

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Note of a meeting on Friday 13 March

Present: Mr Burns (Chairman)
Mr Bloomfield
Mr A W Stephens
Mr Elliott
Mr Chesterton
Mr Spence
Mr Wood
Mr McConnell
Mr G Hewitt
Mr S Hewitt
Mr Bell
Mr Kirk
Mr N Hamilton
Mr Rickard
Mr Priestly) Secretariat

Present Political Situation

1. Within Northern Ireland, there had been few developments since the last PDG on 11 February. The unionist 'Task Force' was still engaged in discussion of alternatives to the Agreement. The unionist reaction to the Secretary of State's response to the petition had been on predictable lines; there was no sign of a new phase in the campaign of opposition to the Agreement. In the Republic, the new government had been installed on 10 March. Messrs McSharry, Collins, and Lenihan would be the most significant figures in a government otherwise dominated by Mr Haughey. The Secretary of State would be inviting Mr Lenihan to lunch as soon as convenient to impress upon him the importance of public support for the Agreement.

2. Looking further ahead, the Public Order Order was due to come into force on 1 April. It would be important to provide the Secretary of State with an advance assessment of likely unionist reaction in the run up to Easter.

Policy Development

3. Work was in hand on papers on ways of encouraging devolution and increasing the acceptability of direct rule. An appraisal of the achievements of the Anglo-Irish Agreement so far was being co-ordinated by SIL. Work was also in hand on a 'White Paper' which would now be entitled 'Current Issues'.

4. The paper 'Easing the Log-jam' had been submitted to the Secretary of State who had responded. Arising from this:

- (i) the Secretary of State would shortly be approaching the SDLP to seek a meeting (a similar approach would be made to Alliance). The object would be to encourage greater participation by the SDLP in NI politics;
- (ii) CPL was co-ordinating work on key points for inclusion in Ministerial speeches; care should be taken that these were not addressed exclusively to unionists;
- (iii) PSG had put proposals to the Secretary of State for a series of Ministerial speeches and articles in the press (including one for the Irish News which might reinforce the Secretary of State's message to the SDLP). The Secretary of State had not responded, but care should be taken that these proposals were not lost sight of;
- (iv) there might be ways of drawing the SDLP at local level into closer contact with NI Departments, perhaps through some new consultative machinery. This might have implications for the (presently contracting) development officer and area officer service;
- (v) Mr Scott has recently agreed to see the Bishops Daly on a regular basis. Dr Mawhinney was to do likewise

on education matters. NIO(L) should be kept informed of such exchanges. In addition, it might be possible for the Secretary of State to host lunches for influential priests;

- (vi) the Secretary of State had just agreed to six additional visits by Ministers; such visits might helpfully be used to foster contact with the SDLP at local level.

Irish Language

5. The Secretary of State had asked for further advice on the development of policy; CPL were preparing this. The Government's policy needed to provide a response to Sinn Fein's attempts to hijack the Irish language, as well as to Irish pressure for change through the Conference.

6. Sinn Fein's interest in the language was designed to help them upstage the SDLP as inheritors of the nationalist tradition. The use of Irish could annoy the security forces; whilst Irish language organisations could be used as fronts for Sinn Fein. The issue helped to consolidate Sinn Fein's influence in the nationalist community. The Irish Government, on the other hand, was concerned to reduce Sinn Fein's influence, and to remove a potential source of friction between nationalists and the NI administration. A high regard for Irish was part of the cultural equipment of the Republic's higher administrators and their advocacy of Irish reflected their personal tastes and preferences.

7. Within Northern Ireland, Alliance and the Workers Party regarded the issue as divisive; unionists were totally opposed; and the degree of SDLP interest reflected the state of its competition with Sinn Fein for nationalist support. It was noteworthy that, at present, the SDLP's Irish language policy was markedly more extreme than that advocated by the Irish government in the Conference.

8. It was unlikely that pressure on HMG to do something for the Irish language would cease. Mr Haughey's appointment of himself as Minister for the Gaeltacht portended renewed Irish interest. But the Government's policy should be determined by the demands of equitable government in Northern Ireland, rather than by responses to outside pressures. Against this background, Irish language policy should seek to remove obstacles to the use of Irish, rather than actively promote it. Unduly divisive methods should be eschewed; but there remained considerable scope for small measures which might have a disproportionately favourable effect on nationalist opinion. It might be possible to act in the field of Irish traditional culture, as well as that of language. Sinn Fein's use and exploitation of the Irish language could not be altogether prevented, but Government could seek to minimize it.

Local Government

9. The Group considered the paper circulated under Mr Spence's minute of 5 March. This proposed a package of minor reforms to strengthen local government, based on current GB thinking rising from the Widdicombe Report. Legislation would be required to put them into effect; this could be done in time for the May 1989 election. In discussion the following points were made:

- (i) there was doubt as to whether the Widdicombe recommendations would be enacted for GB before the 1989 elections; it might be difficult for NI to precede GB;
- (ii) the proposed reforms, whilst valuable, did not necessarily tackle the most fundamental problems of local government in Northern Ireland. There was, for example, a relationship between the range of local council functions and the quality of personnel

attracted to local government. The proposals to be considered should, therefore, include the possibility of devolving some additional minor functions to local government;

- (iii) proportionality in council appointments was a large part of the proposals; but that presupposed effective action to exclude Sinn Fein from councils, which was at best a doubtful assumption.

10. It was agreed that the proposals should be worked up further by DOE, to include the possibility of granting additional minor functions to councils. When ready, the revised proposals should be referred back to PDG before being submitted to Ministers.

Action Arising

11. The following action was agreed:

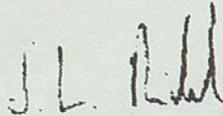
- (i) Mr Elliott and Mr McConnell should prepare, on the basis of material supplied by an assessment of the likely unionist reactions to the coming into effect of the Public Order Order on 1 April. Mr Stephens and Mr Innes should be consulted. This should cover the period to Easter, and should be submitted to the Secretary of State by 25/26 March;
- (ii) Central Secretariat, in consultation with DOE and PAB, should give further consideration to the possibility of improving on the existing machinery for consultation between departments and political parties at local level.

12. In addition, the Group noted that:

- (i) papers were being drafted by CPL on ways of achieving devolution and on possible changes to the administration of direct rule;
- (ii) CPL would co-ordinate key points for Ministers' speeches, and would prepare a paper for the Secretary of State on Irish language policy,
- (iii) DOE would work up further the proposals in Mr Spence's paper of 5 March, and return to PDG before submitting them to Ministers.

Date of Next Meeting

13. The next meeting would be at 2.15pm on Tuesday 7 April in Stormont House Conference Room.


 S L RICKARD
 CPL
 24 March 1987

Distribution: those present
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 Mr Watkins (L&B)
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