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European Parliament and Northern Ireland - Update 10 March 1983

(Matters which the Minister may wish to consider are listed on page 6)

1. The Enlarged Bureau of the European Parliament met yesterday to consider inter alia the treatment of a draft resolution tabled by MEPs Paisley and Taylor last November questioning the Parliament's competence regarding Northern Ireland. The Enlarged Bureau is composed of the President of the Parliament, 12 Vice-Presidents (including Paddy Lalor, the only Irish Member) and 7 Chairmen of political groups. The formal question to be addressed yesterday was whether the Political Affairs Committee or the Legal Affairs Committee of the Parliament should handle the Paisley/Taylor text. However, the main business yesterday concerned attempts by British Conservative MEPs to get the Bureau to block the decision of the Parliament's Political Affairs Committee of 24 February last to draft a report on Northern Ireland and to appoint a Rapporteur. After about an hour's discussion it was decided by 16 votes to 2 to authorise the PAC to go ahead with its report on Northern Ireland. The concluding remarks of the President Dankert were along the lines of the following:

"On the basis of the limitations set out in the European Parliament Resolution of June 1981 (an error for May 1981) that the European Parliament could not involve itself in work affecting the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, the Political Affairs Committee is mandated by the Enlarged Bureau to draw up a report on the subject." Dankert also said that this would be done on the understanding that there would be no question of public hearings or visits to Northern Ireland by the Rapporteur unless under the authorisation of the Enlarged Bureau. The two voting against the Bureau's decision were Lady Elles, a Vice-President, and Sir Henry Plumb, Chairman of the European Democrats, to which British Conservative MEPs belong. Newspaper reports this morning indicating that a report on "the political and economic situation" in Northern Ireland was to be drawn up may be based on a phrase used by MEP Joe McCartin in a very recent communication to MEPs on the subject. The phrase was not used by Dankert in his summing up. The Permanent Representation in Brussels report that that the Bureau's decision is in good part attributable to the fact that Irish MEPs are dispersed throughout the major political groups in the Parliament and can therefore influence them in a way that

the British Conservatives, all 61 of whom are in the one group, can not.

2. The British attitude to the PAC's decision to draft a report appeared at first to be uniformly hostile. However, there are indications that some British Conservative MEPs feel that Mrs Thatcher has gone too far in her total opposition to the PAC's decision. The Embassy London report that the major factor behind the Prime Minister's strong negative reaction was that the PAC decision would provide arguments for opponents of the Community within her own party and elsewhere. She may also wish to secure some advantage from the anti-Community constituency in Britain. Mrs Thatcher is, of course, also concerned about what she sees as interference in Britain's internal political affairs. However, the attitude at official level in Whitehall appears to be less clearcut. One official in the NIO has said that the MEP being mentioned as a likely rapporteur for the PAC report (Niels Haagerup) is a "sensible politician" and that there is a case to be made for meeting him and trying to influence his report. He described the essential political question for the British as being whether to maintain an attitude of non-cooperation from the start. In this context it is interesting to note that Lady Elles, the Conservative MEP's initial reaction was that while British MEPs voted against a report in the PAC, they nevertheless accepted that decision. She told a London Times correspondent in Brussels that the British Government would cooperate in the drawing up of a report, if requested, but would not have anything to do with public hearings. There are suggestions too, that Mr Prior's attitude may be more flexible than the Prime Minister's. Speaking to the Commons on 24 February he omitted from his comments a section of his prepared statement to the effect that the Government would not give the PAC any assistance. The initial British reaction to the PAC decision followed BBC reports which effectively gave a Paisleyite interpretation of what had happened. In the interim the British may have adopted a more measured approach based on more accurate information on what the PAC actually decided. However, the Prime Minister was reported in the London Times on 5 March to have repeated her total opposition to the PAC move at a meeting with Conservative MEPs on 1 March. Clearly British

Conservative MEPs felt obliged to follow her orders yesterday. Lady Elles, who yesterday with Plumb strongly opposed allowing the PAC to go ahead with its report, nevertheless is reported to have said after the Bureau meeting that Haagerup, whom she felt would be appointed, would present a "balanced and objective" report. The immediate official British response through a spokesman to yesterday's decision was to repeat their protest that the Parliament had no business interfering in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland and to claim that a report would be of no value. The British Labour Party have to date supported the Government line on the PAC report at Westminster. During the recent visit by a Party delegation to Dublin, their Spokesman, Don Concannon, said that their position was based on Labour's attitude to the Community. However, reports available to the Permanent Representation late last night indicate that John Hume claims that he has succeeded in winning over the British Labour Party Front Bench to his way of thinking about the report.

3. The current state of play regarding Northern Ireland in the European Parliament may be summed up as follows:

- (i) there are now four resolutions before the Parliament calling for reports on discussions in Community fora on Northern Ireland. These were tabled by Messrs Hume, McCartin, Lalor and Maher and have the support of their respective groups (Socialist, EPP, EPD and Liberal/Democrat).
- (ii) Paisley and Taylor, following their original motion in November 1982 denying European Community competence on Northern Ireland, have now tabled various resolutions seeking to highlight problems in Corsica, Wallonia, Thrace etc. as well as what they view as the disadvantaged position of Protestants in this State. The Permanent Representation report that these resolutions are not likely to have any significant impact other than to provoke hostility towards their sponsors. John Hume's offer to co-sponsor a resolution with Paisley and Taylor on the treatment of minorities in all of Ireland was an effective response and the Leader of the Socialist Group Ernest Glinne - a Belgian, apparently told yesterday's Bureau meeting that he had no problem in discussing the

Paisley/Taylor resolution on Wallonia but that it was inconsistent coming from advocates of non-interference in internal affairs by Member States. Paisley and Taylor are now calling on the British Government to go to the European Court over the Bureau's decision and Taylor has further called for a withdrawal of the British Conservative Members from the Parliament.

- (iii) It is likely that Niels Haagerup will be appointed as Rapporteur at the next meeting of the PAC to be held from 14-16 March next. Haagerup is a Danish Liberal MEP, former journalist and expert in strategic studies, who has in recent years chaired an ad hoc group in the Parliament on Northern Ireland. He was reported in the Irish Times of 9 March as saying that he was willing to take on the task. However, he is also being quoted, particularly in the British media, as saying that he does not expect his report to touch on constitutional issues. Indeed the London Times of 5 March quoted him as suggesting that the question of Northern Ireland was "better off in the hands of the Committee" rather than on the floor of the Parliament where Haagerup feels it could lead to open confrontation. The Dane is close in his political views to British Conservatives. It will be recalled that Fianna Fáil MEPs have expressed serious reservations about him and effectively accused him of being pro-British.
- (iv) As pointed out above, some press reports about the precise terms of reference of the report to be compiled have been misleading. In addition to the limitations apparently imposed by Parliament President Dankert at yesterday's Bureau meeting it should be noted that Haagerup will not be bound to pursue the proposals in the Hume resolution or in any of the other resolutions tabled by Irish MEPs. Given his apparent sympathy with the view that constitutional questions should not be embraced by the report he is perhaps likely to take a limited view of his mandate if appointed. In any case, the original PAC decision on 24 February stated that the rapporteur would

refrain from presenting any written document to the Committee before the Bureau had decided on the action to be taken on the resolution by Paisley and Taylor denying the Parliament's competence in the matter.

4. Our public response so far to the PAC decision has been broadly based on the following elements:

- (i) that the Government did not feel it appropriate to comment in detail on a preliminary working decision of this nature by a committee of the European Parliament but that in general any efforts made by the European institutions to deal with the problems of Northern Ireland were to be welcomed;
- (ii) that before commenting specifically we would need to see the detailed terms of reference etc. of the mooted enquiry;
- (iii) if pressed to react to accusations that the Community is interfering in the political status of Northern Ireland our response could be that we would welcome what our European partners might do to encourage two Member States in their efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in this troubled region of the EEC. It could also be pointed out that good relations between Ireland and Britain will facilitate assistance to Northern Ireland from the other Member States.

The SDLP and Fianna Fáil parties have, of course, strongly welcomed the PAC decision.

5. Yesterday's decision is significant in that for the first time a report on Northern Ireland will be prepared for a committee of the European Parliament which by definition is concerned with political affairs. It is unlikely that such a report could be compiled in such a way as to completely avoid the central constitutional question. At official level in the Parliament Secretariat it has been suggested privately that if Haagerup is the rapporteur the ensuing report will contain nothing much. To counter this it was suggested informally that the Government here could supply ideas to the Secretariat on possible roles for the Community. The same official source felt privately that it would be a good idea for the Taoiseach to write a positive letter to

President Dankert about the Parliament's initiative, saying that he would be willing to come and talk to the PAC about Northern Ireland. The Permanent Representation responded in a non-committal and very cautious way to this idea which is, in any case, unofficial. It may, of course, be partly motivated by a desire to enhance the Parliament's prestige by having a Prime Minister address it in the year before elections to that body.

6. The Minister may wish to consider the present situation regarding Northern Ireland in the European Parliament.

- (i) A question of immediate consideration is whether to continue the approach outlined at paragraph 4 above which is one of a generally positive attitude to Community interest in Northern Ireland without detailed comment on or endorsement of the PAC's intentions.
- (ii) It will be necessary to consider the extent and nature of our cooperation with the rapporteur. If it is Haagerup his approach may be fairly minimalist. Should we positively seek to influence the content of the report through political and official channels?
- (iii) Regarding the question of influencing the PAC's deliberations it should be noted that presently the only Irish member is the Fianna Fáil MEP, Paddy Lalor. It may be a matter for political consideration as to whether it would be desirable to seek a nomination for an MEP from one of the Government parties either as a member or a substitute for the PAC. Under the European Parliament's rules of procedure it would probably be possible to have an Irish member of the EPP (or Socialist) group so nominated to replace a member of the same group of a different nationality.
- (iv) The question of the timing of the report's presentation might also be considered. It might be possible to influence the PAC's work so that a report was considered by a plenary session of Parliament during our Presidency

of the Council of Ministers in the second half of next year. This could provide the Minister with the opportunity of addressing the European Parliament on Northern Ireland both as President of the Council and, if he so wished, as Irish Foreign Minister.

Anglo-Irish Section

10 March 1983