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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS PAB(86)6

Reaction to the Day of Action

1. Two issues have dominated media coverage of the Loyalist action on 3 March and public and political reaction to it: the scale, extent and apparent effectiveness of intimidation; and the perceived refusal of the RUC to take appropriate steps to prevent intimidation or obstructions.
2. Intimidation was widespread and took a variety of forms. Pickets took note of the registration numbers of cars whose drivers crossed their lines. Other cars were kicked and beaten and their occupants abused. In North Belfast a number of vehicles were hijacked and set on fire. Employees at a meat processing factory in Moira and a textile factory in Portadown were forced to leave in the face of hostile crowds who, in the latter case, finally set the premises alight. Nine police families were forced to leave their homes in Lurgan, and attempts were made to intimidate RUC homes in Ballymena and East Belfast. There are many similar reports from throughout the Province.
3. An almost equal number of reports from all parts of Northern Ireland and from a wide range of sources complain of inactivity on the part of the RUC when faced with physical barricades, picket lines or cases of manifest intimidation. These reports have been underlined and brought to national attention by media coverage - notably of a civil servant haranguing a police officer for failing to assist him in entering the Stormont Estate, and of what appears to be an RUC landrover being driven out of the way in order to allow a tractor and trailer to block a road. There have been allegations that members of the RUC watched barriers being built without intervening; that the main Belfast-Newry road was allowed to remain blocked for five hours at Dromore despite the presence of policemen, including a number of senior officers, who turned back traffic rather than confronting the demonstrators; that the RUC were under instructions not to interfere with 'official picket lines' and that people attempting to cross picket lines were left entirely to their own devices and received no RUC support and protection.

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Public statement and private conversations indicate much surprise, shock, concern and dismay at the pattern of events. Although most people expected that intimidation would be used and that some violence could take place, the scale and extent of both has surprised everyone (except those immediately responsible for it).

5. Molyneaux and (to a lesser extent) Paisley may also have been taken aback. It is clear that they had no control over the way in which the Day of Action was organised or run. Molyneaux's words in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 26 February now have a hollow ring '... there must be no violence in the course of this operation on Monday. That means more than just sitting back and hoping there will be no violence; it means that those of us who are elected representatives have to make very, very sure that the protest, whatever form it may take in our different areas, is rigidly controlled, and that there is a weeding out of any irresponsible people who have on previous occasions brought shame on the Unionist cause in general.' The absence of Mr Molyneaux from television screens during the evening of 3 March and his replacement by Harold McCusker as the UUP spokesman was taken in many quarters as a sign of the weakness of his position. Equally clear is the emergence of Peter Robinson as a figure of great influence in the Unionist movement as a whole

6. It is significant that in later statements Molyneaux has been at pains to disassociate himself from the excesses of 3 March and to be unequivocal in his condemnation of violence. He was 'horrified, shocked and disgusted' by the violence and intimidation and said it was 'a tragedy that some elements chose to behave in this manner. It does horrific damage to the Ulster cause, and those who committed these atrocities were very aware of what they were doing'. Molyneaux said subsequently that he had no intention of participating in any further strikes. There are indications that other UUP members share this view, and are privately expressing support for Molyneaux's efforts to distance himself from the wilder elements of the Unionist leadership.

7. Paisley has expressed his regret that violence and intimidation were permitted to take place, and has said that there are no plans for further strike action (though he did not exclude this type of action if required). He also claimed that Republican elements had

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launched attacks on Loyalist pickets in parts of North Antrim. Peter Robinson was wholly evasive in dismissing violence, blaming the Government for introducing the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the first place. He also suggested that the oil and nails spread on the M1 motorway in the small hours of Monday morning might have been the work of the NIO dirty tricks department.

8. Seamus Mallon, Deputy Leader of the SDLP, described the day as one 'of shame for the RUC' and claimed that some RUC officers had blatantly abandoned their duty demonstrating that they were as weak-willed now as they had been during the UWC strike of 1974. John Cushnahan and members of the Alliance Party reported widespread intimidation and RUC inactivity, and it is understood that at one stage during the day Cushnahan had to make great efforts to persuade some colleagues (some of whom had been personally assaulted) from formally announcing their withdrawal of support from the RUC.

The Media

9. National and local newspapers carry firm condemnations of violence and intimidation. Editorials from the three Belfast newspapers for ... 4 March are attached. The Newsletter acknowledges that 'there is little cause for jubilation on anyone's part' but goes on to state that 'given that no one was intimidated into taking an active part in the protest (although there were many allegations of unfair pressure being put on people to make a passive contribution to it) it can be said that the opportunity to show the true face of Ulster was presented yesterday'. The Irish News talks of 'loyalist madmen' and 'political ostriches' and bemoans the fate of those who were intimidated. 'What a tragedy, what a betrayal for them that they did not get the support which the London and Stormont authorities had pledged would be forthcoming.' The Belfast Telegraph considers that the violence of the Day of Action was as disastrous as it was predictable; and condemns those responsible. It warns, however, that 'If the Anglo-Irish Agreement is only enforceable by force, it is not worth proceeding with, because it will achieve nothing.'

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Other Developments

10. A document suggesting a formula for devolved government in Northern Ireland which would be a substitute for further implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, allegedly having the support of both communities, has been produced following confidential discussions between UUP elder statesmen Harry West and Austin Ardill and SDLP ... members Paddy O'Hanlon and Ben Carraher. *(Copy attached). Neither group has the support of its party organisation and it is understood that the SDLP members have incurred the wrath of their party hierarchy. Molyneaux referred briefly to these talks to the Prime Minister at the 25 February meeting but has yet to pronounce on the document.

Comment

11. The 'Day of Action' has been widely seen as a shameful exhibition of all the most unpleasant features of the Northern Ireland scene. Although it was reasonably successful in achieving its aims - though only because of the use of intimidation - many are saying that it has told the NIO and the Government nothing that they did not already know.

12. Despite attempts from Molyneaux and Paisley to demonstrate that there was no split between them, the cancellation of their planned joint press conference on 4 March is not without significance, and the suggestion that this was because no agreed line could be found is likely to be correct. The joint statement issued later on 4 March reaffirmed the leaders' resolve to oppose the Agreement and to intensify the withdrawal of consent of the unionist community from the Government. The leaders pledged to 'hold talks with our members at every level to give this further effect.' The statement is clearly an attempt by Molyneaux and Paisley to re-establish their authority. (It is worth noting that Molyneaux acknowledged on 4 March that there were 'worrying signs that our control might be slipping and our authority eroding.') The indications that many UUP members support Molyneaux's line and share his revulsion at the outcome of 3 March are also significant. But it is too early to draw any very hopeful conclusions. Peter Robinson's emergence as a hard-line leader is not encouraging.

13. There is genuine concern from many quarters about the behaviour of the RUC which was seen to be inadequate at best and collaborative at worst. At present, outrage at the violence and intimidation appears

* London copies will follow
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to be stronger than concern about the RUC's shortcomings, and the fact that they came under fire during Monday evening may have helped restore some sympathy. Nevertheless any prospect of the SDLP expressing support for the RUC must have receded still further, and retaliatory action by nationalists against the police cannot be ruled out.

14. The future of the West/O'Hanlon initiative is bleak, but it seems that it is unlikely to command the support of either the UUP or the SDLP, and it presupposes the abandonment of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Political Affairs Division

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