

Ref. A0342

PRIME MINISTER

Prospects for Political Progress in Northern Ireland

(OD(79) 26)

BACKGROUND

When Northern Ireland was discussed by the Cabinet on 30th August you agreed that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should bring forward early proposals for a political initiative to increase democratic participation in the processes of government in the Province. Work was already being done on this subject following the discussion at OD on 10th July. This paper by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is the result. It has been fully discussed at senior official level with the other Departments concerned.

HANDLING

2. You will wish to ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to introduce his paper. You might then seek the views of the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence.

3. It will be all too easy to criticise the Secretary of State's proposals ("not enough substance", "too imprecise", etc.): but no-one has the "answer" to Northern Ireland and a political initiative of some kind is clearly necessary. The Secretary of State's objective has therefore been twofold - to find a course which will not meet downright opposition from one or other of the communities and to provide a structure on which further development can be built. In other words a minimalist approach with a carrot for good behaviour.

4. The main points to establish seem to be:-

- (a) Is the departure for the time being from the line stated in the Manifesto justified? The paper argues (paragraphs 1 and 2) that although we could accept a number of "model systems" to achieve the Manifesto aims none of them can be sold in present circumstances to both communities. An elected consultative assembly is therefore put forward both as a way out of the immediate impasse and as a basis on which to build later.

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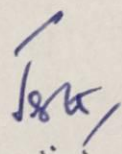
- (b) Will the new assembly be credible from the outset? It will not meet before the end of 1980, and it will be preceded by extended discussions with the main Party leaders to enable detailed proposals to be devised. But do we need to have clearer ideas ourselves now on how it might work, even if these are not spelt out in the proposed White Paper? For example, the relationship with Westminster described in paragraph 9 of the paper sounds very complex.
- (c) What is the international reaction likely to be? A consultative assembly may be criticised in the United States and the Republic of Ireland as a mere talking shop. On the other hand, there is an analogy with the Strasbourg Parliament to which we can point (i. e. cutting its teeth with no real powers). And even if this proposal does not succeed, it will be easier to lay the blame for lack of political progress on the leaders of the main parties in Northern Ireland rather than on Her Majesty's Government.
- (d) Is the new proposal likely to be of assistance in easing the security situation? This may depend to some extent on the international reaction, particularly in the Republic and in the United States. It is unlikely to influence the hard-line PIRA: but, particularly coming soon after the Pope's appeals, could well detach some of the PIRA's popular support and also make the Republic more co-operative on security measures.
- (e) Is there any better way forward? In paragraph 12 the paper mentions obvious risks to its proposed course and there may be other risks that are less obvious. Furthermore, some of the details of the present proposal are very imprecise. For example, the paper is not clear about the precise machinery whereby the new consultative assembly should be elected: this process of election may itself create major problems because of the risk that the issue of "straight" majority versus "weighted" majority may be in the forefront from the beginning, if the new body takes on the task of considering and reporting on Northern Ireland primary legislation and even being free to put forward legislative proposals of its own. The main virtue of the proposed course is that it

does offer some chance of slow but steady progress together with maximum scope for adjustments following discussions on points of detail with the Party leaders in Northern Ireland: and it is difficult to see any other course which would do this at the present time.

CONCLUSION

5. In the light of discussion on these points the Committee may be guided to reach the following conclusions:-

- (a) To agree with Mr. Atkins' analysis of the present political impasse in Northern Ireland.
- (b) To agree that despite this impasse, there is an urgent need for us to find a way forward to achieve political progress.
- (c) To agree that he should bring forward to the Committee a White Paper to fill out his proposals.


JOHN HUNT

2nd October, 1979