



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Townsend's Visit to Britain

Feb. 1986.

Anglo-Irish Agreement - SDLP position

3/2/86

SI9003.

The British Government, who do not seem to have been prepared for the negative reaction to the Agreement by the Unionists, now want to rescue the situation by giving concessions to the Unionists. Besides pushing us on security and the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism they have been trying to coax and coddle the SDLP into making concessions. There is considerable pressure from the British for the SDLP to make some gesture towards the unionists which would involve making progress on devolution and a possible entry by the SDLP into the Assembly. The SDLP have indicated that they are willing to sit down and talk but unionists must not make it a precondition of such talks that the Agreement be recinded. (See attached John Hume's February letter to Prime Minister Thatcher and Commons Statement 26 November 1985).

The SDLP are also under pressure to make some declaration of support for the security forces. John Hume in his speech in the Commons on 26 November indicated that the SDLP will give their full and unqualified support to the police force in impartially seeking out anybody who commits a crime in Northern Ireland. For the SDLP the problem is that the security forces have not always acted impartially and this is one of the problems which the Conference has to address. The SDLP see their ability to give unqualified support to the police force as intimately bound up with the question of public confidence in the administration of justice (which is specifically mentioned in Article 8 of the Agreement). Action to improve this confidence will greatly assist the SDLP in being able to give public and unreserved support to the police force. Two points where action could now be taken are in relation to the Stalker Report and in a Police Code of Conduct.

At present the SDLP are aware that their own Community are very happy with the Anglo-Irish Agreement but the feedback from them is that they need to see it working to redress the grievances. Issues such as the Flags and Emblems Act and unaccompanied UDR patrols still cause resentment and they continually ask when these matters will be resolved. The SDLP feel they have made all the gestures they can and doubt anyway that any gesture from them would help at present given the current intransigent posture of the Unionists.

A.P. 17/2/85.

Letter from John Hume MP to Prime Minister Thatcher

Dear PM,

I understand that you are due to meet the leaders of the Unionist parties in the near future. There have been some calls recently for "gestures" towards them from the SDLP. Apart from the fact that I do not believe that they are the sort of people who would appreciate "gestures" from ourselves, I do not believe at the moment that they are listening seriously to anyone and in their present mood would be likely to reject any offer, thereby making dialogue more difficult in the future when they pass through the present phase.

However I think it important that you should be aware of our position on the two areas where there appears to be some concern. The SDLP are willing to enter into discussions with the Unionists on Devolution or any matter that pertains to peace and stability, and having reached agreement with them on the form of Devolution, to go then to the Electorate in an election to a new Assembly and put the Devolution Agreement before them. I am sure that you will appreciate the strength of such a position if for the first time we have a united approach to the Electorate.

Secondly the SDLP believe that the Anglo-Irish Agreement creates for the first time the framework of equality in which a genuine process of reconciliation can begin. We believe that in practice this means that there must be a willingness on our part and on the part of the people that we represent to play the fullest possible part in all aspects of life in Northern Ireland and in all institutions.

In particular we want to play the fullest possible part in the institutions of law and order. The Agreement provides for rapid progress in this area and we look forward to such progress.

In our view it is only by such a reconciliation process and by working together to build, our community that we will ever break down the barriers of prejudice, hatred and distrust that have disfigured this part of Ireland for so long. The building of trust born of working together as equals is in our view the only way to diminish the distrust and prejudices of centuries.

I would of course like to meet you myself in the near future to elaborate in more detail on our position but in the meantime I thought that you might find the above of some value in advance of your meeting with the Unionists.

Yours sincerely,