

NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL REVIEW: 4 - 17 JANUARY 1982

A: INTRODUCTION

1. Comments made by Lord Gowrie during an interview with the "Belfast Telegraph" on 13 January sparked off considerable controversy. During the period there has been much press speculation that the Secretary of State is considering a form of "rolling devolution" for the Province.

B: NORTHERN IRELAND

(i) Political

2. In an interview with the "Belfast Telegraph" on 13 January, Lord Gowrie (Minister of State, NIO) remarked that direct rule was a deeply unsatisfactory mode of government; in a forthcoming initiative the Government would be saying: "Here is the form of government we propose, now get on and operate it. If we can't get agreement we would do it anyway." He said that he was not in favour of power-sharing: "It only makes sense in a form of UDI and I don't think Northern Ireland is a self-contained political unit." He also stressed that the Government would continue to co-operate with the Republic "whatever the pressures on us to drop it" and advocated (as a personal opinion for the long term) dual Irish/British citizenship: "Why not have people living in the North, who regard themselves as Irish, administered both by Ireland and Britain?" An NIO spokesman later commented that the Secretary of State and Lord Gowrie had "made it clear on every occasion on which they had met members of political parties that the Government was examining various options. Lord Gowrie was outlining some of those options. The Government had not made up its mind on the way forward on devolution."

3. Lord Gowrie's remarks on dual citizenship were predictably welcomed by the SDLP and the IIP (Hugh Logue (SDLP) said they represented the most progressive and enlightened thoughts to have emanated from any British Minister with responsibility in Northern Ireland) although unionists reacted angrily. Ian Paisley advised Lord Gowrie to "Get your green Republican hands off Ulster", while the UUP remarked "Britain cannot impose any structure of

vernment on Northern Ireland, where they must govern, either as a full and equal part of the United Kingdom, or try establishing a devolved Parliament which meets the requirements of the majority of people here ... Lord Gowrie may find arguments about nationality and allegiance sterile but he will find that upon such issues depends the success or failure of any proposals which Mr Prior may make."

4. During the period there has been increasing press speculation (culminating in an interview which John Hume gave to RTE on 17 January) that the Secretary of State is considering the idea of "rolling devolution" for the Province. According to Mr Hume, the executive would initially be led by the Secretary of State, who could appoint a broad-based team including members of an elected assembly. The assembly itself would have separate powers and would be constructed along congressional lines with strong committees and powers of investigation.

5. The continuing disruption of council business by UUP and DUP councillors was widely condemned, eg on 5 January, by Belfast City Councillor John Cushnahan (Alliance) who urged the Secretary of State to consider setting up independent commissions to counter the "irresponsible antics" of unionist groups. Billy Bleakes, chairman of the Official Unionist Councillors Association, defended the action, claiming it was an effective method of pressing for greater security measures and more devolved powers.

6. A meeting of the Unionist Councillors' Association was called in Belfast on 9 January, but due to adverse weather conditions only 32 out of 150 UUP councillors attended. The group accordingly did not reach a decision, but the full Party Executive, which was also meeting, decided to instruct councillors to abandon the protest. Many Unionists who had been unable to attend the meeting were angry with the decision, especially Harold McCusker's "Frontier" Group who are often critical of Molyneaux' leadership. McCusker himself used the occasion again to attack the leadership and called the decision "typical of the do-nothing leadership which the Party offers the people in Northern Ireland". He continued: "Our leaders are extremely good at telling us we are being betrayed, at telling us the snakes at the Foreign Office are betraying us; that the danger

an, Mr Prior, is betraying us and what his real motives are. But once they spell all that out to us they say, "but do nothing about it"!

7. Mrs Norah Bradford, widow of the murdered South Belfast MP, called a meeting at her home on 11 January in a bid to get agreement from the unionist parties on a "Unity candidate" for the vacant seat. The meeting was said to be amicable with agreement in principle on the desirability of unionist unity, but it was decided to refer the matter back to the UUP and DUP constituency associations. DUP leader, Ian Paisley, attended, but Jim Molyneaux (UUP leader) stayed away on the grounds that the matter was one for decision by the South Belfast association, without reference to the party leadership. Frank Millar (UUP Press and Information Officer) said the following day that "an agreed candidate would be a sham and would disguise the real difference between us ... South Belfast presents both parties with the opportunity to test the views of the electorate without the risk of handing the seat to non-Unionists." On the other hand John Taylor MEP (UUP) warned on 14 January that if the UUP did not pick the correct candidate for the seat then it could end up with no Parliamentary representative in the City".

(ii) RUC

8. The Chairman of the Northern Ireland Police Federation, Alan Wright, resigned on 14 January after the Federation's central committee had been sharply rebuked publicly by the Chief Constable for allegedly discussing the establishment of a security force outside the RUC at a meeting on 18 November, four days after the murder of Rev Robert Bradford.

9. In the letter to the Police Federation, which was made public on 4 January, Sir John Hermon said any discussions about setting up a "force outside the RUC or RUC(R) was manifestly improper and highly damaging to the standing of the RUC". He continued by criticising the way in which a motion of "no confidence" in his leadership had also been raised at the meeting. Many members of the committee were unaware in advance that such a motion was to be proposed, and no attempt was made, as required by regulations, to consult the members of the force on their views. (The motion of "no confidence" was narrowly defeated by one vote.)

10. Ian Paisley (DUP leader) later criticised the Chief Constable for being "out of touch" with his men, and published a copy of the minutes of the meeting. The Police Federation subsequently issued a statement saying they were appalled that the minutes had been "circulated in an un-authorized manner and used for political purposes or as a weapon to embarrass the police service". Alan Wright subsequently withdrew his resignation and decided to continue in office after receiving a vote of confidence from his committee.

C: INTERNATIONAL

(i) Operation USA

11. Mrs Bradford, who is taking her husband's place on the joint UUP/DUP propaganda trip to the USA, said on 10 January that she hoped to put across the message to the American people that the present troubles in Northern Ireland are a struggle between Communism and Christianity.

D: MISCELLANEOUS

(i) The Economy

12. The Secretary of State announced on 6 January an increase of some £90m in 1982/83 over the planned level of spending, which should lead to 9,000 new jobs. The only political party to respond entirely favourably was the UUP, who welcomed "any relief from our chronic unemployment and housing conditions". John Hume (SDLP leader) commented that the package was clearly insufficient to solve the deep-rooted problems of the Northern Ireland economy.

CPL

Northern Ireland Office

26 January 1982