

E.R.

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cc PUS (Bar).M.

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Mr Bloomfield

As invited, I attach some Notes incorporating the pith and substance of what I said at our meeting with colleagues yesterday morning. Since I have been involved almost continuously in meetings since then, I have largely confined myself to reproducing my original notes and quickly expanding them to cover the main points relevant to my thesis which I made in the course of the ensuing discussion. I fear that the crudities and infelicities reflect this process but the theme emerges, I hope, reasonably clearly. As I said at the meeting, I was speaking very frankly and, I appreciate, somewhat provocatively from outside the mainstream of the political work in the office. I felt that this might be helpful.

W G H QUIGLEY

20 March 1986

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NOTES

1. I find encouraging features in the present situation. Clearly the Agreement has broken the logjam:
 - it has introduced the sharp discontinuity which was needed to stimulate political development;
 - it has accomplished radical structural change;
 - it has gathered considerable, if wary, support within the nationalist community in NI;
 - it has secured international understanding and support for the combined efforts of the two Governments.

2. Even more interestingly, you can see the changes of tone and attitude in the most surprising quarters - like the editorials in the Irish Times and the columns of people like Mary Holland and John Healy. The main characteristic of these writings has been the effort - mostly successful - to empathise with both communities in NI and to seek a strategy which embraces both.

3. On the Unionist side, the surprising thing is not the hostility but - notwithstanding the day of action - the fact that its more virulent manifestations have been so long in appearing and have been kept in check. It would be wrong to misread this as a sign of weakness or lack of resolve, though it probably reflects hesitancy as to what to do next. There are already emerging signs of a significant realignment within Unionist politics, most clearly spelt out in Frank Millar's recent speech. Though all parties may not yet realise the ultimate logic of their positions, the struggle is between those prepared - for all kinds of reasons - to compromise to preserve the Union and those who would trade the Union for control - as they would perceive it - over their own destinies.

4. There is, therefore, a nice judgement to be made. Can Unionists be left to battle it out for the soul of Unionism in the expectation that good sense will prevail? I

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would be very pessimistic about the outcome. They see themselves as an embattled and enduring people. Their historical self-vision is one of an endless repetition of repelled assaults. Rationality and prudent self-interest have gone out the window. Ignoring elementary tactical considerations, they have taken up their initial position in the last ditch.

5. I believe that the position of the more responsible among them now resembles that of the SDLP pre-15 November 1985, at risk of being overtaken by those who practise violence or who are prepared to use those who do. Constitutional Unionism has manoeuvred itself into a position where it too needs to be thrown a lifeline.
6. There are two major risks which attend the handling of Unionist opposition to the Agreement:
 - (a) That attempts will be made to reassure the Unionists by diminishing the significance of the Agreement. That spells disaster on the nationalist side and would threaten to rob the whole process which is reflected in the Agreement of its *raison d'etre*. Moreover, it would not carry credibility with Unionists.
 - (b) That it will be assumed by the British and Irish Governments and the SDLP that explanation and clarification of the Agreement can bring the Unionists into negotiation or reconcile them to the Agreement. Nor do I believe that a Grand Committee at Westminster or greater transparency in respect of Conference proceedings will cut much ice. In fact some of Government's suggestions emphasise or reinforce the very centrality of the Conference in NI affairs to which Unionists object. To seek to achieve symmetry by parallel arrangements for consulting Unionists may have short-term attractions for Government but risks institutionalising community division.
7. The merit of the Agreement lay not in its precise provisions but in its ability to start a political process. It constitutes scaffolding. It is not the structure itself, though it may ultimately be incorporated in the structure. For the reasons I have mentioned, I believe that the Agreement has started the process. The risk now is

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that the Agreement itself will stand in the way of the full development of the process. I am therefore worried by the steady reiteration of the Agreement by both Governments as a simple article of faith, as if constant invocation of its objectives will achieve them.

8. A distinguished commentator on Irish affairs (Oliver MacDonagh) has a vivid passage about Irishmen's repetitive view of history and how this inclines them - perhaps in defensive wariness and from fear of failure - to prize the moral as against the actual and the bearing of witness as against success. There is a great deal of bearing of witness going on - on the highest of moral ground - by both Governments and the SDLP.
9. I have said on other occasions that the two Governments need to concert a political strategy which embraces both communities. I agree that a measure of toughing it out is necessary and that the holding of the Conference last week, for example, made an important point and was right. But toughness is not enough. Not to respond to the kind of thinking in the Frank Millar speech would, I suggest, be a major strategic error. To put the Agreement in effect on ice whilst talks proceed on a defined timescale could be represented as clear evidence of the Agreement achieving what it had not been possible to achieve hitherto - getting the parties to stop skirmishing and finally talk turkey about the future Government of NI and about UK/NI/ROI relationships. Simultaneously one could discontinue the Assembly, thereby demonstrating that the short-term gains were not all one-way.
10. The window of opportunity has opened more quickly than could have been expected. The strategy and tactics appropriate for a long and damaging war of attrition therefore need to be urgently revised. The window is likely to be narrow. Experience teaches that the habit of civil disobedience, once acquired, is difficult to eradicate. Violence tends to be self reinforcing. It is vital to try to stop the slide into a situation where conventional politics become irrelevant.
11. The fact that an ambitious Unionist politician like Frank Millar should feel able to speak so unambiguously about the unpalatable compromises facing Unionists if they engage in dialogue (and that he should not be immediately disowned) indicates that, if the lifeline is thrown to constitutional Unionism, there are those still capable of grasping it. It was significant that Millar himself should acknowledge that, if talks

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failed, Government would obviously continue with the Agreement. Properly presented, it is difficult to see what either Government has to lose. The Agreement might not emerge unscathed but it already incorporates provision for review, and agreed changes which made its objectives more realisable need not be resisted. For Unionists, as the Millar speech recognised, the start of dialogue, far from being an easy option, would introduce them to a very difficult and testing process. It would, however, provide a focal point around which to mobilise those prepared to compromise in the interests of their main objective - preservation of the Union.

12. The history of the last 15 years is of moves made too late to achieve their intended effect. This can happen again if immobilism sets in around the Agreement. It is vital for Nationalists as much as for Unionists that the equality of status and esteem achieved by the Agreement should be given practical expression in a Northern Ireland which works and is viable in institutional terms. There is a grave risk that this will not be secured by the present strategy and tactics.