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Current Political Position of SDLP

Background

- I. A delegation from the SDLP met twice with the Government in 1981 - on 6 February and on 7 October. At the meeting in February the SDLP welcomed the outcome of the 8 December 1980 summit meeting. The agreement to commission joint studies was considered a major advance. Mr. Hume suggested to the Government that it adopt a position that participation in an Anglo-Irish Council would involve sacrifices on behalf of the Government and this aspect should be represented as a concession to the British. Of three possible options emerging from the joint studies process - confederal, federal or unitary - he preferred the federal model which would involve a substantial degree of autonomy for Northern Ireland.
2. At the meeting on 7 October 1981 the SDLP informed the Government of the outcome of a major review of policy at a meeting in Carrigart on 19/20 September 1981. Mr. Hume summarised the new policy position under five headings:
 - (1) There was a need for a new North-South framework.
 - (2) No movement was possible while the British guarantee remained.
 - (3) The two sovereign Governments and the various Northern Ireland political parties should sit down and work out a solution.
 - (4) The SDLP would outline the sort of Ireland they consider reasonable. They envisaged a federal Ireland whereby the North would have substantially the same powers as under the old Stormont regime. This included majority rule but the powers, formerly reserved to Westminster, would be transferred to Dublin. An Anglo-Irish Council could protect the matter of citizenship and oversee changes.

- (5) The proposal would be put to the people, North and South, by way of referendum. It would involve a new Constitution in the South.

3. The SDLP faced 1982 with the possibility of regaining the initiative which they had lost because of the hunger strike. They had survived the May 1981 district council elections with 104 council seats as distinct from 112 in 1977. But senior members of the party felt their future depended on a successful political initiative which involved North and South in a new relationship.

4. Mr. James Prior was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 15 September 1981 and on 13 October he indicated the first outlines of a new initiative for Northern Ireland at the Conservative Party Annual Conference. In a subsequent RTE interview Mr. Prior said it was most likely that there would be some sort of Assembly in Northern Ireland with certain safeguards for minorities. On 6 November 1981 the then Taoiseach and Mrs. Thatcher decided to establish an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council. In response to unionist criticism of this move Mr. Prior said in a statement on 13 November: "The Government will continue to seek to put the economy of Northern Ireland on a sounder footing to eradicate terrorism and to re-establish greater control by the people of Northern Ireland over their own affairs. All of this is consistent with the aim of closer relations with the Republic of Ireland".

5. Mr. Prior did not discuss his initiative with the political parties in Northern Ireland until January 1982 but he continued to build up a momentum for it in media interviews, especially in the Guardian and Financial Times. The political atmosphere in Northern Ireland remained tense at the end of 1981 in the aftermath of the hunger strike, the murder of Rev. Bradford M.P. and Rev. Paisley's threats of a "Third Force". The SDLP had its first meeting with Mr. Prior to discuss his initiative on 11 January 1982 and has had two subsequent meetings on 29 January and 26 February. Mr. Prior is to have another meeting with the SDLP in the near future before he decides to go ahead with a White Paper and new legislation for Assembly elections.

SDLP Discussions on Initiative

6. At the meeting on 11 January Mr. Prior outlined his views

on "rolling devolution" and voting by weighted majority. The SDLP responded that it would be very difficult for them to face into an election without any clear guarantee of power-sharing in the Assembly. Mr. Prior asked the SDLP for ideas on how best the interests of persons in Northern Ireland whose primary self-identification was Irish could be promoted in the Anglo-Irish framework. Mr. Prior also floated the concept of "separation of powers" whereby the executive would be headed by him and institutionally separate from an elected Assembly. The SDLP gave some initial favourable reaction to this idea but it was dropped by the British following strong unionist objections.

7. The SDLP's second meeting with Mr. Prior on 29 January was not a good one and they made clear to Mr. Prior that he was offering very little on the key issues of power sharing and the Irish dimension. Mr. Mallon issued a statement on 1 February saying that Mr. Prior's proposals "reduce the Anglo-Irish process to an optional extra". He continued that if speculation about Mr. Prior's plans was correct then "what he is doing is basing his plans on what is essentially the Loyalist and Northern Ireland Convention report of 1975".

8. Mr. Mallon said there was no evidence that a parliamentary tier to the Anglo-Irish Council would be set up. "Failure to pursue this step would mean the Government's attempt to find a solution would again founder because it did not recognise the legitimate claims of the minority". The SDLP vice-chairman, Mr. O'Hanlon, said on 5 February at the Oxford Union that "we would view as unacceptable any solution that did not move forward the day when an Anglo-Irish forum would house T.D.'s, M.P.'s and Assemblymen, discussing problems of mutual interest. We are not interested in a solution that attempts to impose a British identity on the minority. We are Irish - James Prior would be well advised to accept this reality". Mr. Mallon issued a further statement on 5 February that any initiative which did not include the proposed Anglo-Irish parliamentary tier with clearly defined structures, functions and powers would not be accepted by the SDLP.

9. On 15 February the then Minister for Foreign Affairs expressed the Government's serious concern to Mr. Prior about his proposals (both at the level of devolution and the level of accommodating the two identities). But Mr. Prior still seemed to hope that the SDLP would agree to his initiative without any fundamental

changes. In the House of Commons on 25 February he admitted there was a problem of identity but said the continuance of Northern Ireland as part of the Union would be advanced if sensible account were taken of the identity of the minority community.

10. Mr. Hume had an informal meeting with Prior and Lord Gowrie on 23 February and the third SDLP/Prior meeting took place on 27 February. Mr. Hume said that the 27 February meeting was a good deal more positive than his own earlier meeting. Nevertheless Mr. Hume did not feel hopeful about the SDLP being able to work the initiative that was proposed.

11. Regarding the parliamentary tier, Mr. Prior envisaged that it would be set up by the passage of motions in both the Dáil and the House of Commons. In the case of the Commons it would be established by the passage of a joint "Early Day motion". However Westminster would not devolve any sovereignty to the tier under any circumstances. Mr. Prior guaranteed that a parliamentary tier would be established irrespective of whether an Assembly was elected in Northern Ireland within a year. He hoped arrangements could be made "during the course of the summer". His view was that the tier would be a loose association similar to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Participation would be voluntary and it would not be possible to exclude participation by a veto by a majority of the Assembly.

12. The proposed White Paper, Mr. Prior told the SDLP, will recognise that there are two political and cultural identities in Northern Ireland. The British Government will accept the legitimacy of an Irish identity and will ask the minority to recognise the rights of the majority. (It is not clear what is meant by this phrase). Finally the White Paper will support the British Government's belief that the Anglo-Irish talks will develop mutual respect between the two identities.

13. The SDLP noted that there had been some movement but pointed out that words in a White Paper did not necessarily guarantee any real progress. Mr. Prior also mentioned his proposal that three Ministries should be transferred to local control as soon as the Assembly met. Three possible Departments were Commerce, Social Services and Agriculture

and Mr. Prior suggested that the SDLP, OUP and Alliance party might each provide a Minister in a "voluntary coalition". He said that if he was not satisfied that the 70% weighted majority contained sufficiently large minority involvement he would not recommend the foundation of a Department. He said no Unionist/ loyalist/independent grouping of 70% would be acceptable because it would not have cross-community support.

14. There is widespread opposition within the SDLP to the Prior plan as it now stands. The feeling is that once power is devolved every future vote on a Department's administration would be by simple majority except where a confidence vote was forced. Meanwhile an SDLP Minister might easily find himself opposed by votes in his committee and in the Assembly. In such a situation there was no evidence to suggest that the OUP and DUP would not close ranks and vote as a bloc.

15. Mr. Hume said on RTE Radio on 14 March, "when you examine Mr. Prior's proposals in detail they would not provide the basis for peace and stability they are largely unworkable riddled with ambiguities and flaws". Mr. Hume added that the British Government had not come up with anything since the 1974 Sunningdale agreement. The SDLP were, he said, offering proposals to develop the Anglo-Irish process. Mr. Mallon on RTE's "Today Tonight" on 15 March took the same line and said it would not be possible to find a solution solely within Northern Ireland.

16. Mr. Prior's initiative is also facing opposition from the OUP. The party's leader, Mr. Molyneaux, said on 15 March that his party found the Prior plan relating to the Irish dimension, the 70% weighted majority and the "claw back mechanism" completely unacceptable. Together these elements were "far far worse than Sunningdale". The reference to a "claw back mechanism" refers to what Mr. Prior told the OUP at their meeting on 8 March what he would do if the minority decided at some point to boycott the Assembly. Mr. Prior said that if in his consideration, such a breakdown took place, then the powers would revert

to the Secretary of State. Hence the need for "claw-back" powers. The OUP criticised the proposed involvement of Assembly members in the Anglo-Irish parliamentary tier and Mr. Prior admitted that it was designed to narrow the area of disagreement with the SDLP.

17. The OUP have said, however, that they will contest any Assembly elections on the basis of opposition to the parliamentary tier and devolution of powers by weighted majority.

18. Irish Prisoners in Britain.

Earlier this month Mr. Hume said privately that he expects that the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein will, as their next major propaganda effort, draw attention to the position of Irish prisoners in Britain convicted for politically-motivated crimes. Mr. Hume has for the past six months intermittently urged on the British the desirability of moving these prisoners back to Northern Ireland so that they can be visited by their relatives. There are many cases, he said, of real hardship involving families who cannot get to see husbands and fathers who are serving long term sentences. Mr. Hume has hitherto found the British unresponsive.

Anglo-Irish Section
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