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NOTE FOR THE RECORD



cc - PS/Secretary of State (B&L)
 PS/PUS (B&L)
 PS/Sir E Bell
 Mr Merifield
 Mr Angel
 Mr Boys-Smith

① Sir Ernest 28/9
 ② Mr Caplan
 ③ Pul

VISIT OF FORUM DELEGATION TO NORTHERN IRELAND

1. A ten strong delegation from the New Ireland Forum visited Northern Ireland on 26 and 27 September. The delegation included former Foreign Minister, Brian Lenihan (Fianna Fail) and Dublin TD Maurice Manning (Fine Gael). Coinciding as it did with the Maze prison break-out, the visit attracted rather less media interest than might otherwise have been expected but nevertheless provoked a fairly angry response from members of the DUP.
2. The delegation visited Londonderry, Belfast and Newry meeting representatives of the Church of Ireland, the Methodists and the Corrymeela Community. The delegation was received by the SDLP Mayor of Londonderry and held talks with three members of the Alliance Party in Belfast.
3. The visit got off to a bad start when a planned meeting with Presbyterian ministers in Dungannon was cancelled apparently because the churchmen only realised at the last minute that the delegation represented the Forum. A spokesman for the ministers claimed that they had expected the delegation to consist simply of "interested folk from the South" and had no idea of the true purpose of the visit.
4. The delegation ran into trouble in Londonderry where a crowd of DUP supporters, led by Assemblyman Gregory Campbell, gathered outside the Everglades Hotel waving Union Jacks and singing as the visitors arrived. Two members of the Forum group, Seamus Mallon (SDLP) and Brian Lenihan were involved in a minor scuffle with the crowd but neither was seriously hurt. Newspaper reports that the RUC were not present at the time are untrue: in fact, the RUC were on the scene and are investigating the incident. We understand, however, that members of the Forum delegation have told the police that, as far as they are concerned, no further action need be taken.
5. Even the meeting with members of the Alliance Party, led by Donnell Deeny of Belfast City Council, caused some controversy and, in a statement issued last night, Mr Oliver Napier stressed that those who had taken part had no authority to speak on behalf of the Alliance Party.

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He described their actions as "unwise" and "not in the best interests" of Alliance and repeated that his party's official attitude to the Forum was one of non-participation. DUP spokesman, Sammy Wilson, made it clear that Mr Deeny's decision to meet the Forum delegates did not represent the views of the unionist majority on Belfast City Council and should not be regarded as a success for the Forum in breaking down unionist opposition to its "unwarranted interference"

6. Before leaving Northern Ireland, Mr Lenihan described the visit as "worthwhile" and said that it had been undertaken so as to ensure "that the problems and concerns of people living in the North could be taken into account in the Forum's deliberations". From a PR point of view, the visit was not a complete failure and probably did the SDLP no harm: the Forum members can, at least, say that they came to Northern Ireland and made an effort to listen to the unionist point of view. But the fact remains that they have yet to receive any serious input from representatives of the main unionist parties and, despite rumours that one or two unionist politicians may be prepared to give evidence in private, it seems increasingly unlikely that they will. The Forum will presumably have to content itself with contributions from other sources: today's Irish Times, for example, reports that members of the Forum heard evidence last weekend from a group of five Belfast Protestant community workers at the Glenree Centre for Reconciliation.

Hewitt.

S G Hewitt
PAB

28 September 1983

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