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Enclaves, Galway & Wexford

Note on Irish Association Conference
in Dun Laoghaire on 14 October, 1984

The speakers were Chris Patten MP, Parliamentary Undersecretary at the NIO, Viscount Brookeborough, Seamus McGarry, Chairman, Federation of Irish Societies in Britain and Mr. Michael Mates M.P.

1. Mr. Patten spoke for three-quarters of an hour. Among the points he mentioned were:

- He expressed gratitude for the Taoiseach's eloquent expression of sympathy following the Brighton bombing and said the bombing would not change by a millimetre the British Government's policy on Northern Ireland, anymore than it would change the Republic's policy. In a sense Brighton bound us together.
- By way of introduction, Mr. Patten referred to the complex interrelationships between the two islands and said it was "sad and shocking" that Irish literature and history were not studied at any British university. [This point was later taken up by the British Ambassador who said it was the subject of serious discussion in the AIIC].
- The Forum Report was seen by all in the UK as a sincere, bold and honest attempt to understand Unionists, although it was finally flawed because its precise meaning was the subject of "early exegesis" - i.e. there seemed to be difficulty in accepting the concept of consent. For that reason, Mr. Patten was sceptical of how deep the understanding of unionism is.
- There were other hopeful signs like "The Way Forward" in which unionists recognised the need for nationalists to give expression to their culture. He wondered, however, where and how often that expression of sentiment had been put into practice. It seemed to be absent from the controversy over the re-naming of Derry City Council and from the appointments to statutory boards by district councils. Another hopeful sign was the welcome accorded the Prior speech in Westminster on 2 July by the Taoiseach.
- The realities Prior identified and those listed in the Forum Report would together form the framework of the Prime Minister's discussions with the Taoiseach in November. It would be unwise to invest such meetings with too much mystery, significance or expectations, and one could not expect the two leaders to reverse in one day the historical processes which had been at work for generations.

- Mr. Patten wished to record a number of cautionary notes: the depth of Northern Ireland's legacy of distrust had to be recognised in any settlement. There could be no quick panacea ("aspro politics"): any improvement is going to take time. We should be wary of simplistic assessments founded on fear. We will not be frozen into inaction because of the views of those who claim a veto, but do not have a veto, nor because of an alienation which no-one attempts to define. Alienation cuts both ways - it affects both the majority and the minority community.
 - No Government can force on the people of the Republic or Northern Ireland a structure or constitution which they are not yet ready to accept. We should not be too unambitious about the application of reason to Anglo-Irish relations. The two realities basic to any settlement are firstly that none of us can impose on the majority a constitutional settlement they do not want and secondly that a system of Government must be devised which will secure at least the acquiescence of the minority. Explicit and unqualified acceptance of the first reality made it incomparably easier to deal with the second. It would be a "long, uphill haul".
 - our best hope of solving the problem may be the last.
2. Lord Brookeborough, in a shorter speech, made the following points
- Sixty people had been murdered in the Fermanagh area: nearly all were known to Lord Brookeborough and nearly all attacks emanated from across the border.
 - As an illustration of the situation with which Border Protestants were faced, he referred to Dr. FitzGerald's visit to Fermanagh 3½ years ago when he met local Protestants. After dinner, the police informed him that Mr. McIlwaine and four other murderers were five miles away.
 - It was customary to sneer at the Orange Order yet it had prevented any form of retaliation in Fermanagh. (Lord Brookeborough is District Master of the Order).
 - The present verbal bombardment from Dublin was dangerous and irresponsible and it was encouraging the IRA. What was needed was an active, determined "no-initiative". Direct rule should be made permanent and violence defeated.
 - The British Government had built up an understandable distrust among unionists with its unspoken addendum to the so-called guarantee: we hope it won't be long before we slide you into a united Ireland. It had also promised not to talk to the IRA and it had done so. In addition, unionist opinion was not represented at inter-governmental talks between Dublin and London, with the result that the campaign of misinformation about such talks emerging from Dublin contributed to further distrust.
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- No public censure was necessary over the Downes killing. Rather, there should be an apology from Dublin for letting Galvin and his evil men into the Republic. The onslaught by the government on the North's security forces had "evaporated" (sic) the goodwill which had previously existed vis-a-vis the Coalition.
 - There could be no prospect of powersharing. Such institutionalised sectarianism should be put aside as should any institutionalised Anglo-Irish dimension, for the same reason that the SDLP cannot enter the Assembly. Ministerial meetings between Dublin and London should be confined to practical matters, and the Parliamentary tier should be restricted to Westminster and Dublin. More Northern Ireland people should be appointed to the House of Lords. The Assembly should not be abolished but should be let die if it had to.
3. Mr. Seamus McGarry, made the following points:
- There had been a change in the perception of British people in the last 3 or 4 years; they now distinguished between the bombers and the Irish community.
 - Successive British governments had a record of ignoring moderate Irish politicians. The conflict had to be ended and there was an obligation on politicians to find a solution. The ownership of territory was subordinate to peace. More imaginative structures were needed. There had to be a gradual withdrawal of British troops from the streets of Northern Ireland as they were an irritant. Policing had to be normalised.
 - Mr. McGarry referred to the need for an intensification of Anglo-Irish and North-South youth exchanges next year - International Youth Year.
 - He finished by making the point that repressive legislation, supergrasses and the use of plastic bullets lent credence to the charge that Britain was addressing the effects of the problem not the cause. The people he represented wanted a united, independent Ireland with peace and justice for all.

Finally, during questions after the speeches, Mr. Patten reiterated the British Government's recognition of the Republic's "legitimate interest" in what was going on in Northern Ireland and in representing the concerns voiced to it by the minority community.

The afternoon session consisted of an address by Mr. Michael Mates M.P.

Mr. Mates began by referring briefly to the Brighton bombing. He said he had spoken to the Wakehams the night before the attack. The Irish community in Britain would not suffer a backlash for this atrocity, in contrast to attacks in the 1970's e.g. Birmingham. This was due to a new perception that the Irish government and the vast majority of the Irish people abhorred the I.R.A. (Mr. Mates had misinterpreted a similar comment by Mr. McGarry at an earlier session as implying that there would be a backlash).

Mr. Mates said the Forum Report was a major document which showed a willingness on the part of nationalists to bring their ideals into line with reality. He felt the Official Unionist "The Way Forward" deserved more attention than it had received as a move in a similar direction. The SDLP should respond to this document by taking their seats in the Assembly.

The "guarantee" to unionists was not fundamentally, a legal or political commitment. It was a statement of reality - a million unionists could not be forced out of the Union. However, unionists could not expect Britain to underwrite intransigence. Northern Ireland was receiving enormous funding from the Exchequer. The British taxpayer had a right to demand that the unionists show a willingness to seek a political accommodation with the nationalist minority.

Mr. Mates said that normal politics had never existed in Northern Ireland as every election was dominated by the constitutional question. If the parties could begin to work together, on the subject matter of ordinary politics (e.g. roads, bin collection) cooperation would develop. Cross-border cooperation should also be encouraged. Unionists could not have it both ways on this; they could not demand better security cooperation and then seek to prevent the Government from coming to an arrangement with the "Republic".

He then discussed the issue of identities saying that while nationalists might persuade unionists to do away with some symbols of their Britishness they could not expect unionists to abandon their allegiance to the Western Alliance and the defence of Europe.

Finally, he appealed to both sides to allow Britain to act as honest brokers while holding the ring in Northern Ireland.

There followed a lively question and answer session. Dr. Fanning asked Mr. Mates if his concluding remark on neutrality indicated that Britain had an overriding strategic interest in Ireland. Mr. Mates denied that this interest, which was vital during World War II, was a major factor now. He had referred to Ireland's neutrality only to indicate the ultimate stumbling block to accommodating the unionist identity within a united Ireland.

A number of speakers challenged Mr. Mates on his description of Britain as an "honest broker" when it was clearly underwriting the unionist position. Mr. Mates said he had only referred to the honest broker role in relation to its day-to-day role of administering the region, i.e. "holding the ring".

Dr. McGimpsey of the Official Unionists emphasised the openness of "The Way Forward" but suggested the guarantee was a double-edged sword because, he claimed, it implied that Northern Ireland would be forced into a united Ireland if a simple majority should ever favour it. Mr. Mates doubted this reading of the guarantee and noted the restrictions on a simple majority imposed during the referendum of Scottish devolution.

In reply to a question from a member of the Two Traditions group, Mr. Mates said representatives of the minority, by harping on the alienation of the minority, were helping to create alienation. However, he saw no reason why flying the Irish tricolour should be illegal and felt the minority should be free to express their sense of identity.

Mr. Sean Farren of the SDLP explained why his party had not entered the Assembly and claimed that this had precipitated the establishment of the Forum and the change of heart in unionist circles. Mr. Mates argued that this analysis did not explain why the SDLP did not take their seats now and, in any case, the real crisis precipitated by the SDLP was not caused by their abstention from the Assembly but by their withdrawal from the Fermanagh South Tyrone by-election which led to the election of Bobby Sands and Owen Carron and the electoral rise of Sinn Fein.

The session was cut short at 5.15 p.m. because a number of members wanted to go home before the British Ambassador's reception at 6.30.

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