting between Ministers and the SDLP on 20th August, 1974, that he had gained the impression from the SDLP's recent conversations with Mr. Heath that Mr. Heath personally believed that the Labour Government wish to withdraw from Northern Ireland. Mr. Heath had stated that Labour have what he described as a neurosis about the 12 Northern Ireland seats in the House of Commons.

4. Statements ruling out withdrawal have, however, been made. The most recent authoritative statement on the subject by Mr. Wilson was in the House of Commons on 4th June last. Speaking of the withdrawal of troops which, in practice, would be synonymous with a British withdrawal, he said -

"The withdrawal of troops.....provides no positive solution at all for the problems of Northern Ireland, for there can be no positive solution other than a political solution based on consent. Without that a decision simply to withdraw the armed forces would be a purely negative act, productive of nothing. The creating of a vacuum can never be more than a negative act. But this vacuum would quickly be filled and I think many of us here fear that it would be filled by men of violence of all extremes,

intent on forcing their particular sectional supremacy.....

On the issue of withdrawal, therefore, I conclude that there is no easy solution through the withdrawal of troops unless the House is prepared to risk a holocaust." (Hansard, for 4th June 1974).

The background to Mr. Wilson's statement was given by officials from the Northern Ireland Office during a visit to Dublin on 5th June when they said that, so far as British thinking was concerned, withdrawal was "way-out territory". They indicated that it was not, at that time, being considered by British Ministers as an option. The speeches of Messrs. Orme, Heath and Thorpe in the same debate eliminated withdrawal as an option and only very few M.Ps seemed to support it.

5. Among arguments against withdrawal are that

- (1) it could involve the British in international trade losses through the involvement of their third or fourth largest customer in serious civil disturbances;
- (2) the British could face international ostracisation if they abdicated their Northern responsibilities;
- (3) the violence in this island could spill over even more than at present into British cities; and
- (4) the effects on demands for independence from Scottish and Welsh nationalists, at a time when the future economic prosperity of England relies heavily on the benefits of oil offshore Scotland and probably Wales.

Regard must also be had to the statutory commitment in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973, that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority of the people there voting at a poll held for the purpose, and the further declaration in the Sunningdale communique that the British Government would support the wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Both of these commitments can of course be changed, as similar commitments have been in the past.

6. More recently, statements by Mr. Rees in a T.V. interview on 12th August were interpreted in some quarters as suggesting that some form of disengagement was being contemplated by the British Government. However, Mr. Rees had a press statement issued on the following date (13th August) in order to clarify what he actually said in the T.V. interview. The press statement is headed "Mr. Merlyn Rees says not a "pull-out"". He followed this up with a statement in a speech, delivered on 15th August, that "it is nonsense to say that the British Government are on the point of pulling out".

7. It is, however, clearly British policy to reduce the level of their troop commitment. The recent proposals on policing, coupled with the simultaneously leaked intention to withdraw 1,000 troops in the near future are steps in this direction.

8. The S.D.L.P. now believe that the British and especially the Labour Party want to get out of Northern Ireland and may do so following a loyalist victory in the Convention elections. They see the options likely to be open to the British Government as either confrontation with the loyalists or withdrawal. This view was given public expression in a recent statement by Mr. John Hume. The SDLP would wish to ensure that Britain would not withdraw from Northern Ireland before acceptable and workable political institutions had been set up. They aim to bring about a change in what they see as the evolution of British policy so that the British Government would make a positive attempt, in conjunction with the Irish Government, to provide and, if necessary, to impose acceptable institutions of government in Northern Ireland. They have called for the British Government to state, in advance of the Convention election, that power-sharing and an institutional provision for the Irish dimension are non-negotiable conditions of any settlement.

9. It should be mentioned that the stated policy of the loyalist parties does not favour independence for Northern Ireland but rather maintenance of the union with Britain, with a regional assembly and executive on whatever lines (not involving compulsory power-sharing) may be decided on for other areas of the U.K. on the basis of the Kilbrandon Report.
10. On Monday, 9th September, 1974, the British Government issued a Green Paper on the nature and extent of the British financial and economic support of Northern Ireland. While the Paper's content is factual and its tone neutral it helps to underline the possible consequence of defiance of the wishes of the British Parliament for a settlement in Northern Ireland. It demonstrates clearly the North's dependence on Britain. In a foreword, the Secretary of State recalls the statements of various realities in the most recent White Paper, including the need for some form of power-sharing, the need for any pattern of government to be acceptable to the people of the United Kingdom as a whole and to Parliament at Westminster and the need to provide for the special relationship with the Republic. The foreword does not go beyond the White Paper in relation to these matters.
11. While the SDLP are pressing for a statement of British intentions, the need for discretion on the part of the Irish Government in relation to British intentions in respect of withdrawal is patent. It seems necessary to seek to obtain an indication of intentions in this regard only by indirect means and, perhaps, even implicitly in other declarations.