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EXMIN 74/32

Copy No:

MINUTES OF EXECUTIVE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 28 MAY 1974 AT 11 15 AM IN
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS, STORMONT

PRESENT:

Mr Faulkner (Chief Minister)
Mr Fitt (Deputy Chief Minister)
Mr Napier (Law Reform)
Mr Baxter (Information)
Mr Bradford (Environment)
Mr Currie (Housing, Local Government and Planning)
Mr Hume (Commerce)
Mr Kirk (Finance)
Mr McIvor (Education)
Mr Morrell (Agriculture)
Mr R Cooper (Manpower)
Major Hall-Thompson (Chief Whip)

Mr K P Bloomfield }
Mr P A Sythes) Secretariat

Mr T M Roberts - Head of Press Services

A G E N D A

1. The Emergency Situation

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1. THE EMERGENCY SITUATION

The Chief Minister summarised the position as seen by him and by his Unionist colleagues - the Army operating a minimal petrol and oil supply system, the Belfast gas plant no longer supplying gas, the power stations in process of shutting down with the prospect of a total black-out for at least several days even if the Army could partially restore functioning, water supply, and sewerage services at grave risk, food distribution in jeopardy and feed distribution to farms stopped.

He saw only two options. First, to attempt to "break" the strike, either by sitting it out and involving the community in severe hardship, including loss of life and intolerable damage to industry and commerce, or by progressive intervention in which the Army would run more and more of the essential services. This could result, at best, in prolonged stalemate with unacceptable hardship to the population and severe damage to the economy. He could not accept this option.

Second, the possibility of negotiating, whether direct with the UWC or with the politicians, or indirect through intermediaries. The Secretary of State and the Minister of State were both strongly opposed to any form of negotiation. He and his Unionist colleagues were resolutely opposed to the sacrifice of the economy and the life of Northern Ireland for the maintenance of a position which was clearly and increasingly unrealistic.

He had given long and earnest thought to the possible options during the weekend and had more immediately taken into account the factual appraisal of the likely pattern of events which had been given to him by the Permanent Secretaries. He and his party colleagues were convinced that the proper option was to seek agreement from the Secretary of State to the initiation of discussions through intermediaries.

In opening the subsequent discussion the Minister of Commerce expressed total disagreement with this conclusion. In his view the Executive, having asked the Secretary of State for certain action and having been assured of the Army's capacity to follow through with any consequentials, should stand firm. There were fundamental political principles not only for the authority of the Executive, but for British authority in Northern Ireland. He was convinced that if power could be restored the public would get back to work. He would not resign.

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The Deputy Chief Minister recalled that the Executive had made a united request to the Secretary of State to which he had responded. He was therefore entitled to loyalty from the Executive. If not the result would be a very hostile United Kingdom - no Harland & Wolff, no Short and Harland, no Dundonald. He did not want to see Northern Ireland dragged down into the mire. He saw no possibility of a change of heart by the strikers who wanted to bring down the Constitution. He did not see how a mediator could talk to the strikers with any hope of making a change. The Secretary of State was prepared to talk to politicians but they obstinately wanted him to make the first move. He still believed that there was a vast residue of people who wanted to work and wanted to support the Executive. He thought that a vast number of Protestants did not want to live under Craig and Paisley.

The Minister of Law Reform did not agree with a policy of confrontation. He was deeply concerned that if the Executive failed Northern Ireland might not ever get the chance again to have devolved government. There would be widespread unfavourable reaction of public opinion in Britain, throughout the world and in the South. The strike had gained and was still gaining support because the public felt that the Secretary of State was being intransigent. The Prime Minister's speech on Saturday had been a disaster. Another basic thread running through the minds of Protestants was that the opinions of Protestant workers had never been taken into account. He saw as the only course open continuation in office with the Army keeping as much of the essential services going as possible and to start mediation, whether the Secretary of State liked it or not. Such a course might turn the tide towards the Executive especially if the Executive were to be seen as not intransigent.

The Minister of Finance spoke in favour of mediation and suggested Sir Frederick Catherwood or Lord Grey - the former as an economist and industrialist and the latter as barrister, a constitutional expert and former representative of the Queen. Both had wide knowledge of Northern Ireland and were highly respected. He considered that they would be fully acceptable to everyone.

The Minister of the Environment thought that it was a disastrous misjudgement to have thought that the strike could have been broken. It was the Executive itself which had pressed the Secretary of State to take a strong line and the result had been a pan-Protestant strike. He considered that

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there was still a possibility of coalition government if the Executive were to agree immediately to some sort of discussions. There were only two courses, the first to press on with attempts to break the strike and the second, to talk. The Army had obviously made it clear that the first course was not a feasible one. He had no doubt that the Executive should talk, otherwise the country would slide into anarchy.

The Minister of Agriculture emphasised the point that time was not available for further thinking and talking. Every hour the situation was worsening - the situation on the farms was becoming desperate, food supplies and milk production were threatened and basic services such as water and sewerage were in danger. All these were in the hands of the UWC.

The Minister of Housing emphasised that he was not speaking from a party political point of view. The situation was extremely serious in every term but the suggestions put forward seemed to him to be capitulation, although the use of intermediaries might make that appear not quite so blatant. He compared the situation with the Germany of the Weimar Republic. He feared the present movement was towards a fascist take-over and reassertion of Protestant ascendancy which would never be accepted by the Catholic population who would be driven into the arms of the IRA. Civil war would be inevitable. He advocated immediate progress towards Sunningdale II. At that stage when control had been asserted and some direction shown, the Executive could bring in mediators. The Executive had charted a way and should brazen it out.

The Minister of Education agreed that the Executive should not resign but should show a willingness to talk. This would not be a victory for the UWC but an initiative which would be well received by the general public who would welcome it not as a sign of weakness but of responsible action.

The Minister of Manpower Services thought that there was a reasonable chance of negotiating with the tanker drivers to achieve full distribution of petrol and fuel oil. This could lead to a de-escalation. He agreed that the strike could not be beaten by head-on confrontation. He thought that progress could be made area by area if the Army could move over to a more active role, for example by preventing the UWC from issuing passes.

There was some further discussion in which other Ministers took part.

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The Chief Minister summed up by saying that there was not a concensus view, but a majority view, that the Executive should open communication with the strikers, preferably by way of mediation. He would report that view to the Secretary of State.

The Minister of Commerce stated that he did not favour that course of action.

(The meeting adjourned at 12 30 pm and reassembled at 1 35 pm).

The Chief Minister reported that he had spoken to the Secretary of State who had said clearly that he was not prepared to agree to mediation. The Chief Minister had then offered his resignation and those of his Unionist colleagues, and the Secretary of State had accepted them. The Secretary of State had then requested that the leaders of the other two parties should speak to him.

Ministers exchanged good wishes and expressed their mutual sorrow that the great co-operative and, to that point, very successful effort which had been made by all of them should have ended in this way. They regretted that on this last occasion they had not been able to act in complete unity as they had invariably done before on so many difficult issues. They agreed that they would do everything possible to avoid all personal or political recrimination and that they would not deviate one jot or tittle from the principles on which the Executive was founded.

Office of the Executive
Stormont

3 June 1974