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Review of Government Policy on Northern Ireland

24/25 August, 1981.

Some preliminary views: M. Lillis, Department of the
Taoiseach.

This observer was involved in various aspects of Anglo-Irish policy from 1972, with the exception of the two years July 1979 to 1 July, 1981 i.e. the period in which the policy currently under review was developed. These impressions, set out in summary and in "frank and uninhibited" terms, are accordingly those of an interested outsider fresh to the Joint Studies.

Objective of Review:

I have no specific observations to make on the agenda prepared in the Department of Foreign Affairs other than to say that it seems somewhat rigid in outline and perhaps excessively detailed. My feeling is that, at this stage, the aim should be to identify the outline of policy in broad terms e.g. will the Government continue the Joint Studies and, if so, will they constitute the single or most important focus of effort? It does seem to me that it would be somewhat premature to attempt a detailed assessment, in conclusive terms, of several constituent elements in the Northern Ireland situation, e.g. state of Unionist opinion, until the Government's central objective has been broadly delineated.

Partitionism

There is evidence of a strong and mounting distaste in important circles of public opinion for Government involvement in the Northern Ireland crisis, notably the hunger strike problem. Some people feel that this is an unprofitable exercise which carries its own dangers of e.g. the destabilisation of our State or damage to economic development (investment, tourism). There is a corresponding feeling that the Northern Ireland problem is not soluble for the foreseeable future. Many years for the less convulsed years of the fifties and sixties and hope or believe that a policy of benign neglect in Dublin might restore more tranquil conditions.

These anxieties and resentments create their own pressures on Government. They must be confronted, not merely for domestic political reasons, but in the interest of developing and sustaining an effective policy on Northern Ireland.

Thus the responsibility and commitment of Dublin should be publicly clarified, probably repeatedly so. The same might be said for the view in Dublin that the crisis in Northern Ireland is chronic, profound and worsening.

It may also be necessary for Ministers, while aiming towards a solution, to work for progress rather than complete success.

Consideration might be given to the idea of bringing Ministers who are not familiar with Northern Ireland on visits so as to gain a direct impression of the problem.

Joint Studies

Judged in terms of political or constitutional movement in Northern Ireland, I have not been able to discern a prospect of short-term or medium-term advance in the papers I have read.

There are a number of advantages of perhaps a lesser order to be gleaned from a continuation of the exercise:

domestic political: the continuation of the exercise, at least through the next stage, should help to sustain a bi-partisan base for policy;

administrative: continuation ensures the availability of administrative channels and guarantees a certain regularity of political contact.

Continuation through the next stage would seem, in my opinion, to pose a number of very serious difficulties;

Anglo-Irish: our formal acceptance of the Studies as setting the framework for British policy would seem to inhibit the British somewhat from taking radical steps e.g. acting on the Taoiseach's suggestion

that British leaders should clarify their real intentions on Northern Ireland; it would also seem to diminish our own authority to exert pressure on British leaders to take such initiatives; reports of meetings within the Joint Studies framework as well as the results of the Joint Studies to date (which amount to little more than suggesting a formal structure for Anglo-Irish Ministerial and Parliamentary contact) reflect a minimalist and unyielding attitude on the British side which is, to the reader, seriously discouraging in terms of the Studies framework providing for real change;

North-South: the North-South dialogue which the Government regard as central to progress would, under present proposals, be channelled through and even perhaps confined to a UK-Dublin network; this would have the effect of consolidating the Union and reinforcing Unionist complacency and the British "guarantee"; as such it would also be unsatisfactory to moderate leaders on the minority side.

An Alternative?

If my judgement is correct, the Joint Studies, far from creating a dynamic process, constitute, in major respects, a confining and even retrogressive framework for the pursuit of Government objectives.

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It would presumably be impossible for reasons, not alone of domestic politics but of Anglo-Irish relations, to formally abandon the process at this point. Any alternative effort by Dublin, therefore, would have to be in addition to and, perhaps even formally separate from, the joint studies approach. This would have to be clarified not alone formally with the British but in public and, ideally, not in terms of the inadequacy of the existing process but rather in terms of the need for additional effort as "the next step".

What would seem to be indicated would be a major effort from Dublin to reach Northern, particularly Unionist, opinion. This would require a systematic and sustained programme of contact at political and other levels as well as directly through the media. A number of "spectacular" gestures which would evidence Dublin's commitment would seem to be in order e.g. the drafting of a new Constitution, the urgent commissioning of energy sharing efforts, the purchase of Northern-manufactured equipment by the Government, a financial commitment by the Government to promote South-North as well as North-South tourism on a large scale.

It would also be necessary to inform the British at political level that the Government does not consider itself confined to the framework envisaged so far in the joint studies

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either for London-Dublin or for South-North dialogue or policy initiatives. Presumably a preliminary indication could be given to the British of this position at official level.

21 August, 1981.