

RECORD OF A DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE LEADER OF THE OFFICIAL ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY, MR. JAMES MOLYNEAUX, MP, AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON WENDESDAY 14 NOVEMBER 1979 AT 1600

Present:

- The Prime Minister
- The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
- Mr. Ian Gow, MP
- Mr. Michael Alexander
- Mr. James Molyneaux, MP

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The Prime Minister said that, as Mr. Molyneaux would know, Dr. Paisley had asked to see her to discuss the security situation in Northern Ireland. She had decided that she would like to see Mr. Molyneaux also. She was determined to get security raised to the highest possible level. Various actions were in hand. A security co-ordinator had been appointed. The Government were seeking closer co-operation across the border. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland added that police recruiting had been significantly increased.

Mr. Molyneaux said that he was concerned about the advance publicity that had been given to the Prime Minister's meetings with himself and Dr. Paisley. He had been beseiged by the press with requests for interviews. He would be asked whether he had raised the points on the "shopping list" of 16 October produced by a number of District Councils. This was of course Dr. Paisley's list, not his. His own list, compiled in mid-August, was much more moderate and two items on it, calling for improved co-ordination and the expansion of the RUC, had already been dealt with. (Mr. Molyneaux handed over the two lists to the Prime Minister and copies are attached.)

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland reverted to the point about police recruitment (no. 6 on Mr. Molyneaux's list) and said that at the end of this year, the RUC would have 180 additional men. He expected to be able to recruit, as promised, an additional 1,000 within 12 months. In response to a question

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from the Prime Minister Minister, the Secretary of State said that the RUC was able to pick and choose among candidates. The 80 men recruited last month had been selected from 370 applicants. Mr. Molyneaux said that he feared that press interest would concentrate on the District Council shopping list rather than on his own. The Prime Minister said that the Government were doing a great deal. Not everything could be made public. But some of the points on Mr. Molyneaux's list, notably that dealing with detention, had enormous implications.

Turning to the political scene, the Prime Minister said she was determined to get more power into the hands of the people of Northern Ireland. It was the only part of the country whose population did not have local authority powers. She was determined that the status quo should not be maintained indefinitely. She was familiar with the scheme developed by Mr. Airey Neave. It was one of the options included in the White Paper. She very much hoped that Mr. Molyneaux would be prepared to have someone come to the forthcoming conference to argue the case in favour of the scheme. The biggest Party in Ulster should be present to defend the scheme it believed in. It would not show Ulster in a good light if that Party stayed away. The scheme favoured by the Official Ulster Unionists was not of course the only one on the agenda. The Government would be criticised if the views of others were not discussed. As it was, the Government was criticised for holding down Ulster. She wanted to show that the Government were consulting everyone concerned. Following these consultations she hoped to move down the path which found most support. It would be very difficult if there was no-one there to defend the case of the Official Ulster Unionists.

Mr. Molyneaux said that in the summer he had made the mistake of attempting to relieve the pressure on the Government to take an initiative by saying that he would support them in implementing their manifesto commitment. At the conference everyone would argue for their own option. If the Government were to decide in favour of the scheme favoured by his Party, they would be criticised for giving in to the Unionists. This had led him to conclude that

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it would be easier for the Government if the Unionists were not present. He would be happy to make it clear in public that he was neither obstructing nor boycotting the conference. The Prime Minister said that she recognised that there was no solution to which everyone would agree. In the end the Government would have to make up its own mind about the best way forward. Nonetheless, she would much regret the absence of Mr. Molyneaux's Party.

Mr. Molyneaux asked why Mr. Neave's plan for the establishment of a small, impartial committee to study the problem for three or four months and then to produce a report had been abandoned. The attraction of this approach would have been that it would have prevented the staking out of positions and provided the Government with an impartial recommendation which it could have said that it saw no reason to reject. The Prime Minister said that the problem was not one for experts. It was a political problem. People would have staked out their positions in relation to any scheme sooner or later. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that there might still be a place for experts in advising whether any given scheme was or was not feasible. He added that Mr. Molyneaux's Party were the only supporters of the regional council approach. The Prime Minister said that she recollected having discussions with Mr. Molyneaux in the past whether there should be one or more council and what its title should be. Discussions at the conference would demonstrate the difficulties and advantages of the various approaches. She wanted them all set out clearly so that the problems the Government faced could be seen clearly. She was determined that no-one should have a veto once the Government had decided how it intended to proceed. Mr. Molyneaux said that he agreed that no-one should have a veto. He was not claiming one for his own Party. He would accept any outcome which was acceptable to the population at large.

The Prime Minister said that Mr. Molyneaux had always been very helpful. He was the first Ulster politician she had seen in the present series of talks. She did not want his voice to be missing at the conference and would be happy to say this to Mr. Powell. Mr. Neave had spent a lot of time on the scheme and she wanted the arguments in its favour to be put forward with

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vigour. Mr. Molyneaux said that the problem went wider than Mr. Powell. With one possible exception, the officers of his Party were agreed that participation in the conference would be a waste of time. Moreover, it would make it impossible for the Government to find a compromise. He had taken a firm position on this in the summer and would find it difficult to do a somersault now. In any case, he himself did not see merit in the idea of a conference.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that it looked as though Dr. Paisley, Mr. Fitt and Mr. Napier would all be there. Many detailed issues would have to be discussed. Mr. Molyneaux said that they would all put forward different ideas and that in any case the question of the structure to be adopted was more important than the detail. The Prime Minister asked about Dr. Paisley's position. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that he wanted to go further than Mr. Molyneaux. He wanted any body established in Northern Ireland to have legislative as well as executive powers. Mr. Molyneaux said that would be his preference also if this were possible.

The Prime Minister commented that it was precisely in dealing with this kind of issue that Mr. Molyneaux's presence would be so useful. She wished to be clear that the Government were consulting all the Parties in Northern Ireland. She wanted to remove the widespread impression that the Government were imposing policies. She was determined to make progress. The world expected this. Moreover, there had been direct rule in Northern Ireland for many years. The political vacuum could not be allowed to continue. The Government had promised to take action on the security front before taking a political initiative. It had done so. If Mr. Molyneaux's Party decided not to attend it would reflect badly on them and they would be criticised in the media.

Mr. Molyneaux said that he did not think the Government's good intentions would be weakened if the Official Ulster Unionists stood aside. They did not want to go to a conference which would get involved in a lot of detail. This was why they had refused to touch Mr. Mason's last plan. The Government might say they

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did not intend to negotiate at the conference but the other participants would make them negotiate there. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that the Government would be searching for the highest common factor at the conference. Mr. Molyneux said that he did not see why his Party could not express its views on the outcome of the conference after it had taken place.

The Prime Minister said that the Government intended to go ahead with the conference. If Mr. Molyneux decided not to attend, she hoped that his Party would at least put in a detailed document and send someone to read it. Mr. Molyneux said that if this were done, it would not be necessary to do it at the beginning of the conference. The Prime Minister repeated that the absence of the Official Ulster Unionists would reflect badly on them and that it would be very difficult for the Government to go ahead with the scheme favoured by Mr. Molyneux if his Party were not there to defend it. Mr. Molyneux said that he had not been aware of the "options exercise" before his Party Conference. He had said then, six days before the conference had been announced, that he would not encourage anyone to set up a useless talking shop. It was difficult for him to turn round now.

There was then some discussion of the two papers handed over by Mr. Molyneux. The Prime Minister left for another meeting in the middle of this discussion. As he said goodbye, Mr. Molyneux made it clear that in addition to the various other objections he had voiced to attendance of the conference, he himself thought the conference was a bad idea.

The Prime Minister left the discussion at 1645.

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14 November 1979

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