



10 DOWNING STREET

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland

Jim Molyneaux addressed our Northern Ireland Committee last evening. Later in the evening I had a talk with him in the Smoking Room.

What follows is based on what he said on those two occasions:-

1. The Conference in Belfast had served to underline differences of opinion, and not to reconcile them. This was predictable and predicted. In particular, the S.D.L.P. had hardened its attitude. It remained committed to a united Ireland.

2. Those participating in the Conference had rejected the proposal made in our Election Manifesto for a regional council or councils. The D.U.P. because it wanted Stormont back; the S.D.L.P. because this appeared to be a move towards integration; and the Alliance Party because it did not wish to offend the S.D.L.P.

3. Having called a Conference where all the participants had rejected a Regional Council, it would be difficult to proceed with that part of the policy which had been condemned by all.

Although Molyneaux still believes, in principle, that a Regional Council is desirable, he thinks that it is politically impossible during this Session of Parliament.

4. That being the case, he believes that it would be better to give extra limited and non-controversial powers to District Councils, whose powers at present are derisory. The next District Elections in Ulster are in May 1981. Jim says that it will be very difficult to persuade Councillors to offer themselves for re-election, because their powers are so limited and when they act in an advisory role, their advice is usually ignored by officials and Ministers alike.

5. Jim said that he was strongly opposed to an idea which was being floated by the Northern Ireland office that there should be some kind of Advisory Council without legislative or executive powers. He said that such a Council would simply be a form for destructive criticism. It would devalue the role of Westminster MPs. He stressed that the Official Unionists would seek to co-operate in maintaining and strengthening the Union with whatever Government was in power, provided that Government supported the Union. He added that the Official Unionists were strong supporters of our monetary policies.

6. Though a regional council was, he believed, unrealistic in the short term (because of the abortive Conference) he said that that would be

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

the desirable second step, the transfer of some extra powers to District Councils being the first. He believed that although the S.D.L.P., Alliance and D.U.P. would all object to the transfer even of limited extra powers to District Councils, they could hardly refuse to put up candidates for more important District Councils in May 1981. He said that attention was being focussed more on Westminster and that, apart from Paisley, the demand for the return to Stormont is diminished.

7. Generally, Jim made a favourable impression on our backbench Committee and I continue to have a good and relaxed relationship with him. I did not, of course, mention to Jim Enoch's forthcoming visit on 1st May.

8. As you know, the Officers of the Northern Ireland Committee (Biggs-Davison, Mates, Benyon, Stanbrook and Goodlad) plus Humphrey are coming over on 6th May.

23rd April, 1980

Ian Gow