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2/PA - PDG

Mr Re

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B) *B*
 PS/Mr Scott (L&B)
 PS/Mr Needham (L&B)
 PS/PUS (L&B)
 PS/Mr Bloomfield
 Mr Brennan
 Mr Merifield
 Mr Chesterton
 Mr Carvill
 Miss Elliott
 Mr Bell
 Mr G Hewitt
 Mr Ehrman

BRIAN FEENEY: SDLP

I had lunch today with Brian Feeny of the SDLP. We discussed a wide range of matters including the prospects for a successful Anglo/Irish agreement; the possibility of achieving political progress after any such agreement; the situation on Belfast city Council and the current unionist protest about Sinn Fein. As usual, I made it clear at the outset that PAB were not privy to the content of current Anglo/Irish negotiations: for his part, Mr Feeny boasted that he had been fully briefed by Mr Hume and that he therefore knew precisely what the agreement would contain.

2. Against that background, the following points from our conversation are worth recording:-

- a. The SDLP Conference is booked for 8, 9 and 10 November. Feeny was confident that the Summit would be held a few days before. The Conference would be a triumph for Mr Hume. His address as party leader would be broadcast live on RTE. There would be some doubters in the party, but the overwhelming majority would welcome the agreement. The leading spokesmen would avoid presenting the agreement as a final settlement of Northern Ireland's problems and would also refrain from calling it "a first step" towards their eventual goal. Instead, they would describe it as part of a continuing process.
- b. The agreement itself was of enormous symbolic importance, but what really mattered was implementation. In this context, Feeny could see two potential difficulties. First, he was worried that unionist pressure would persuade the British Government to adopt a "softly, softly" approach. Second,

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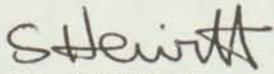
- He was concerned that Irish Ministers might not always represent the nationalist case in precisely the same way as the SDLP.
- c. There was bound to be some form of unionist protest action. The politicians were talking about a legal challenge to the agreement and the possibility of by-elections. Neither of these seemed likely to have much impact. Of more concern was what would happen at paramilitary level. The SDLP were concerned that the UVF would undertake a series of sectarian murders and would attempt to get protestant mobs on to the street. He hoped the security forces would be ready to deal with the threat and would be able to prevent the IRA from portraying themselves - as they had done before - as the only effective defenders of the Catholic population. At present, the Loyalist community was not particularly concerned about the agreement but that could rapidly change once the implications of the agreement were seen.
- d. Belfast City Council was a shambles although the Official Unionists had behaved sensibly at the last meeting to prevent the suspension of business. There was an unspoken agreement between the SDLP and UUP aimed at keeping Council business running on a reasonably even keel. The SDLP refused to support some of the more outrageous moves made by Sinn Fein: as a quid pro quo the UUP declined to back the wrecking tactics of the DUP. Feeney expected the next meeting, scheduled for 4 November, to be adjourned in protest at the Anglo-Irish agreement. If the meeting went ahead, he did not expect the Council to vote to close the Ardoyne Community Centre: the risk of surcharge was too great to allow UUP councillors to back this week's decision of the Leisure Services Committee.
- e. Feeney was worried about Craigavon Council. He hoped we would appoint commissioners if the row continued. I explained the legal problems and asked what other action we could take to meet unionist concern about the presence of Sinn Fein. He replied that proscription would be a major boost for Sinn Fein and would seriously erode support for the SDLP. Sinn Fein would be seen as martyrs and would increase their electoral appeal. Some kind of declaration was a possibility but only if introduced for the next round of elections. Democratic politics would be

undermined if the Government were seen to be changing the rules because they did not like the election results.

- f. Feeney could see no prospect of an internal political agreement. He had discussed the matter with a number of unionist politicians and their attitudes had clearly hardened. If power-sharing were on offer, the SDLP would take it but they could accept nothing less. He expected the Assembly to be wound up in the next few months as it became clear to everyone that unionists were not prepared to work a system in which nationalists were given a role.
- g. He was grateful for our help in removing the sectarian graffiti from his local, North Belfast primary school. I said I would pass his thanks to Mr Scott who had taken a personal interest in the matter. He was also pleased by the attitude of the local police who had mounted discreet but visible patrols in the area to prevent further attacks on the school premises. I took the opportunity to encourage him to deal directly with the local RUC divisional commander on issues of this kind.

Comment

3. Mr Feeney was amongst a group of SDLP politicians who were briefed on the Anglo-Irish negotiations by Mr Hume about 10 days ago. It is interesting to note his confidence that an agreement will be reached and that the Summit date has been fixed. I feel sure that he is deliberately playing down both the prospects of internal SDLP difficulties and the strength of unionist protest action. At this stage, it would clearly be in the interests of the SDLP to do so. As for his other comments, they were all largely predictable and I would not regard his views on internal political development as being particularly significant. The point here is that, like others in the SDLP, he has not really addressed himself in any real detail as to what might happen after an agreement. In this context, it is ironic that he should complain about the way in which an agreement will put the Irish Government in the driving seat and leave the SDLP on the side lines. Mr Feeney believes that an agreement will show that constitutional nationalism can work and thereby undermine support for Sinn Fein. Perhaps he is also beginning to realise that after an agreement his party will still need a role in Northern Ireland if they are to retain their electoral position.


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Political Affairs Division
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