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Conversation with Mr. Gerry Fitt, M.P., in London
on 14th May 1975

1. When I met him in the House of Commons at 4.30 p.m. Fitt had just come from a meeting with the Prime Minister and Northern Ireland Secretary of State. He had sought the meeting for the purpose of pressing the Prime Minister to spell out clearly and, ideally, publicly what the British Government would do in the event of the Convention not reaching agreement on a form of government for Northern Ireland. Fitt had pushed Wilson very hard on this but he got no direct response and his impression was that the British Government would do nothing, either publicly or privately, to spell out to the UUUC what decisions might be taken in London if the Convention failed.

2. Towards the end of Fitt's meeting with Wilson and Rees, Wilson remarked "out of the blue" that "if there is another UWC strike, we won't be there to deal with it". Fitt was very puzzled by this remark, particularly since it did not relate directly to anything which was being discussed and it was in fact said when Wilson was pouring him a drink just before the end of their meeting. He did not succeed in drawing Wilson any further on it and indeed he said that the full significance of it was only beginning to sink in as he was leaving. Fitt's interpretation of the remark was that the British would pull out completely if the Loyalists attempted to reject decisions taken at Westminster but he was puzzled as to why the remark should have been made to him at all and particularly as to why it was made to him at this stage.

3. In general, Fitt is very gloomy about the possible developments of the Northern Ireland situation. Three dominant factors in his assessment are (i) the present attitudes towards Northern Ireland at Westminster, (ii) fears for the safety of Catholics in Belfast and (iii) the unrealistic attitude of his SDLP colleagues in their response to the current situation.

4. He is particularly worried about the mood among Labour M.P.s at Westminster many of whom have had enough of Northern Ireland and are privately, though not yet publicly, talking in terms of withdrawal. Financial and to some extent military considerations obviously influence thinking but in many cases there is also an attitude of "we don't know how to deal with this, we've tried very hard and no one can blame us if at this stage we pull out and hope for the best". The traditional friends of Ireland (Kevin McNamara, Jock Stollard and others) had considerable goodwill within the Parliamentary Labour Party from 1968 to 1974 and had a powerful influence on policy but many of their colleagues now felt that the trust they had placed in this group had not produced results and that it was time to look elsewhere for direction. In the absence of any strong commitment or guidance from the Wilson/Rees leadership, there was no difficulty for M.P.s in moving towards the position of the Troops Out Movement - 11 Labour M.P.s are appearing on the platform at one of their meetings this month - and following people like Leo Abse M.P. who for all his gimmickry and eccentricities had in the last ten years decisively influenced the Labour Party on a number of unpopular issues. But the M.P.s Fitt was most concerned about were those who at this stage were supporting neither the McNamara Irish lobby nor the withdrawal lobby but those who felt that "one side over there is as bad as the other" and who would therefore fully support an expedient move which Wilson might make, particularly if it banished discussion of Northern Ireland affairs from Westminster. While Fitt thinks the present British Government is capable of total withdrawal from Northern Ireland, he was more inclined to the view that there would be some whitewashed restoration of majority rule when the Convention breaks. Because of the neutral mood of many M.P.s he is particularly concerned that the SDLP's role in the Convention should at all times be constructive and reasonable so that when the crisis does come there will be maximum sympathy at Westminster for the Northern Ireland minority.

5. Fitt is, even more than usual, out of sympathy with the general SDLP position at present. As leader of the party, he delivered the

party line at the opening session of the Convention on 8 May when he put on record the commitment to the Irish dimension. He felt that it had been neither politic nor necessary to do so since if the Convention was to fail it might as well be seen to do so on the immediate issue which it had been set up to deal with, viz. what provision for the government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance. But he had been prevailed on to deliver the party line and he had done so. More than once in the course of my long session with him, Fitt talked about the difficulties he had in remaining with a party dominated by "Derry, Armagh and Newry nationalists who can afford to be nationalists because they don't live in Belfast". When he joined with five others to form the SDLP he had done so only after he had satisfied himself that the party would be "reasonable on the border question" but the party had developed over the last five years primarily as a non-Belfast party and while this might be a short-term victory for the Humes and the Curries it would in the longer run be a disaster for the Northern Ireland minority if the party ignored the position of the Belfast Catholics. At the moment, these people felt very vulnerable and were very worried about their safety in another political crisis. If that crisis were seen to come about as a result of SDLP insistence on an Irish dimension, every loyalist gunman would feel the urge to kill a few Catholics and the brunt of this would be felt in Belfast and not in Derry, Armagh and Newry. Fitt thought that the most useful contribution he could make to reducing the risk for Catholics in Belfast was to resign from the SDLP just before the Convention ended and make a dramatic, direct plea to the loyalists to leave the Catholics of Belfast alone since they at least were not trying to drive anyone into a united Ireland. He thought he could persuade Paddy Devlin to support him in this and though he realised it would end the "one strong voice" on the minority side, he felt that the end of the Convention would in any event signal the end of the SDLP and he would therefore be killing something that was already dead.

6. Fitt has often previously been at loggerheads with the rest of the SDLP and to that extent what he said was not totally surprising. His general pessimism about the political future for Northern Ireland combined with the persuasive case he put for the advantages to the Belfast Catholics of his parting company with the SDLP cannot, however, be dismissed lightly. In discussions with him, I took the line that as a first step at least he should talk to Hume and Currie about both the mood at Westminster and the fears of the Catholics in Belfast. I also said it would be a great pity if the minority political representatives were so openly divided at a time when crucial decisions are about to be taken in London but even when I had put these and many other arguments to Fitt, I was left with the distinct feeling that he will find it very difficult to stick with the SDLP in the months ahead unless there is less emphasis on the Irish dimension. The day-to-day business of the Convention will, of course, bring him into closer contact with his colleagues than at any time since the Executive fell a year ago and this may be enough to ensure that they stick together at least for the duration of the Convention.

Seán Donlon

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