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Discussion with Jim Prior, former Northern Ireland Secretary of State  
16 July 1986

I had some discussion with Jim Prior at a reception at Malcolm Rutherford's this evening.

Prior was rather gloomy about the present situation and, as a general matter, far from optimistic about the Agreement.

As to the present situation he noted the statement and interviews yesterday and today by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr Barry and said that anything Mr Barry said would inflame the Unionists simply because it was he who said it.

As to the Agreement, Prior felt that it had not gone far enough to meet the Unionists. I asked if he was referring to Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution and said that we had felt, at a key point, that we were getting definite message from the British side that they would prefer not to aim for an Agreement which would include movement on Articles 2 and 3 - both because of what such an Agreement would have to contain otherwise and because of the consequences of a failure to achieve change in those Articles in a referendum. Prior commented that I had mentioned something like this to him before (I reported on discussions with him about July? and October 1984 when he seemed less than enthusiastic about the idea of a package including something on Articles 2 and 3). In our present conversation he said no - it would have been nice to get something on Article 2 and 3 if that were possible but that was not what he mainly had in mind. He was thinking rather, for example, what he felt the SDLP should have done once the Agreement was achieved - take their places in the Assembly. Certainly he had been disappointed in the general response of the SDLP.

In reply I touched on the position of the SDLP - that what should come first was agreement between the parties so that there would be a base on which to stand for election to a new Assembly; and I suggested that this SDLP position was given considerable credibility for many people by the fact that the Alliance Party, which had experience of sitting in the Assembly, now took a similar position. Prior listened but he still maintained that he had been disappointed in the lack of "give" from the SDLP in the period since the Agreement.

Prior was generally pessimistic about what could now be achieved in face of the Unionist reaction to the Agreement. At one point he commented that he was afraid "we are back in 1981".

We were joined at this point by Sir Kenneth Newman the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, who was of course Chief Constable of the RUC before Hermon. Prior was just saying that Ministers have been doing nothing in Northern Ireland. (I took him to be hitting directly at Tom King). Newman joining in, recalled that he had once heard a senior British Minister in Northern Ireland correct someone who talked about "movement". The Minister said "what we want is not movement but the appearance of movement". As I moved away Prior continued to talk with Newman and I thought I heard him at one point make a sardonic reference, quoting someone else, to Sir John Hermon as virtual "Gauleiter of Northern Ireland". I did not get the point but it may have arisen from criticism in a sarcastic way of King's position that decisions on marches were a matter for the Chief Constable in his sole discretion.

COMMENT

Prior's general mood seemed to be to say "I told you so . . ." and he seemed ready to make some snide comments about the lesser figures who had followed him in the job in Northern Ireland. Granted that the Assembly was put in place under his auspices it is understandable perhaps that his criticism of the SDLP should focus on their unwillingness to enter it after the Agreement and that he should express his pessimism about the present outlook by equating it with the situation in 1981 before his Assembly proposals were introduced.



Noel Dorr  
Ambassador

16 July 1986