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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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*Handwritten signature*

*Dear Michael,*

Conference on the Government of Northern Ireland

Although my Secretary of State will have given the Cabinet this morning an oral report on progress at the Conference on its second week's sessions (21-23 January) I thought it might be helpful if I continued the practice begun in my letter to you of 15 January of letting the Private Secretaries to OD Members have a note of how things have gone.

Within its limits the second week of the Conference went reasonably well: progress was better than might have been expected in the light of experience of the first week.

The agenda was settled without undue difficulty or delay. Basically it is the same as the list of questions on page 11 of the Conference Working Paper published by the Government in November (Cmd 6673); but the order is slightly different and there are 2 additional items, which derive from the Working Paper but were prompted by the initial submissions of the Parties to the Conference. The first of these is the question whether any arrangements agreed on for devolved government should be seen as permanent or temporary; the other is arrangements for testing the acceptability of any agreement, including the use of a referendum.

Unfortunately the SDLP, though they agreed to the agenda, announced when substantive discussion began that they would not be taking any part in the discussion until the Conference reached what to them is a crucial question - the role to be given in a devolved government to the minority. Underlying this unwelcome posturing is their determination, shared by the Alliance Party, not to be manoeuvred into agreeing on some matters unless there is agreement on all matters. On this crucial point we are essentially in agreement with them: an agreement (as was the 1975 Constitutional Convention) on some aspects of devolved government which did not include the basic question of the role of the minority would be no use at all.

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The immediate result was that the SDLP played no part in a number of quite meaty and sensible discussions of agenda items. From these discussions, the following particular points emerged:

- (1) There is no support for a "local government" type of solution: the Parties, including (we know from their general position) the SDLP, want maximum devolution to a proper regional government.
- (2) They want the range of subjects that are transferred to that government to be no less than was transferred in 1973 (or even, the DUP would say, than in the original 1920 Constitution). Interest was expressed in giving a devolved administration some voice in matters - eg EEC - which in principle would have to remain a Westminster responsibility.
- (3) The devolved government should have power to legislate as well as administrative responsibilities: there is a strong feeling that devolution without legislative power is of little value in meeting Northern Ireland's particular needs.
- (4) There is general agreement that election to an assembly should be by some form of proportional representation, though there are differing views on what form it should take.

We have therefore quite a lot to show in terms of ground covered. But the non-participation of the SDLP has limited its usefulness, and looming ahead is the critical question what will happen when we reach a point at which the SDLP will put forward their views on the role of the minority in a devolved administration. The risk is that at this point the views of the Parties will prove so irreconcilable, and they will conduct themselves in such a way, that the Conference breaks up. The Secretary of State's object in handling next week's session will be to avert any such breakdown while exploring the question of the role of the minority as fully as the Conference will agree to do.

One ground for concern is the obvious SDLP suspicion, which is being increasingly strongly expressed, of the bona fides of the UK Government. They believe, quite wrongly, that the Conference is a mere "charade" on the conclusion of which the Government will impose a "secret plan" already prepared. We are doing our best to dispel this illusion.

The Conference meets for 3 days next week, and 2 days in the following week; but thereafter there are problems in agreeing dates because of other commitments (especially the European Parliament) and, assuming that the Conference continues in being, progress in February is bound to be slow.

Finally, to pick up the point made in the previous report, although there has been some leaking to the press the "self denying ordinance" has to a surprising degree held up so far. Indeed, the Conference even decided not to continue with a Conference press spokesman, because of the difficulty of his avoiding being drawn into answering supplementary questions. It follows that discretion is important in drawing on the contents of the above.

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I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretaries of all OD Members and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

*Yours cord,*

*Roy Harrington.*

R. A. Harrington

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