



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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8 July 1987

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Northern Ireland Debate at House of Commons

Dear Assistant Secretary

1. Further to my telex earlier today regarding Secretary of State, Tom King's speech in the Direct Rule debate the remainder of the debate was marked by the failure of the two Unionist leaders to endorse the Task Force proposals and by John Hume's positive presentation of the SDLP position. Following the debate the Unionist leaders eased their sense of embarrassed indecisiveness by agreeing to meet with NIO officials for tentative talks about talks. With Ian Paisley away to Strasbourg tomorrow and on holidays for six weeks from Tuesday this holding response should see the Unionist leadership through the Summer and beyond.
2. Observers in Westminster are unsure about the motives of the Task Force authors but suspect a mixture of political opportunism and genuine concern for political patronage. However, most see what movement there is as a direct result of pressure from the Agreement and think that even more of the same will be required before there is a major change of ~~event~~ among Unionists. Dennis Murray of BBC NI believes that Peter Robinson and many of the DUP feel that Paisley is discredited and new leadership could provide better results. Murray speculates that Robinson wants a return to "Prod Rule" of Northern Ireland and to achieve it London and the SDLP must be painted as intransigent which would justify the loyalists seeking a confederal deal with Dublin to allow them run their own affairs.
3. This theory has been aired before and the major question mark is whether the Unionists would have the nerve for such turmoil. Certainly the Task Force's findings on Unionist willingness to contemplate leaving the UK are not representative of average Unionist views but of those who are vehemently against the Agreement. (Molyneaux as much as made this point in his speech tonight). Most Unionists might prefer to sulk under Direct Rule and the Agreement rather than risk major constitutional changes.

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4. If the Task Force had hoped to out-manoeuvre London and the SDLP the performance of Paisley and Molyneaux tonight did not help. Although the tone of both leaders' speeches was (by normal standards) non-confrontationalist their indecisive comments on the Report betrayed insecurity about the attitude of Unionist voters and their own judgement.
5. By contrast the SDLP acquitted themselves well in Westminster terms. McGrady made a well-received maiden speech and Hume said that his party would be willing to go before a "Commission" and give its views. As for talks "we are more than willing to take part" he added forcefully. Similarly King and Mawhinney (who is handling political matters instead of Stanley) were as conciliatory as possible. For example Mawhinney said that if there was agreement about devolution amongst all parties "we would have to consider what that meant for the working of the IGC". Such a statement was clearly designed to be taken many ways. Speaking to Mawhinney afterwards he was happy enough that dialogue between the NIO and Unionists has been resumed by the tentative talks about talks.
6. Many of the OUP MP's are wary of the Task Force proposals. Molyneaux doesn't like Frank Millar and Martin Smyth and Clifford Forsythe were kept in the dark by the Task Force. Smyth is concerned that McCusker will get political advantage from the Report and would probably be happy to see the whole business deferred. As a political organisation with a solid Orange Order base the OUP relies less on generating political activity than does the DUP. John Taylor's speech was notable for its mild tone and modest enough proposals for a NI Committee and the abandonment of NI legislation by Order in Council.
7. With Summer holidays rapidly approaching in British politics the view of one participant is that the ball has been kicked into the long grass by Paisley and Molyneaux and the search parties will take their time.
8. The underlying danger remains, however, that protracted talks about talks through 1987 will interfere with the implementation of the Agreement and undermine nationalist morale.

Yours sincerely

pp *Not Kelly*
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