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Visit to Northern Ireland, 6/7 September 1975

1. This is a brief summary of my conversations in Northern Ireland on 6/7 September with SDLP members. I have already reported orally and in detail to the Minister.

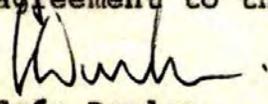
2. The private inter-party talks are now taking place on the basis of the attached document, dated 4 September 1975, prepared by the Convention Chairman. The UUUC and the SDLP negotiators are talking separately to the Chairman but in addition Hume and Craig seem to have developed a close relationship over the past few weeks and they have been and are in frequent direct contact. The present formal position is that both the UUUC and the SDLP are preparing themselves to give answers to questions (a) - (h) in point 5 of his agenda but Hume and Craig have agreed that as a first step the UUUC will set out in detail their proposals on (f), viz., safeguards that may be required by either party.

3. According to SDLP sources, there have been significant shifts in the last week within the UUUC and the most likely interpretation of these shifts is that Craig has decided to make a bid for power taking with him, in addition to his own party, most of the Official Unionists but leaving Paisley's DUP behind. The significance of the decision at the ULCCC meeting on 6 September - ~~which~~ the meeting dominated by the para-militaries, excluding the UVF, but including rank and file UUUC politicians - to tell the politicians "to keep talking at the Convention to sort out Ulster's problems" was that Craig now had para-military backing for what he proposed to do. (He would make his bid formally at a UUUC meeting on 9 September.) Late in the evening of 6 September, two prominent para-military leaders arranged a meeting with one of the SDLP negotiators who is satisfied that the purpose of the four-hour meeting was (a) to enable the para-militaries to check the accuracy of the account they were being given by loyalist politicians of what was happening at the

Private talks and (b) to assure the SDLP that they were at the moment backing the efforts to find a political solution. The SDLP contact did not, however, get the impression that the para-militaries would necessarily accept any form of power-sharing though he is satisfied that the Irish dimension will not be a problem for them. He asked them, as a gesture of their good intentions towards the talks, to turn off the sectarian murders immediately and they undertook to try to do so. They did, however, say that the nature of their organisations was such that it would take at least a week for the message to get through and they also said they could not speak for or control the UVF which was the organisation mainly concerned in the sectarian killings.

4. In addition to being opposed by Paisley and the UVF, it is also understood by the SDLP that Craig's bid is being opposed by some of the Official Unionists, led by John Taylor and in these circumstances, and bearing in mind what the para-militaries privately said to the SDLP about power-sharing, it is difficult to see Craig winning the support he would need to carry through the proposals about voluntary coalitions now being discussed.

5. The SDLP Convention members and Party Executive met on 6 September and it is clear that a group within the Party is not at all happy with the line being taken by the negotiators. It will be recalled (see my note of 27 August 1975 about the inter-party talks) that the SDLP were to have handed to the UUUC detailed proposals based on a document drafted by the Attorney General. In fact, the Convention Party refused permission to the negotiators to hand over this document, mainly because of what was regarded as its weakness in relation to the Irish dimension. Some members of the Party are also making difficulty about the discussions now taking place on "voluntary" power-sharing and it is to be expected that if agreement is reached between the UUUC and the SDLP on that basis, it will require all the experience of the established leadership to sell the agreement to the party.


Seán Donlon
8 September 1975

c.c. PSS, Mr. D. Nally, D/Taoiseach