

Note for the record

cc P/S Chairman

Dr Oliver

Mr Blackburn

Mr Corbett

File copy MW

Meeting with SDLP 19/1/76

Present: Chairman Mr Fitt  
Dr Oliver Mr Hume  
Mr Blackburn Mr Currie  
Dr Hayes Mr Devlin

1. Chairman welcomed the delegation and thanked them for coming. Mr Devlin spoke in warm terms of Chairman's standing in the Convention and Community and suggested he should take a more positive role in the next stage of the Convention.
2. Mr Blackburn outlined the position in relation to recall of the Convention and pay of members, which he said would continue until at least May 7. Mr Devlin spoke of the position of SDLP after the failure of the Convention. He was convinced that the main UUUC strategy was based on the destruction of the credibility of SDLP and the belief that within a year of the failure of the Convention SDLP activists would have been forced out of politics, leaving the field to UUUC. Mr Hume expressed the fear that the vacuum would be filled by Provos, and ultimately also by loyalist paramilitary groups leading to a bloody sectarian conflict. Mr Devlin also alleged that NIO was still intent on negotiations involving paramilitary forces on both sides and would welcome the disappearance of the present generation of politicians.
3. Mr Fitt agreed with Dr Oliver's assessment of opinion at Westminster, especially the isolation of UUUC. However loyalists refused to recognise this and Paisley and Powell had an interest in inducing failure of the Convention as a prelude to integration. He thought SDLP had no more to give, and any movement in the recalled Convention must come from UUUC - and of this there was no sign.
4. Mr Currie said they had hoped during the Convention for some initiative by Mr Paisley. This had not come. They had gladly agreed to discuss Mr Craig's proposals, and were still convinced of his honesty. After the Convention ended, there had been the hope that the UUUC, and especially the Official Unionists such as John Taylor, would reject Paisley - but this had not happened either. There was therefore little point in talking further.

5. Mr Hume said they had moved very far from the basic Nationalist position, and had had little credit for this. They had entered the Convention believing that loyalists were worried about being tricked into a United Ireland. SDLP had indicated their acceptance of the State of Northern Ireland, and were willing to ask the people of the Republic to recognise it too. Then Loyalists had changed their ground to demands for a British system. SDLP had shown how the British system could accommodate coalition - they had even been prepared to consider voluntary coalition in the belief that it was enforced power sharing that UUUC objected to. In each case UUUC had shifted ground. There was little doubt in his mind that they simply wanted power for one community and would not be satisfied with any compromise. In the meantime SDLP had had a main plank swept away in the rejection of the Council of Ireland. They had no more to give, and were in danger of being discredited and upstaged by the Provos. Only if they were in a position to command the support and respect of the Catholic community could they contribute to the restoration of stability and order in a period which would be very violent and in which they would be exposed to great personal danger.
6. Dr Oliver pointed out that the Report had been rejected, and that no settlement could emerge which did not attract the support of SDLP. The reference in the White Paper concerning the desirability of maximising agreement were an implicit criticism not only of UUUC, but of other parties, including SDLP, and the Convention staff. He asked SDLP to take a constructive view.
7. Mr Hume said they would prefer, rather than engage in a meaningless charade, or to engage in fruitless public bickering, to end the Convention without waiting for a full month, during which there would be a dangerous political vacuum.
8. Dr Oliver said there were four ways of proceeding, by plenary session, by committees, by inter-party talks and by mediation by the Chairman. He favoured a judicious mixture of the last two - and there was now a fifth option - direct intervention by S of S.
9. SDLP expressed a preference for inter-party talks as a means of discussing the matters referred back by S of S. Mr Devlin hoped for continuing involvement of the Chairman.

10. Agreed to advise 2.15 pm on 3 February as the time of the first meeting.
11. Press statement agreed with UUUC was approved and released.
12. Mr Hume expressed concern that Para 24(b) seemed to be pushing Convention in direction of a local govt. Committees System. Dr Oliver said that in the context, he thought committees were to be considered as part of a wider system, and not as an end in themselves.

[SDLP appeared to be very dispondent - they would engage in talks because they had no other choice than to appear flexible and constructive, but with no real hope of success.

After the meeting Dr Oliver informed Mr Currie of the possibility of clerical assistance provided by the Clerk's Office. Mr Currie was grateful for the offer and agreed to consider taking advantage of it if the inter-party talks developed in any useful way.]

L.

M N HAYES

20/1/76