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NORTHERN IRELAND - GOVERNMENT POLICY

Briefing Note

1. The Taoiseach stated in the Dail on 13 December, 1979 that the Government's top political priority was progress towards the coming together of the people of this country as a whole living in harmony and prosperity under the common name of Irishmen. He indicated on that occasion and also at his first Press Conference on 7th December that the principles of the policy the Government would pursue to that end would be as stated in the Fianna Fail policy statement on Northern Ireland of October, 1975.

2. The opening paragraph of that statement, quoted and reiterated by the Taoiseach on that occasion, is as follows:-

"A central aim of Fianna Fail policy is to secure by peaceful means the unity and independence of Ireland as a democratic republic. We totally reject the use of force as a means of achieving that end".

3. Paragraph 2 of the statement is as follows:-

Fianna Fail calls on the British Government to:-

- (a) Encourage the unity of Ireland by agreement, in independence and in a harmonious relationship between the two islands and to this end to declare Britain's commitment to implement an ordered withdrawal from her involvement in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland.
- (b) Enter into an agreement guaranteeing appropriate financial support for a specified period to enable the transition to take place smoothly in stable economic conditions.
- (c) Promote in the interim the development of political institutions which will ensure civil rights and equality for all the people of the Six Counties of Northern Ireland and to ensure that security in the area operates impartially through acceptable structures.

- (d) Support the development of social, cultural and economic links between North and South through appropriate structures and institutions.

4. In the course of replies to questions at his first Press Conference on 7th December, 1979, the Taoiseach:-

- (1) said that on Northern Ireland there was only one sensible line to pursue and that was to use every means at the Government's disposal to concentrate on bringing the people of this island together in harmony and co-operation - and that the way that could be achieved was a matter of policy to be spelled out from day to day.
- (2) recalled that the 1975 policy statement, after stating the central aim of policy and rejecting violence, said that as a means to the aim stated, the Party would like the British to enter into a commitment to disengage from Northern Ireland, from this country.
- (3) also recalled that the 1975 statement indicated that pending the withdrawal or disengagement of Britain from Irish affairs, the Party should pursue the peaceful coming together of the communities by means of interim institutions - any such interim institutions being welcome.
- (4) refused to spell out policy at that stage, in answer to a question as to which came first - interim institutions or a British commitment.

5. In the course of his Dail statement on 13th December last the Taoiseach also declared that the Government were determined that the principle of rejection of force would be clearly translated into practice, that our security forces would seek to prevent totally any cross-Border activity of any illegal or subversive nature and that cross-Border security operations will be maintained to ensure the most effective action against violence within the rule of law.

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6. The principles of the policy the Government will pursue are in continuity with those of all previous Fianna Fail governments. For example, the Taoiseach's predecessor had called on the British Government to remove what he called the steel wall of the unconditional guarantee or of a one-sided basic orientation of British policy which discourages unionists in the North building on what all the people of this country share in common. This is also what the SDLP seek, as indicated in their presentations to the current Conference in Belfast (but it is desirable, given the fragile basis of this conference not to underline in public or in any proceedings that may be made public, this identity of view which could raise difficulties for continued DUP participation in the Conference or provide an excuse for their withdrawal if this suits them otherwise).

N.B.

7. The commitment which the 1975 statement seeks from the British Government is not a call to coerce the unionists. It is rather to be seen as a call for positive action towards a positive end, to help bring the unionists to a realisation of their own best interests and of the major role that is theirs for the taking in the government of their own affairs and of the affairs of all Ireland, embracing so many common interests, through whatever institutions would be agreed in the free and open process of discussion, with nothing excluded from consideration which is contemplated in the third paragraph of the 1975 policy statement.

8. The efforts of the Taoiseach's predecessor to obtain a positive response to his calls for a British commitment in line with the policy of the Irish Government were unavailing. The Labour Government headed by Mr. Callaghan was in no position, in terms of its parliamentary position to alienate the Unionists at Westminster and following successive meetings between Messrs. Lynch and Callaghan it was indicated that on this issue

they had "agreed to differ". The Conservative Government headed by Mrs. Thatcher came to power committed to maintain the union and they maintained this position.

9. They continue to do so. In the course of remarks to a joint session of the U.S. Senate and House Committees concerned with foreign affairs, during her visit to the U.S. last month, Mrs. Thatcher said that the British presence in Northern Ireland would remain as long as a majority within Northern Ireland so desired and noted that that desire had been confirmed in recent years, for instance through a Border Poll (under the British 1973 Constitution Act). In the course of a radio interview in New York on 18th December, she said that Northern Ireland belonged to the U.K. because it wished to stay within the U.K, termed this a policy of self-determination pursued by the British, recalled what she called the overwhelming result of the last Border Poll in 1973 and recalled that there was provision for these every 10 years.

10. The Working Paper produced by the British Government in November, 1979 as a basis for the current Conference of the main political parties in Northern Ireland indicated that the Conference would be concerned essentially with a transfer of powers within the United Kingdom. It contained the following paragraph:-

"It is at present the clear wish of a substantial majority of the people in Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. The Conference will therefore not be concerned with the constitutional status of the Province and will not be asked to discuss issues such as Irish unity, or confederation, or independence. Nor, since there is no serious prospect of agreement on them, will the Conference be invited to consider either a return to the arrangements which prevailed before 1972, or a revival of the system which obtained in the first five months of 1974. New patterns must be sought which take full account of the needs and anxieties of both sides of the community".

11. The paper was regarded by the SDLP as an unsatisfactory basis for the Conference. At first, while appearing to yield something in relation to economic aspects of the Irish Dimension, the British Government maintained their position. In winding up the debate in the House of Commons on the 29th November, the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Mr. Michael Alison, M.P. said "if Irish Dimension means clear moves towards the unity of Ireland it will not be on the Agenda. It is ruled out by paragraph 4 of the document. The honourable member for Belfast West chided us for being so brutally frank about that. We all know of the irreconcilable views in Northern Ireland on that matter". Later he said that if the people of Northern Ireland wanted Irish unity the Government of the U.K. would not stand in the way. This was a less positive restatement of the British declaration included in the Sunningdale Communique. However, so long as they would wish the union to continue the U.K. Government would respect that wish. He saw the Conference as "not exactly the right arena for the process of peaceful political persuasion of the majority of people of Northern Ireland" who would have to be persuaded to give their consent to the unification or reunification of Ireland. The Conference was not the place for that, Mr. Alison stated. Later he said that there was no point in the Conference discussing the long term constitutional future of Northern Ireland. Again in his concluding remarks Mr. Alison stated that the Irish Dimension must be a factor in any consideration of how Northern Ireland should be governed. He acknowledged that in that form it might well arise in discussion on new arrangements at the Conference. The SDLP refused to attend a Conference held taking the paper as the sole basis of reference. The Taoiseach at his first Press Conference stated that the paper had already been shown to be inadequate.

12. Subsequently, following a series of talks between Mr. John Hume and Mr. Atkins, agreement was reached on a formula which enabled the SDLP to participate in the Conference. This involved written submissions and an opportunity to introduce these at the Conference.

The SDLP submission calls for the dropping of the British negative guarantee to the Unionists. Mr. Hume's initial presentation of these and other arguments setting the Northern Ireland problem in an All-Ireland dimension almost led to the breakdown of the Conference on its first day. This was avoided, following further talks, by Mr. Atkins' issue of an invitation to the leaders of the four main political parties to meet him to discuss "certain matters which are outside the task of the Conference as defined in the Working Paper" - in effect an invitation to a parallel conference. Mr. Hume has accepted this invitation while the Rev. Ian Paisley has rejected it. The SDLP are satisfied that (1) the original conference will now go ahead, (it was resumed this week and adjourned until next week), (2) the results of the parallel conference will also be reported to the British Prime Minister and Government and will be an input to decisions on new institutions of government for Northern Ireland which they are expected to make regardless of the Conference.

13. Mr. Hume is anxious that the Government and parties here refrain from criticism of the main Conference. It appears reasonable to respond to this request and to adopt a wait-and-see attitude to both conferences. In these circumstances, it appears desirable that any official Party spokesman, in responding to motions at Conventions should not comment on the conferences or go beyond restatement of the principles and approaches set out in paragraphs 1-7 of this briefing note.