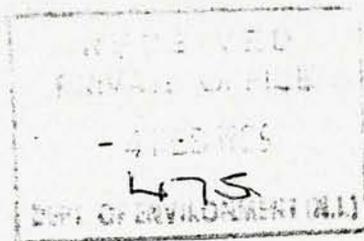


DEVELOPMENTS FOLLOWING THE BY-ELECTIONS



1. Unionist leaders have been successful in maintaining united opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, though there are indications that there are divergences of view both between the DUP and the UUP/^{and}with the UUP.

Parliament

2. Molyneaux and Paisley announced in a joint statement on 27 January that they and their colleagues were prepared 'as MPs... to play a full part in the campaign to rid Ulster of Dublin interference ... but it would be inappropriate to expect Unionist MPs to neglect the Province and revert to a normal range of Parliamentary activity. If the Agreement continues to be implemented Unionist MPs could not in all conscience provide, by normal House of Commons practices, a veneer of democracy to the form of joint authority which the Agreement established'. The leaders refused to be drawn on this statement and what action they intended to take remained unclear. Many rank-and-file Unionists regard the return to Parliament as, in the words of the unionist morning paper 'expecting the bloody infantry to carry on fighting in the council trenches while their officers are carousing in the enemy's tents at Westminster'. However John Taylor (UUP), arguing that a Westminster boycott would be betraying the trust of the electorate, said that he would remain in the House of Commons unless or until Mr Molyneaux advised otherwise. Withdrawal from Westminster was also criticised by Mrs Dorothy Dunlop, UUP Assembly Member, who considered that such action was tantamount to 'flirting with UDI'. The 14 unionist MPs were however united in boycotting Northern Ireland Question Time in the Commons on 30 January.

The Northern Ireland Assembly

3. The Assembly, without its Alliance Party members, met on 29 January to hear that the Committee on the Government of Northern Ireland (the so-called Grand Committee established to examine in detail the Anglo-Irish Agreement) had completed its first report. The Report concluded that the Anglo-Irish Agreement 'must lead to a radical reappraisal of the Assembly's future and all proposals for the future of Northern Ireland' and that any further consideration of the Catherwood proposals

for devolution could not take place until the Agreement was dismantled.

4. The Assembly also resolved that the six statutory Committees should 'investigate the possible implications of the Anglo-Irish Agreement for the work of the six Northern Ireland Departments'. This appears to be an attempt - of questionable validity - to meet the criticism that the Assembly is failing to carry out its statutory scrutiny responsibilities.

District Councils

5. A meeting of Unionist Councillors on 1 February confirmed that their suspension tactics will be continued and that the 18 unionist-controlled councils will all refuse to strike a rate on 15 February. The Councillors seem likely to argue that arrangements for governing Northern Ireland following the Anglo-Irish Agreement are already so undemocratic that the appointment of Commissioners to run District Councils will make little difference and, indeed, will strengthen their argument that they, unlike the Irish Government and the SDLP, have no say in the administration of the Province. Although there are still rumours of disagreement with this line in some quarters, an attempt by a UUP Councillor in Coleraine, in conjunction with Alliance and SDLP support, to break the boycott failed when his motions were quickly voted down by the other Unionist members of the Council.

Public Bodies

6. Alderman William Corry, UUP member of Belfast Education and Library Board, refused to join 10 of his colleagues in walking out of the Board's meeting on 27 January. He remained behind to chair the meeting and now faces disciplinary action, as does Mr James Stewart, former Lord Mayor of Belfast (but no longer a Councillor), who failed to join a Unionist boycott of a Northern Ireland Fire Authority meeting on 28 January. However these indications of less-than unanimity among unionists are isolated and infrequent.

Alternative Proposals

Taylor, McCusker and Maginnis (UUP)

7. Unionist leaders have during the week floated a variety of proposals for alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Ken Maginnis (UUP)

said on 29 January that although opposition to the Agreement should continue; it was incumbent on 'all of us who have been given this massive support to come up with a viable alternative.' John Taylor (UUP) supported the Catherwood proposals, calling for devolved administration at Stormont through a Committee system where all constitutional parties which opposed violence could be represented and share top posts in line with party strengths. Some sort of North/South body could then be created to allow Northern Ireland politicians to meet Dublin TDs 'about matters of mutual interest.' In an extended radio interview on 30 January, Harold McCusker (UUP) said that Unionists had a new willingness to achieve a political settlement within Ulster, and suggested that once the Anglo-Irish Agreement was dismantled, and following the re-establishment of devolved government 'acceptable to all the people' a tripartite conference could be established where London, Dublin and Belfast representatives could meet to 'oversee the totality of relationships within these islands.' During an RTE radio broadcast on 2 February, Peter Robinson (DUP) put forward proposals for a conference or conferences between the British and Irish Governments and the political leaders in the North to work out a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement. His proposals, like those put forward by McCusker and Taylor, are conditional on the scrapping of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

8. It is significant that Taylor and McCusker are two of the three leading contenders to succeed Molyneaux as UUP leader (Martin Smyth is the third). Robinson is Paisley's heir-apparent in the DUP. All three statements represent a degree of kite-flying at a time when there are signs that the UUP at least is internally disorganised and uncoordinated. //

SDLP

9. The SDLP predictably have firmly rejected any idea that the Anglo-Irish Agreement should be abandoned to allow talks on alternatives to commence. The party's reactions to the initiatives range from John Hume's welcome for what he sees as some consideration of political progress taking place within the Unionist camp, to the statement of an unnamed senior member of SDLP to the effect that he was unimpressed by Robinson's proposals, that Unionists were attempting to buy time, and that they had not worked out a strategy to oppose the Agreement.

10. The SDLP sensitivity about the UDR was demonstrated in the nationalist reaction to the shooting incident at Kildress, Co Tyrone, on 27 January. The action of the Commander UDR in immediately withdrawing from operational duties those involved in the incident effectively defused controversy, but the underlying strength of feeling about the UDR ^{was} well illustrated in the Irish News editorial of 30 January, ... attached at Annex A.

Alliance Party

11. John Cushnahan has repeated that his party will continue its boycott of the Assembly until its full scrutinising role has been properly restored, and has urged the Prime Minister to take the initiative in instituting talks on devolution. He welcomed some of McCusker's ideas, but pointed out the absurdity of demanding the dismantling of the Agreement as a prerequisite for talks on devolution.

The Press

12. The Newsletter and Irish News continue to support their respective camps, while the Belfast Telegraph, though still uneasy about the Anglo-Irish Agreement, advocates the conciliatory approach. Its ... editorial of 27 January is attached at Annex B.

Comment

13. It is significant that Taylor, Maginnis, McCusker and Robinson all appear to have recognised that the Agreement cannot simply be removed; something must be put in its place. However the quite different views put forward from within the Unionist ranks as to how this might be achieved suggest that there is no consensus view. The SDLP's assessment that the views so far advanced are merely kite-flying exercises may be fairly accurate. Unionist comments should certainly not be interpreted as any weakening of their resolve to oppose the Agreement. But the closer harmony of view between McCusker and Robinson is interesting; it may presage some realignment of forces within the Unionist camp and will almost certainly cause friction between McCusker and his UUP colleagues.

ANNEX A.

A regiment in doubt

THE future of the Ulster Defence Regiment is in more doubt than ever before following the shooting of two men outside a Tyrone public house.

It is not just the incident itself which has posed serious questions; for the regiment's reputation will have been tarnished further by the decision not to suspend the soldiers involved. As will be obvious to even the most partial observer, had someone other than a member of the security forces taken part in the incident, the treatment would have been very different.

So, no prolonged visit to the Castlereagh Holding Centre for these soldiers; instead, they are confined to non-operational duties with no loss of pay and are able to go about their daily business. The authorities should have realised that such a decision would further erode public confidence for it places the subjects of the inquiry in a position of privilege and increases the belief that a presumption of innocence has already been made.

It is unfortunate, to say the least, that such an impression should have been created before the inquiry had got off the ground and it will not lessen the pressure on the police to complete it within the shortest possible time. They should be helped by the established facts: the only guns involved were carried by the UDR patrol and the two victims were backseat passengers in a car which had not left the pub car park.

One expects that the welcome intervention of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Peter Barry will concentrate the minds of those making the inquiry and his continued interest will increase hopes that this time we will see justice done.

However, it should be stressed that no matter what the result of the inquiry, the overwhelming belief within the nationalist community — and an increasing number of unionists are coming to share it — is that there is no place within Northern Ireland for a force like the UDR.

Viewpoint



Monday, January 27, 1986

The way forward

NOW THAT the election is out of the way, the solid unionist front is beginning to crack. Tomorrow 14 of the 15 MPs who quit Westminster in protest will be back to take the oath, but afterwards three very different approaches are being canvassed. One MP from each party has given notice that he is on a boycott course, while another is undecided. Another group, in the middle, is prepared to wait and see what the Government response to Thursday's "No" vote is, while a third faction, represented by Messrs. Molyneux, Powell and Taylor, is determined to carry on the fight at Westminster.

Such confusion can only weaken the unionist case, and disappoint its 418,000 supporters. They expect to see unity maintained, and a coherent strategy emerge, by which the popular rejection of the present Anglo-Irish agreement can be translated into parliamentary action. They know the dangers of a policy of boycott for politicians whose whole philosophy is based around retention of the link with Britain. Once unionists decide to stand aside, removing themselves from the essential business of persuading Government that it is on the wrong road, they begin to lose control of their destiny, and create a vacuum which wilder paramilitary elements may fill.

It is a time for cool heads, to give Westminster a chance to make a rational response to the by-elections, once the Westland affair has left the centre stage. Initially, there may be a disposition on the part of Government and Opposition to concentrate on the positive aspects of the poll, like the nationalist swing to non-violence, and ignore the size of the anti-agreement vote. But MPs will in time understand the realities of a 70 pc vote against Hillsborough and be obliged to come to terms with it. They will know that the accord cannot produce the results expected of it, against such overwhelming opposition, but they need unionist help to arrive at an alternative.

That is why it is the job of unionist MPs to stick to their task at Westminster: of playing politics rather than merely shouting defiance, and winning friends for their defensible position. They have the strength of Thursday's vote behind them, and if they can hammer out an acceptable agreed policy they will be listened to. Strong hints were emerging from Government, at the week-end, that although the Anglo-Irish agreement still stands, Mrs. Thatcher is much more interested in devolution than in reinforcing permanent joint consultation with Dublin. If unionists can show they have a definite plan — which, unlike Catherwood, cannot be seen as rolling majority rule — they may get a sympathetic hearing.

But if they go off in all directions, or produce devolutionary schemes which nationalists could instantly reject, they will continue to lose the political battle. And if they do, and are forced into civil disobedience and attempts to make Northern Ireland ungovernable, they will find they have handed over power to the paramilitary organisations, who have a much more coherent, if destructive, plan of campaign. That is the scenario which all should be attempting to avoid, and not just on the unionist side. Compromise is the only way forward for a divided community, and those who expect the Anglo-Irish agreement to be scrapped in its entirety are courting disaster.

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