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POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS IN BELFAST 21-23 APRIL 1982

During my attendance at the Belfast 2000 Conference (on which there will be a separate detailed report) I met and talked to a number of political figures, and was also in a position to gauge the reaction of some of the leading members of the Belfast business and professional community to political issues.

1. Prior Initiative

John Cushnahan, Alliance Party

He expressed keenness about the Prior proposals and professed to believe that they were even stronger on power-sharing than the 1974 proposals.

Paddy Devlin, Independent

He also supports an Assembly, and the communities coming together within the Province. He spends much of his time attacking the SDLP for not being a socialist party and for not talking to the Unionist community. (I pointed out to him that when it came to boycotting talks it seemed to me it was the Unionists that were the past masters). He said however elections would require him to construct a political base. He was thinking of launching a democratic socialist party with Gerry Fitt. They had had quite a number of discussions with Jim Kemmy, although he did not agree with his two nations theory of the North. I heard Devlin trying to persuade an official Unionist Concillor to create a right-left within the Unionist party, so that they could have 'real politics'!

Dr J Hendron SDLP

We met at my request, and I gave him the note analysing the Prior initiative. He said that when they had come down to Dublin they had been exceptionally unimpressed by their meeting with the Labour Party, whose leader seemed not to have the slightest interest in Northern Ireland. Perhaps they regarded the SDLP as closely allied to Fianna Fail. He referred to the Constitutional crusade by Dr. Fitzgerald, particularly the reference to the 'sectarian state', as disastrous.

He repeated his view that the SDLP would have to participate in elections, because of the inroads that would otherwise be made by the Provisionals, but agreed that it was not necessary to announce this now. He also made a point made by Mr. Mallon last week that they were somewhat embarrassed when asked to articulate an alternative to the Prior proposals. I pointed out to him that the development of the Anglo Irish approach had been an alternative and that with a proper commitment to that, the Prior initiative would not have been needed.

I asked and he promised to think about ways in which there might be cooperation between Belfast and Dublin on inner city renewal. An inner city developer who had helped organise the Conference was very interested in what was proposed for Dublin. Mrs Bannister, the Lady Mayoress, is likely to be succeeded by Mr Patten, another Official Unionist, who is in favour of visits to Dublin (although there is a majority on the Council against at the moment.)

Belfast Businessmen, Civil Servants and Unionist Councillors

Opinion in the business and Unionist community, judging by their representatives at the Conference, appears to be very divided. Many are very opposed to the initiative; others want a return to local responsibility. The fact that Stormont, unlike most Parliaments, is on the edge of the city rather than the centre makes its absence perhaps less keenly felt by the citizens of Belfast.

The arguments advanced against the Prior initiative from this quarter are:

- (a) (Particularly from some Unionist Councillors). The Prior initiative is rubbish. What is required is integration.
- (b) From a Senior Civil Servant in the Department of the Environment. The Prior initiative will not provide stable Government. It is also irrelevant to the major economic issues such as jobs and housing.
- (c) From Sir Denis Myles (Manager, Belfast Enterprise Zone) He thought that the present team of British Ministers was a good one, and of superior quality to the local politicians. He also feared that stability and business confidence would be affected by switches in policy for political motives. Another businessman spoke to me about his good working relationship with Civil Servants, which might be interfered with by politicians. In general there seemed to be a very low opinion of local politicians.

Powerful Belfast papers, such as the Newsletter and the Belfast Telegraph, are both critical of the initiative. The Telegraph in an editorial on 22 April 1982 believes that an Assembly will be little more than a talking shop..

Those in favour of the Prior initiative in the business world are in favour because they want local initiative. Nobody in the course of the conference argued however that an Assembly or a local devolved Government was of vital or critical importance, and the population at large in Northern Ireland would probably be entirely unmoved, if it did not go ahead.

There is no doubt however that Belfast's status as an administrative capital is regarded as crucial to the city's prosperity.

2. Sense of Identity among the Belfast Business Community

Perhaps, as might be expected at a conference of this type, the primary identification of most of the speakers was with Northern Ireland and with Belfast as its capital. The phrase 'our country' was used repeatedly, always referring to Northern Ireland not to the UK or Ireland and 'the province' was used much less frequently. Some speakers however used the term Irish unselfconsciously to refer to themselves. None referred to themselves as British, a term reserved for the people of the mainland, except when talking politics (where the term Ulster British, Ulster Irish was used by one speaker). One speaker from a working-class area thought that older Protestant people felt themselves to be more Irish than the younger Protestants who were more Ulster.

The economic terms of reference of the business community appeared to be Northern Ireland in the first instance, secondly the rest of the UK, thirdly Europe. A Buy Northern Irish Campaign was urged by one speaker! While some comparisons were made with the Republic, it does not appear to loom significantly on their horizons. Sir Denis Myles said he could not understand why American companies chose to go South, where there was a largely agricultural workforce, compared with the abundant skills of the Belfast region.

Barry White, Belfast Telegraph

He spoke and expressed hostility to the Prior initiative, and did not believe any internal solution was possible at the moment. He saw the Anglo-Irish process as offering the way forward, while being critical of the Taoiseach and fulsome in his praise of Garret FitzGerald.

(I spoke up and denied that the Taoiseach was in any way anti-Protestant or hostile to the people of Northern Ireland and said that what was most needed was to get away from black and white stereotypes of each other. I also challenged his assumption that the South had effectively to give up its identity and values if any progress were to be made, by pointing out that the objective should be cultural accommodation not submersion.) His worst case scenario was a repartition, whereby the safety of the Protestant population in rural areas would be held in pawn for the safety of West Belfast which would operate like West Berlin.

He expressed the view that the closer the two populations in the North came to parity (and his unofficial intelligence on the 1981 census was that the 40% figure had already been passed (in 1979 53.6% of births were Catholic) the further the South would draw away from unity, which for financial reasons was not on.

He was of the opinion that over the next 18 years, the Catholics would be no longer willing to tolerate the near monopoly of engineering jobs in Protestant hands.

Philip Woodfield, NIO

He expressed the view that even with a Catholic majority Northern Ireland would still opt for the Union and that the South would then have to renise its assumptions.

3. A Novel Theory on Unity

A Senior Northern Ireland civil servant put to me the interesting theory that what the Unionist middle class was most afraid of was its own working class. They were frightened that their working class would destroy the city and whatever prosperity there was in a way the IRA had failed to do. If there is anything in the theory, it would demonstrate the importance of reaching to the working classes rather than hope to win over a portion of the middle classes (Dr. Fitzgerald's Strategy).

4. Economic Withdrawal or ample Resources

A Unionist Councillor and BBC NI radio made in the couple of days I was in Belfast the charge of British economic withdrawal from the province, principally in relation to employment. This view does not appear to be widely shared in the Belfast business community. On the contrary, there appears to be more than ample resources for health, education, roads and housing. The big economic problem is lack of inward investment and therefore lack of jobs.

I acquired the impression that Belfast has become a virtuoso performer at the 'poor mouth'. Businessmen, Civil Servants and planners talked in a way their counterparts would not do in Dublin, as if financial constraints were virtually non-existent. Slum clearance will be complete in 5-10 years time, undoing completely outmoded images from TV of the early 1970s, and one city councillor said that when they talked about 15% of houses being substandard they were actually referring to the inner city not the whole of Belfast, but it made a better impression with the EEC if one were not too specific. Sir Denis Myles thought that Belfast in terms of housing and social provision would soon be 15 years ahead of Dublin. The British Government have poured money into Belfast by way of social

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palliative, and there seems to be very little left of the famous spirit of self-reliance.

The problems of Northern Ireland or at least of the Belfast area have increasingly little to do with poor social provision, just as the H-Blocks troubles were not primarily to do with lack of physical amenities. On the other hand I have a suspicion that if the troubles died down, or if social unrest elsewhere captures more attention, that public spending in the North may be scaled down considerably, and there is a dangerously heavy dependence on it.

5. Political Influences on the Economy

The biggest influence of the Troubles is inward private investment, which seems to have been largely written off as a realistic prospect by the business sector.

However, many present felt the Troubles were being used as an excuse and as an alibi for high unemployment. Many firms (e.g. textiles) would have closed anyway. It was also felt that a considerable amount could be done by way of initiatives without assuming an end of the Troubles. Indeed, the underlying assumption

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seemed to be that the troubles would not end for a long time yet, though they were more an irritant than a real threat at this stage.

6. The Future of Belfast

Implicit, in the view of most speakers was relatively little basic political change. While some were optimistic about an upturn in the commercial fortunes of Belfast over the next 18 years, others saw little dramatic change. One or two saw the future as bleak and that by 2,00 Belfast could have become like Beirut. While most were committed to Belfast, one businessman said that just because he had a son of 4 did not mean that that boy had a future in Belfast. A civil servant spoke to me of the high level of emigration among the young people of his circle of friends and acquaintances (i.e. Protestant middle class). However, the community divisions do not seem to impinge on the consciousness of the businessmen and professional people or worry them as much as one might expect. Their view of the future, while certainly desiring an elimination of violence, do not seem to require any radical overcoming of Community divisions, not does that appear to be the main thrust of their endeavours. Their thinking seems to be more concerned with creating a politically neutral

area within the existing framework for economic life. However, privately, worries were expressed to me that West Belfast might become a city within a city with its own facilities and amenities to the detriment of the city centre.

Personal Note

I was treated with the greatest friendliness and hospitality by all present (the nearest thing to rudeness being Barry White), and widespread appreciation was expressed for the presence of somebody from the 'august office of the Taoiseach'. There was naturally also some curiosity as to the reasons for my presence, which I explained as a desire for first hand knowledge of the economic and social problems in Belfast.

Martin Mansingh
28/4/82