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BÉALFEIRSTE

5 August 1987

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Assistant Secretary
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Dear Eamon

When John McConnell of the Political Affairs section of the NIO called to the Secretariat this morning, I had an opportunity to discuss with him his views about the present position in the Unionist community. He also spoke about some other matters on which we are reporting separately.

He continues to maintain close contact with Frank Millar and has some contact with Robinson. He has also had discussions in recent days with Martin Smyth and with Cecil Walker and was speaking earlier this week with Ken Maginnis.

He said that Molyneux and Paisley will resume their talks with officials on Paisley's return from holiday. He would expect the talks, which will involve Bloomfield and Andrew but not Burns, who is on holiday, to resume next week in London.

He believes that there is a very strong urge in the unionist community, which is shared by a large number of SDLP supporters, for devolution. Most unionists genuinely believe if they can find the right mechanism that devolution on an acceptable basis is achievable.

Molyneux is engaged in an effort to reassert his leadership. It was the threat to publish the full report of the Task Force which brought him to the current talks with Government officials and it is only the continued threat to leak the elements of that report critical of Molyneux's and Paisley's leadership which hold him to the talks. Molyneux in the past ensured his leadership by letting his followers know that only he could deliver in Westminster. He continues with this practice and, in addition, is reporting Archbishop Eames as saying that he (Eames) has been led to believe in his talks with an Irish official that the Irish Government is prepared to put the Agreement on the table. According to McConnell, Molyneux is using Eames in the same way as he used his connections at Westminster to hint to his followers that he and only he can deliver the two Governments. McConnell was, inter alia, critical of Eames who he said could not be trusted. He also said that Eames reports everything to Molyneux. [We did not indicate any knowledge of the substance of the Archbishop's contacts with our side.]

According to McConnell Molyneux has not raised the future of the Agreement with his British interlocutors. He believes Molyneux will try to gain achievable, but modest, goals such as

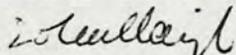
changes in the way legislation is handled at Westminster. He would then try to present such changes to his followers as the maximum achievable whilst ignoring the Agreement and the desire of the Task Force for a Conference to discuss devolution.

The Task Force (Millar, McCusker and Robinson) and their supporters, particularly Sammy Wilson, believe that they have the key to political progress in Northern Ireland. They feel very vulnerable and at present are concerned that they will not attain their goal which is a respected and respectable place at a conference table. According to McConnell they want a conference at which "nothing is off the table". They accept that constitutional nationalists in Northern Ireland now believe that Irish unity can only be achieved when nationalists convince unionists that it is the best way forward. What the Task Force wants to do is to be able to say that if they can persuade nationalists that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is useless then they could, as it were, negotiate the Agreement away. But the Task Force, however, accept that they are not likely to persuade nationalists that this is the case and are prepared in practice to say that the fundamental issue should be placed to one side and that talks should begin at a conference table about devolution.

I put it to McConnell that there was a clear implication in what he was saying that the Task Force and their supporters would be prepared to negotiate devolution with the Anglo-Irish Agreement in place as at present. He said that that is the case. However, the unionists need to be able to say publicly that the Agreement can be negotiated away at the conference table. In other words nothing is excluded from the agenda. Privately they accept that during those negotiations they would find that the Agreement is not negotiable because nationalists would not be prepared to accept that it should be negotiated away. They could not, however, accept that as a precondition. McConnell, thinking aloud, thought it might well be necessary for the two Governments at some stage to indicate that the Agreement could be reviewed in the light of whatever emerges from a conference on devolution.

Returning to the current talks between Molyneux, Paisley and British officials, McConnell said that the two Unionist leaders are determined to keep the members of the Task Force away from the talks. He does not believe that Molyneux and Paisley on their own can deliver the unionist population. If in their talks with officials Molyneux and Paisley succeed in delivering the aim of the Task Force - a conference on devolution with nothing off the table - McConnell believes they will remain as leaders of their parties. If they do not succeed he thinks that Molyneux could go and perhaps also Paisley.

Yours sincerely



D. O'Ceallaigh