

① Mr Bell 88/10
② POL 8/10

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E. R.

PAB/908/RE

Mr Chesterton

- cc: PS/S of S (I&B)
- PS/Ministers (I&B)
- PS/PUS (I&B)
- PS/Mr Bell
- Mr Marshall
- Mr Wyatt
- Mr Harrington
- Miss MacGlashan
- Mr Eyers, RID, FCO
- Mr Tatham, Dublin

NORTHERN REACTIONS TO THE TAOISEACH'S PROPOSALS
FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

I attach the piece I promised on the above subject.

S. J. Leachy

M. P. D E S BLATHERWICK
Political Affairs Division

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NORTHERN REACTIONS TO THE TAOISEACH'S PROPOSALS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

1. Dr Fitzgerald promised on 27 September that he would try to remove sectarian institutions in the Republic and delete from the Constitution the Republic's claim to Northern Ireland. His declaration of intent has caused remarkably little stir here in the North.
2. The response of Catholic/Nationalist politicians has been predictable. The Provisionals and the IIP condemned the Taoiseach's ideas as irrelevant if not a betrayal of Republicanism; only the removal of the "British presence" would enable Irishmen, Protestant and Catholic, to come together. They echoed Fianna Fail's criticism that Dr Fitzgerald had by his statement acknowledged the Unionists' right to opt out of a united Ireland. The SDLP were taken aback. Most found themselves in a dilemma, caught between a wish not to offend the Dublin Government and a desire to echo the IIP's arguments. Hume kept very quiet. One or two, such as Austin Currie, welcomed what the Taoiseach had said.
3. Only the Alliance Party and WPRC were enthusiastic: they found the Taoiseach's ideas constructive and realistic.
4. Unionist politicians were grudging or hostile. The DUP pointed out that most Unionists wanted the Republic to make changes in a ^{different} area - extradition. Dr Fitzgerald's initiative, said Mr Paisley, was "an attempt to show the acceptable face of Dublin at the next Anglo-Irish talks": nothing would alter Northern Ireland's determination to remain British. By dropping the claim to the North, Dublin would merely normalise relations between the UK and the Republic, as between two foreign countries. For the Official Unionists, Mr Molyneaux made the same point. He went on that the Taoiseach was wrong to believe Unionists had a burning desire for Irish unity, provided he made it attractive; the great majority in the North wanted to remain within the UK. The least hostile public comment came perhaps from Rev Martin Smyth, the Orange Order leader: the removal of the constitutional claim, he said, could at least set some Unionist fears/ ^{at least}

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5. These reactions were predictable, given the Unionist politicians' antipathy to the Republic and their fear of making any move which their rivals could misrepresent as indicating willingness to contemplate a united Ireland. But their statements also reflect the deep conviction of Northern Protestants that they are British, and their genuine resentment that anyone should question this.

6. In private people from both parts of the community have been more ready than the politicians to welcome the Taoiseach's declarations as the first step in a courageous attempt to improve relations between North and South, and a refreshing acknowledgment that things in the South need changing at least as much as they do in the North. But there is little enthusiasm from either side for what the Taoiseach has said, partly because people have been preoccupied with the winding-down and end of the hunger strike, as well as with the more immediate problems of life (unemployment, security); and partly out of scepticism that, when it comes to it, people in the South will prove ready to slaughter their sacred cows. Ordinary Unionists at present have their heads firmly in the sand. Like the Labour Party Conference's decision to seek a united Ireland by consent, the Taoiseach's words have brought only a modest and temporary chill to Unionist spines. The truth is that Unionists are unwilling even to accept the validity of the debate which Dr Fitzgerald has started because to do so would open an argument the implications of which most are deeply unwilling to face - and will refuse to face unless they are forced to do so.

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